

# An Examination of Church Leadership

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Terms used in relation to the local church.....	2
Elders .....	2
Deacons .....	3
Apostle.....	3
What made the Apostles Unique .....	4
The Biblical Use of the Terms .....	5
Elders .....	5
Qualifications of an Elder .....	6
The duties of the elders:.....	7
Plurality of Elders .....	7
Ordination of Elders .....	8
Deacons .....	9
Requirements of a Deacon: .....	10
The Church.....	10
Dispute .....	11
Doctrine.....	11
Discipline.....	12
Objections Considered .....	13
Conclusion.....	14

## **Terms used in relation to the local church.**

### ***Elders***

There are three different words used synonymously in the New Testament to refer to the office of elder. In I Timothy and Titus, Paul drafts nearly identical lists of qualifications for elder and overseer, while Peter draws all three concepts together in one passage: "Therefore, I exhort the elders among you... shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight..." (I Peter 5:1-2). Luke uses the terms elder, overseer and shepherd interchangeably in Acts 20.

### ***Presbuteros* --[Greek word #4245](#) in Strong's**

This is the most commonly used word in the New Testament with regard to church leaders. It refers 28 times in the Gospels and Acts to the members of the Jewish Sanhedrin and 12 times in Revelation to the representatives of the redeemed people of God. The remaining 19 times the word is employed in Acts and the Epistles; it identifies a unique group of leaders in the church. The term simply means advanced in age, but in the first century context indicates a rank or office among Jews as members of the ruling council, among Greeks as those who managed public affairs and administered justice, and among Christians as those who presided over the local assemblies. While no specific age is given, this term emphasizes the character of the elder and implies maturity, dignity, experience, and honor.<sup>1</sup>

### ***Episkopos* --[Greek word #1985](#) in Strong's**

This is a common word for in the Greek culture for any official who acted as a superintendent, manager, controller, curator, guardian or ruler. It occurs only 5 times in the New Testament, once referring to Christ (1 Peter 2:25) and the other 4 times to church leaders. The term emphasizes the function of an elder as exercising authority and supervision "by divine placement, initiative and design".<sup>2</sup>

## **Poimen -- [Greek word #4166](#) in Strong's**

This word simply means shepherd. It is applied only once in the noun form and 3 times in the verb form in the New Testament in the context of church leaders. The term emphasizes the heart attitude of an elder as one who tends, feeds, guides, protects and cares for his flock.<sup>3</sup>

## **Deacons**

### **Diakonos – [Greek Word # 1249](#) in Strong's**

The word *deacon* is derived from a Greek word, which is often translated *servant* or *waiter*. It is widely believed that the first deacons are the seven selected in the book of acts to meet the dietary needs of the church.

## **Apostle**

Although the role of an apostle expanded beyond a single local church it may be important to examine them as we examine other roles in the scripture. The apostles were men chosen by Jesus to begin the preaching of his Gospel.

When morning came, he called his disciples to him and chose twelve of them, whom he also designated apostles: <sup>14</sup> Simon (whom he named Peter), his brother Andrew, James, John, Philip, Bartholomew, <sup>15</sup> Matthew, Thomas, James son of Alphaeus, Simon who was called the Zealot, <sup>16</sup> Judas son of James, and Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor. Luke 6:13-16

Jesus selected 12 men of his disciples to be his designated “apostles”. There seems to be an importance to this number as in Matthew 19:28 the Lord tells Peter,

Jesus said to them, "I tell you the truth, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.

Some feel the choice of Matthias was a wrong one. It is contended that this was a poor method of choosing and Paul should have filled the vacancy left by Judas' apostasy. However, those who believe Matthias was a proper selection argue that [Matthew 19:28](#) is Jewish in its orientation and Paul was to minister to Gentiles ([Gal. 2:9](#)). Furthermore

Luke, Paul's friend and companion, acknowledged the Twelve as an official group ([Acts 2:14](#); [6:2](#)). Finally, there is no sense or spirit of censure in the Acts account on the selection of Matthias.<sup>4</sup> This matter is not to be fully addressed here.

### ***What made the Apostles Unique***

They were inspired by the Holy Spirit to speak and write the Word of God, although the Holy Spirit works in every believer, the Apostles received a special inspiration that set them apart from all who have come and gone since. Jesus speaks of this in the Gospel according to John

"These things I have spoken to you while being present with you. But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you." John 14:25-26

"However, when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth; for He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak; and He will tell you things to come." John 16:13

Secondly, the Apostles were eyewitnesses to Christ's earthly ministry and to his resurrection. Jesus called them his witnesses in Luke 24:45-48. They are called to be his witnesses in Acts 1:8; 21-26, and the Apostle Peter tells of their position as eyewitnesses in II Peter 1:16-21. Even the Apostle Paul who may not have walked with Jesus for three years was an eye witness according to I Corinthians 15:7-8.

Do we have Apostles today? Not like "The Twelve". These people fill a role that others do not fill today, as I believe they still fill them to this day. As they will sit on the thrones to judge the tribes of Israel according to Matthew 19 and their names are written on the stones that form the foundation of the wall surrounding the New Jerusalem according to Revelation 21:14.

I do believe there are still people today who may be given the gift of an apostle discussed in Eph 4:11. Simply stated this word means 'messenger or one who is sent.'<sup>5</sup> This can and I believe does still apply to church planters and missionaries, although they do not carry the authority of "The Twelve".

# The Biblical Use of the Terms

## **Elders**

I believe there are two positions in church leadership biblically, elders and deacons. These are the only two titles used like a position. Elder, overseer or bishop and pastor are all used interchangeably several times in the scripture.

“The reason I left you in Crete was that you might straighten out what was left unfinished and appoint **elders** (presbyteros) in every town, as I directed you. <sup>6</sup> 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. <sup>7</sup> Since an **overseer** (episkopos) 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.” Titus 1:5-7 NIV

This passage shows the relation between elders and overseers, the words are being used interchangeably with no differentiation between them in qualification or responsibility.

“From Miletus, Paul sent to Ephesus for the elders of the church. ...Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you **overseers** (*Episkopos*). Be **shepherds** (poimaino <sup>6</sup>) of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.” Acts 20:17, 28 NIV

This passage shows the connection between the overseers and pastors or shepherds, this is one of the only uses of the term shepherd or pastor out side of Ephesians 4:11.

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. I Peter 5:1-4

Again Peter is using several words to describe the different aspects of one position, the Elder. Other than these uses of pastor or shepherd, which are the same term in the original language, Jesus uses the word a few times within an analogy of a shepherding relationship. (I.e. Matt 9:36, Matt 25:32 and references to himself as the great Shepherd)

## **Qualifications of an Elder:**

Taken from I Tim and Titus

### **Relation to God**

1. A man – masculine leader
2. Above reproach – without any character defect
3. Able to teach – effective Bible communicator
4. Not a new convert – mature Christian

### **Relation to Family**

1. Husband of one wife – one-woman man, sexually pure
2. Has obedient children – successful father
3. Manages family well – provides for, leads, organizes, loves

### **Relation to Self**

1. Temperate – mentally and emotionally stable
2. Self-controlled – disciplined life of sound decision-making
3. Not given to drunkenness – without addictions
4. Not a lover of money – financially content and upright

### **Relation to Others**

1. Respectable – worth following and imitating
2. Hospitable – welcomes strangers, especially non-Christians for evangelism
3. Not violent – even-tempered
4. Gentle – kind, gracious, loving
5. Not contentious – peaceable, not quarrelsome/divisive
6. Good reputation with outsiders – respected by non-Christians

## **The duties of the elders:**

1. Prayer and Scripture study (Acts 6:4)
2. Ruling/leading the church (1 Timothy 5:17)
3. Managing the church (1 Timothy 3:4–5)
4. Caring for people in the church (1 Peter 5:2–5)
5. Giving account to God for the church (Hebrews 13:17)
6. Living exemplary lives (Hebrews 13:7)
7. Rightly using the authority God has given them (Acts 20:28)
8. Teaching the Bible correctly (Ephesians 4:11; 1 Timothy 3:2)
9. Preaching (1 Timothy 5:17)
10. Praying for the sick (James 5:13–15)
11. Teaching sound doctrine and refuting false teachings (Titus 1:9)
12. Working hard (1 Thessalonians 5:12)
13. Rightly using money and power (1 Peter 5:1–3)
14. Protecting the church from false teachers (Acts 20:17–31)

Today we have simply replaced the term Elder with Pastor and I don't have a problem with that in and of itself but it connotes certain ideas on our culture that are not necessarily biblical, such as the idea of a single Senior Pastor which will be discussed in more detail later.

## **Plurality of Elders**

There are only a few occasions where the term elder is used in the singular, and those include Peter and John (1 Pet 5:1 and 2 Jn 1:1 and 2 Jn 1:1 respectively) referring to themselves as individuals, which would naturally be singular. Outside of those references we only find two other singular references to an elder:

- a. 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. Titus 1:6
- b. Do not entertain an accusation against an elder unless it is brought by two or three witnesses.  
<sup>20</sup> Those who sin are to be rebuked publicly, so that the others may take warning. I Tim 5:19

While there are many passages that show a plurality of elders, including plural elders in a singular church or location.

1. Acts 11:30 This they did, sending their gift to the **elders** by Barnabas and Saul.
2. 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.
3. Ac 20:17 From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called for the **elders** of the church.
4. Ac 21:18 On the following day Paul went in with us to James, and all the **elders** were present.
5. 1Ti 5:17 Let the **elders** who rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and doctrine.
6. Tit 1:5 For this reason I left you in Crete, that you should set in order the things that are , and appoint **elders** in every city as I commanded you-
7. Heb 13:7 Remember **those who rule over you**, who have spoken the word of God to you, whose faith follow, considering the outcome of their conduct.
8. Heb 13:17 Obey **those who rule over you**, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you.
9. Heb 13:24 Greet all **those who rule over you**, and all the saints. Those from Italy greet you.
10. Jas 5:14 Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the **elders** of the church, and let them over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord.
11. 1Pe 5:1 The **elders** who are among you I exhort, I who am a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that will be revealed:
12. 1Pe 5:5 Likewise you younger people, submit yourselves to your **elders**. Yes, all of you be submissive to one another, and be clothed with humility, for humility, for "God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble."

## Ordination of Elders



It is simple to see how Christians became elders in the Bible; we see many places where Apostles or their delegates, Titus and Timothy, are sent to ordain elders. What that means may not be completely clear in the NIV notes Acts 14:23 this way:

Paul and Barnabas appointed elders Or *Barnabas ordained elders*; or *Barnabas had elders elected* for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust.

Looking into the term for ordain<sup>7</sup>, it is a term related to hand raising or voting. Although no other translation I read included this note or translated it in any way related to voting, a look into early church history reveals commands from the early church fathers to the churches to "Appoint for yourselves therefore bishops and deacons worthy of the Lord, men who are meek and not lovers of money, and true and approved"<sup>8</sup>. This is dated back to the early second century. It is feasible that the Apostles selected the elders for the churches; although it isn't inconceivable that the churches had input into the decision much like the deacons we see in Acts chapter 6.

## ***Deacons***

The Greek word, which is translated deacon, ***diakonos***, actually was a generic word which meant "a servant, attendant, or minister". Using this general meaning, the word was applied to describing: Jesus (Romans 15:8), evangelists (Ephesians 6:21; Colossians 1:7), faithful Christians (John 12:26), the apostles (II Corinthians 3:6), and waiters at feasts (Matthew 22:13).

Many scholars believe the first deacons were selected in the book of acts chapter 6:

<sup>1</sup> In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. <sup>2</sup> So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait (diakoneō) on tables.

<sup>3</sup> Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them <sup>4</sup> and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word."

<sup>5</sup> This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. <sup>6</sup> They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.

If this truly is the first installation of deacons, as I believe it to be, then we can glean some relevant information from this passage. The role of the Deacon is to meet the physical needs of the church. In this case we see the equal distribution of food and the issue, although it could easily translate into other tasks in today's church. Many people use the term Usher for the deacons and these men wait on congregation. It could also be stewards of the church's monies and other goods. While the elders are focused on the spiritual needs of the church, the deacon focuses on the physical needs and assists the elders to prevent them from being distracted by other non-spiritual tasks.

### **Requirements of a Deacon:**

- a. reverent, sober
- b. not double-tongued
- c. not given (addicted) to much wine
- d. not greedy for money
- e. holding the mystery of the faith with a pure conscience
- f. first be proven (tested)
- g. blameless
- h. husbands of one wife
- i. ruling their children and their own houses well

Additionally Deacon's Wives must meet certain qualifications:

- a. Reverent
- b. Not slanderers
- c. Temperate
- d. Faithful in all things

### ***The Church***

Interestingly enough, I see some responsibility and authority in the roll of the church as well. It seems that there just may be a dynamic tension between the role of the elders and the congregation. The church seems to have authority in several areas; dispute, doctrine, and discipline.

## **Dispute**

In Matthew 18:15-17, Jesus instructs us on how to deal with a brother who has sinned against us personally. It is a great lesson for all believers in the biblical way to deal with one another.

"If your brother sins against you go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. <sup>16</sup> But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' <sup>17</sup> If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.

Note the final authority in this situation is not the elders or a committee, it is the Church, and this makes sense if this brother is to be excommunicated. The entire church would need to be involved in that excommunication. Otherwise it could lead to a schism in the body. I suppose one could assume that this use of 'church' really means the elders, but that seems to be a bit of a stretch.

A return to Acts chapter 6 shows that the situation between the Hellenistic Jews and the Hebraic Jews was to be resolved by appointing deacons. Although the Elders gave input on how the situation could be resolved, they delegated this action to the assembled congregation. It seems that God believes it best to have the entire congregation involved in matters of dispute.

## **Doctrine**

The letter to the Galatians was not written to the elders of the church, but was addressed "To the churches in Galatia" and yet the addressees of the letter are directed

to determine what is and is not proper doctrine even to over rule angels or the apostle Paul himself, a role we would reserve to Elders in most cases.

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—<sup>7</sup> which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ.<sup>8</sup> But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned!<sup>9</sup> As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned! — Gal 1:6-9

It appears that on some level there is a system of checks and balances in place; the congregation has the responsibility to discern what is the gospel and what is not, even if it comes from the mouth of the apostle Paul himself.

## Discipline

In one of the only scriptural examples of church discipline found in I Cor. 5, we find Paul instructing the church (1 Cor. 1:2) as a whole that they should have removed the offending member from their midst.

It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that does not occur even among pagans: A man has his father's wife.<sup>2</sup> And you are proud! Shouldn't you rather have been filled with grief and have put out of your fellowship the man who did this?<sup>3</sup> Even though I am not physically present, I am with you in spirit. And I have already passed judgment on the one who did this, just as if I were present.<sup>4</sup> When you are assembled in the name of our Lord Jesus and I am with you in spirit, and the power of our Lord Jesus is present,<sup>5</sup> hand this man over to Satan, so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord. 1 Cor. 5:1-5

Paul did not address the elders or leaders of the church, but the church as a whole and tells them that they should have already put this man out of their fellowship. He has already decided what should be done and they should have done it already. This would indicate that they had the right to do so before being instructed by Paul.

There is a second issue of discipline that is also addressed to the Corinthians and some believe it is in reference to the same individual. It appears that the Church pendulum swung from one extreme to another. In his first letter he chastises them for not disciplining, but in his second letter he had to tell the church when enough is enough.

The punishment inflicted on him by the majority is sufficient for him.<sup>7</sup> Now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow.<sup>8</sup> I urge you,

therefore, to reaffirm your love for him.<sup>9</sup> The reason I wrote you was to see if you would stand the test and be obedient in everything.<sup>10</sup> If you forgive anyone, I also forgive him. And what I have forgiven--if there was anything to forgive--I have forgiven in the sight of Christ for your sake,<sup>11</sup> in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes.

The church is now exercising discipline of its members by a majority, although it may have gone too far at least they had moved in the correct direction. It is also interesting that Paul says he will follow the church's decision on forgiveness. He did not command them to forgive who he has forgiven but, instead he will forgive if the congregation forgives the individual.

### ***Objections Considered***

The initial objection that I have heard from several people with whom I have shared these thoughts is the idea that Timothy and Titus were the pastors of their respective churches, meaning that they were the head of these congregations. I believe this interpretation is in keeping with our modern understanding of what a pastor is however I do not believe it keeps with the biblical use of the word. Timothy and Titus were Paul's protégés and in many cases were operating under his apostolic authority, of which I have already discussed the uniqueness. The concept of a pastor as it is used today is simply not found in scripture. The plurality of elders are commended to pastor the flock, (Acts 20) and the pastor or shepherding gift is discussed with the Ephesian elders, but the idea of a single individual being in charge of the entire congregation is one that is simply not found in scripture.

Additionally, the idea of a Sr. pastor is equally absent from Biblical record. Although it could be linked to the Old Covenant idea of a high priest, Jesus is now our high priest and we have no need an additional earthly one.

Another objection that I hear on the few occasions I have shared this concept is that "anything with two heads is a monster" and while this cliché is readily accepted and is applicable in many instances we must turn to the Bible for our instruction and this concept is not derived from the scripture.

## ***Conclusion***

After looking into this issue I can see how not being obedient to God's instruction can cause many problems in the modern church. It could be dangerous to have a single man with ultimate authority in an organization, even in a corporate environment the CEO answers to a board and to shareholders, but in many cases Pastors are held accountable to no one.

The view of Pastors as the ultimate earthly authority for the church has done several things to the congregations as well. The clergy/laity divide has become greater than it appears to be in the scriptures, the purpose of the "five-fold ministry" given in Ephesians 4:11 was to build up the church for the work of the ministry,<sup>9</sup> but with the creation of a professional ministry team most congregants only feel compelled to pay for the staff to do the work of the ministry. It may also be, due to this idea of the Pastor as ultimate authority, that we no longer verify what our Pastors are teaching, I have heard utter heresy from a pulpit and the church just nodded along, because the speaker used biblical language to give his point more authority. I have already shown that it is the responsibility of every believer to verify what they are hearing is the Gospel or to not listen, but many Christians wouldn't know the difference. This explains why so certain popular speakers can get away with Christless messages.

With a plurality of Elders, you have a collective of Godly men to fulfill the roles given to the church, interestingly enough although I have been taught that a Pastor should have all of the "five fold gifts" it appears obvious from a simple reading of scripture that these gifts are manifest in multiple men, as "It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers<sup>10</sup>" but the scriptures never indicates he gave one to be all of those gifts. Therefore a plurality of elders would have a number if not all of these gifts to edify and build up the congregation. Many Pastors have been buried under the weight of being alone and feeling responsible for every aspect of the ministry. I don't believe this is what the Lord intended.

We live in a fallen world, with and among fallen people so no form of Church government that involves people will be perfect, but I believe God has given us a plan in his word and it should be obeyed. I believe the plan God gives us is one of a plurality of Elders, with varied authority and responsibility resting in different levels of the church.

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<sup>1</sup> Strauch, A. (1995). *Biblical Eldership*. Lewis and Roth Publishers, p. 125

<sup>2</sup> Strauch, A. (1995). *Biblical Eldership*. Lewis and Roth Publishers, p. 148

<sup>3</sup> Strauch, A. (1995). *Biblical Eldership*. Lewis and Roth Publishers, p. 149

<sup>4</sup> Walvoord, John F., and Roy B. Zuck, eds. THE BIBLE KNOWLEDGE COMMENTARY. Dallas Tx: Victor Books, 1985.

<sup>5</sup> Strong's Concordance Gr# 652

<sup>6</sup> From Strong's GR# 4166 (poimen); to *tend* as a shepherd (or figurative *supervisor*) :- feed (cattle), rule.

—Strong's Talking Greek & Hebrew Dictionary

<sup>7</sup> Strong's Concordance GR#5500

<sup>8</sup> Didache 15:1 <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/didache-lightfoot.html>

<sup>9</sup> Eph 4:11 KJV

<sup>10</sup> Eph 4:11 NIV