

CHAPTER 3

“One of the outstanding ironies of history is the utter disregard of ranks and titles in the final judgment men pass on one another... The final estimate of men shows that history cares not an iota for the rank or title a man has borne, but only that quality of his deeds and the character of his mind and heart.”

- J. Oswald Sanders

3. THE ELDER’S FUNCTION

“A PARTNERSHIP OF PLURALITY”

Clergy, Bishop, Chaplain, Minister, Pastor, Associate Pastor, Preacher, Presbyter, Facilitator, Teacher, Pulpiteer, Reverend, Director, Coordinator, Shepherd, Man of the Cloth, Undershepherd, Department Head, Senior Staff, and Brother – these and many other terms have been used to describe Christian church leaders throughout the ages. The titles were born out of an attempt to characterize something of what the spiritual leader is in his office and what function he performs in his role. Most of these titles have no origination in the Word of God, and actually convey something other than what the Bible would say about a Christian leader.

“Reverend,” for example, means that the leader is to be feared in that he is to have distinguished admiration and awe (taking a Biblical concept a little far). Just the opposite, especially in Southern Churches, Pastors are known as “Brother” Fred, “Brother” James, etc., perhaps as a reaction to the reverend position, emphasizing the humanity and equality of the servant of God. Terms like, “Associate Pastor” and “Senior Staff” implies a hierarchy within the leaders of the same team or board.

Actually the Word of God is quite simple and clear about the titles, roles, responsibilities, and authority given to the spiritual leaders assigned to lead the church. Having traced God’s precedent for Eldership throughout Biblical history, we now turn to the issue of the Elder’s titles and functions, his relationship with other Elders and other churches, the proper grounds of his authority, and much more.

1. NAMES WITH PURPOSE

The New Testament gives five basic names to describe church leaders, each of which describe something of the Elders’ function and purpose in spiritual leadership. Understanding these titles and how they are used in the New Testament answer the necessary questions about their authority, responsibility, and diversity.¹

- A. Elder (*presbuteros*) – By far the most common designation for the church leader in the New Testament, this word, from which some derive the word “Presbyter,” appears 67 times. Four of those words refer to the Old Testament Patriarchs, 27 refer to the Sanhedrin Elders, 8 refer to elderly people, and 12 refer to the 24 Elders in the book of Revelation. That leaves 16, which refer to church leaders in the New Testament (**Acts 11:30; 14:23; 15:2, 4, 5, 22, 23; 16:4; 20:17, 18; 1 Timothy 4:14; 5:17, 19; Titus 1:5; James 5:14; 1 Peter 5:1**).

The word itself speaks of the age and experience of the person who serves as a spiritual leader, as having dignity and honor, though Scripture does not specify what age a man can serve. The idea is one of provenness and maturity, demonstrated by his ability to meet the Biblical qualifications and to perform his responsibilities effectively. Typically, older men were in view,

¹ I am indebted to the scholarly work of Bruce Stabbert from his appendix 1 in *Team Concept*.

while it must be remembered that the life expectancy of people in this age might have been lower than today because of medical advancements. The issue then is not about age but **maturity** – it's not how long you have been in the boat, but how hard you row.

“The Biblical Elder, then, is not merely a man of great years, but a man of any age who possesses the wisdom, gravity, balance, and soberness of great years.” - Mike Parker²

- 1) What does the Bible speak about men in significant leadership roles relative to their age?
 - **Luke 3:23**
 - About how old would this have made John the Baptist when he started his ministry?
 - **1 Timothy 4:12**
 - **Numbers 4:3, 23, 30, 39, 43, 47**
- 2) What does the general age seem to be in the Bible for beginning in significant spiritual leadership?
- 3) What temptations do you think face a young Elder?
 - **2 Timothy 2:22**
 - **Ecclesiastes 11:9**
- 4) What are some temptations that a church faces with a young Elder?
- 5) What are some measurements that a church can take to see whether a younger man should serve as an Elder?

² Mike Parker, *Baptist Reformation Review* (Summer 1978), p. 39 cited by Stabbert, p. 138.

- B. Overseer (*episkopos*) – Sometimes rendered “Bishop” in some translations appears only 9 times in the New Testament, in both noun and verb forms. Once it referred to Judas as an apostle (**Acts 1:20**), once to the watchfulness all Christians are to have (**Hebrews 12:15**), and once for Christ Himself, who is the Chief Overseer/Guardian of our souls (**1 Peter 2:25**). Otherwise, the remaining 6 usages of the word speak of church leaders (**Acts 20:28; Philippians 1:1; 1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:7; 1 Peter 5:2**).

The word is of Gentile origin, which explains why it found usage in Gentile churches. It was used in the Greek world to refer to national and local civic officials, administrators of a king who governed conquered cities in his absence. The word means “guardian, manager, and superintendent.” It refers to a person who looks over something or someone to examine it. Referring to the church it speaks of the managing, guarding, and supervising the people of God and the ministries of the church in his *office*.

- C. Pastor (*poimen*) – Most often translated “Shepherd” in the New Testament, this word conjures the familiar imagery of the common occupation of tending flocks in the ancient world with provision and protection – that was his *function*. This job was considered to be a lowly and despised position to some (**Genesis 46:34**). It is a term that God takes to Himself and uses to describe how He relates to His people (**John 10:7-18, 26-28**). This word appears 28 times: 16 times of Christ; 6 times of literal shepherds, once of apostate leaders (**Jude 12**); once of Peter’s responsibility as an apostle (**John 21:16**); and once of believers in heaven (**Revelation 2:27**). The remaining references are to church leaders, leaving only 3 times pastor is mentioned (**Acts 20:28; Ephesians 4:11; 1 Peter 5:2**). Only one of those three actually uses it as an official title, “Pastor;” otherwise it refers to the function of shepherding.
- 1) How is that significant in light of the sweeping emphasis in the modern church on “the Pastor” as the CEO?
 - 2) How does **Ezekiel 34:1-31** teach about the nature of shepherding as it relates to this calling of spiritual leaders?
- D. Those who Rule (*hegeomai*) – This word speaks of those who rise to the occasion in leadership and who have a careful watchfulness over others. It appears 6 times in the New Testament: **Hebrews 13 – v. 7, 17, and 24**, referring to them as men who are examples to the flock, who speak the truth, who are to be obeyed, and who give an account to God for each person they lead. Elsewhere, this word, refers to leaders who stand out among other leaders (**Acts 15:22**), who should be esteemed (**1 Thessalonians 5:13**), but who prove themselves to be servants (**Luke 22:26**).

- E. Those who Lead (*proistemi*) – This word appears 8 times in the New Testament (**Romans 12:8; 1 Thessalonians 5:12; 1 Timothy 5:17**), a verb that has the root meaning, “to stand before.” It is a person who steps out in front of the people *as head* and can compel others to follow. He is to guide, manage, direct, and govern them – he goes before them. Thus these leaders “have charge over” the flock, including their guidance, protection, and care.

2. EQUALITY WITH AUTHORITY

Having studied the names that are used in the New Testament to describe church leaders and something of their function, we now turn to see that the New Testament writers used these terms interchangeably to identify these terms to refer to the same office and person, indicating equality in position and authority.

- A. Acts 20:17, 28, “From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called to him the elders (*presbuteros*) of the church....Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers (*episkopos*), to shepherd (*poimen*) the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.”
- B. 1 Peter 5:1-2, “Therefore, I exhort the elders (*presbuteros*) among you, as your fellow elder (*presbuteros*) and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed, shepherd (*poimen*) the flock of God among you, exercising oversight (*episkopos*) not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness.”
- C. Titus 1:5-7, “For this reason I left you in Crete, that you would set in order what remains and appoint elders (*presbuteros*) in every city as I directed you, namely, if any man is above reproach, the husband of one wife, having children who believe, not accused of dissipation or rebellion. For the overseer (*episkopos*) must be above reproach as God’s steward, not self-willed, not quick-tempered, not addicted to wine, not pugnacious, not fond of sordid gain.”
- D. 1 Timothy 5:17, “The elders (*presbuteros*) who rule (*proistemi*) well are to be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching.”

SUMMARY: After examining some of the key texts on Eldership, it is clear that an Elder is a Pastor is an Overseer is a Ruler is a Leader – they are all one in the same office, function, and authority. To make a hierarchical distinction between Pastors and Elders, or to say that one has more authority than another is thoroughly unbiblical.

E. Consider the implications of this truth:

- 1) What does this make the Elders as a unit?
- 2) What does this do to our modern day term “Senior Pastor?”
- 3) How important is using Biblical terminology when speaking of spiritual leadership?
- 4) Plug the names of your Elders into the following blanks:

a. Pastor _____

f. Pastor _____

b. Pastor _____

g. Pastor _____

c. Pastor _____

h. Pastor _____

d. Pastor _____

i. Pastor _____

e. Pastor _____

j. Pastor _____

- 5) What is a more fitting title to describe the Pastor who fills the pulpit most?
- 6) Can a person serve on the Pastoral Staff without being an Elder, based on the Scriptures above?
- 7) What does this do to the notion that one Pastor or Elder has the final say in matters of decision making?
- 8) What do the following verses teach about the oneness of mind that God commands of all Christians, which should govern Elders as well?

➤ **1 Corinthians 1:10**

➤ **Philippians 1:27; 2:2-5**

➤ **Acts 15:25**

➤ **Jeremiah 32:39**

- 9) What should an Elder council do if one of the Elders cannot **support** a decision?

3. AUTHORITY WITH CLARITY

Having established the equality among the Elders, it is necessary to discuss the basis and limitations of their authority. Before we can completely understand their role and function, we must legitimize the basis for their activity. The authority of the Elders, by which they lead/manage/shepherd/oversee/influence the church is the Word of God, through which Christ Himself tends His flock. This accounts for the foundation and restrictions on Elder authority.

- A. The Lordship of Christ – Clearly the New Testament says that the authority of the church lies completely in Christ, from beginning to end. Note how the following verses teach this:
- 1) How does Paul **Ephesians 1:22-23** affirm the Lordship of Christ over the church?
 - 2) What does the term “**Head**” mean in reference to Christ, from **Colossians 1:18**?
 - 3) What names does Peter give to Jesus in **1 Peter 2:25**? How do they match the terms that describe Elders? What is this saying?
 - 4) How does **1 Peter 5:4** describe Christ’s relationship, not only to the church, but to the church’s Elders? Who is the “Senior Pastor” of Grace Chapel Church?
 - 5) To what extent does this define the parameters of the Elders’ authority?
- B. The Authority of Scripture – the Lord Himself placed the Apostles and their associates as the ones responsible to pour the foundation layers of the church with the concrete truth. Their role was simple: teach the Word and establish

churches. Thus the Scripture they received and taught was the basis of their authority, which would thereafter govern the life of the church.

- 1) How does Jesus indicate this purpose in His response to Peter’s confession in **Matthew 16:13-19** (cf. **John 17:4-8, 14, 20**)? Whose church does He say this is?

- 2) How does Paul affirm this truth in **Ephesians 2:20**?

- 3) How does Peter elevate the authority of Scripture in **2 Peter 1:3-4, 16-21**?

- 4) What does this say about the responsibility of the spiritual leader as to the lone source of his authority, according to **Titus 2:15** (cf. **2:1**)?

- C. The Priesthood of the Believer – this discussion of authority, however, does not in any way elevate one believer over another in terms of importance or superiority. Instead, within the Body of Christ, every believer is on equal footing before God with equal access to Him, though there are different abilities, gifts, roles, and functions.
 - 1) What example does Paul give in **1 Corinthians 11:3** of how role and function can exist without implying inferiority or inequality of persons?

 - 2) What does **Galatians 3:28** say about the equality of all believers?

 - 3) What does **Ephesians 4:15-16** say about the difference among all believers?

 - 4) How does **Matthew 23:8-11** warn against exalting one believer over another, especially among those in spiritual leadership (cf. **1 Corinthians 4:15; Ephesians 4:11; 1 John 2:27**)?

 - 5) When will the Elder/Pastor’s role affirm the priesthood of the believer, according to **Ephesians 4:11-16**?

 - 6) Based on the answer to 4) above, what word describes the Elders’ relationship to the rest of the Body?

4. ROLES WITH RESPONSIBILITIES

If a Pastor is an Elder is an Overseer is a Ruler is a Leader of the church, equal in authority, then we must understand what every Elder is called to do, as a member of a team of leaders, working with one another and the rest of the Body.

A. What is the command given to the Elders in **Acts 20:28**, which tells you how much responsibility each Elder carries?

B. Consider what the following verses say about the role and responsibility of every Elder of the church:

➤ **Acts 20:28-31**

➤ **Ephesians 4:11-13**

➤ **1 Thessalonians 5:12**

➤ **1 Timothy 5:17**

➤ **Titus 1:9**

➤ **Hebrews 13:7**

➤ **Hebrews 13:17**

➤ **James 5:14-16**

➤ **1 Peter 5:3**

C. What categories can we use to summarize the teaching of these verses as to the responsibilities of each Elder of Christ’s flock?

1) _____

4) _____

2) _____

5) _____

3) _____

5. PLURALITY WITH DIVERSITY

While the Bible teaches that every Elder is a part of a team of equals, depending on the age, knowledge of Scripture, wisdom, personality, experience, giftedness, and influence, each Elder might have a different role, specifically tailored to his specialty. The point of this section is to balance the delicate tension between plurality and diversity among equals.

A. **PLURALITY:** Many Elders in one local church – The New Testament speaks clearly about the plurality of Elders in a particular congregation who influence the church with God’s authority, into His will. Whenever Elders are mentioned as referring to a local church, they are mentioned in the plural, meaning more than one (cf. **Acts 14:23; 16:4; 20:17; James 5:14**). Some have suggested that all the Elders within a given city make up one Elder council, though there may be several local churches within that city, but this is a misunderstanding of the New Testament teaching on Eldership. Basically, there was one church per city and many churches per region. Each church was self-governing, but always seen in cooperation with other New Testament churches. The following from Dr. John Street is a helpful breakdown of that relationship between churches.

- They acknowledged their common faith (**1 Corinthians 1:2; Ephesians 4:4-6; Titus 1:4; 2 Peter 1:1; Jude 3**).
- They all received and benefited from the same Apostolic teaching (**Acts 18:24-28; Romans 16:3; 1 Corinthians 16:12; Galatians 1:2; Colossians 4:16**).
- They recognized one another's disciplined and restored members (**2 John 9-11; Philemon**).
- There was a practice of love between early churches (**Romans 1:8; Colossians 1:4; 1 Thessalonians 1:7-9; 4:9-10**).
- They met in councils together to work through issues of doctrine and practice (**Acts 15**).
- They came to the financial assistance of other churches in need (**Acts 24:17; Romans 15:25-26; 1 Corinthians 16:1; Galatians 2:10**).
- They cooperated in missionary enterprises (**Romans 15:24; 1 Corinthians 16:5-9; 2 Corinthians 1:16; Philippians 4:15; Acts 20:4**).³

³ Cited by Russ Kennedy, *Biblical Eldership* (Clearcreek: Clearcreek, 1999), p. 28.

- B. **DIVERSITY:** Many Elders with several different roles – While every Elder is called to shepherd the entire flock entrusted to his care within the local church, the New Testament points to Elders who function, not according to differing positions, but according to different gifts. Therefore, though every Elder is responsible for the whole flock, each member of the Eldership can be given specific responsibilities that differ from the other Elders, primarily based on the combination of factors with which God has equipped him.
- 1) What is the distinction made between certain Elders pertaining to their giftedness and specific function within the church, according to **1 Timothy 5:17**?
 - 2) What are the criteria for the division of labor among the Elders, based on the principle in **1 Peter 4:10-11**?
 - 3) What should Elders look at before they look at additional potential candidates for their Compensated Staff Elders?
 - 4) Note how the following template best serves as the basis for a Elder’s Job Description, whether he is compensated or not:

I am a pastor-teacher at *(name of church)* to fulfill my calling to *(express the essence of his calling)* through the use of my spiritual gifts of *(identify the spiritual gifts in order from greatest to least)* by *(list the specific functions in which the gifts of the Pastor/Elder will be carried out)*, so that the Savior would be exalted, the saints edified, and the sinners evangelized.

SAMPLE JOB DESCRIPTION:

Justin Erickson: I am a pastor-teacher at Grace Chapel to fulfill my calling to preach Christ and serve Him through the use of my spiritual gifts of preaching and teaching, exhortation, leadership, and mercy by studying, praying, preaching, dialogue teaching, developing leaders, discipling, counseling, writing, and administrating, so that the Savior would be exalted, the saints edified, and the sinners evangelized.

- 5) How does this job description measure a Pastor/Elder’s faithfulness in the ministry as opposed to numerical success?

CONCLUSION

In response to this study, it is useful to answer with some appropriate Biblical guidelines for the congregation, so that you can honor God and rightly relate to the spiritual leaders He has placed in this local church.

A. Support

1 Timothy 5:17-18, “¹⁷The elders who rule well are to be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching. ¹⁸For the Scripture says, ‘YOU SHALL NOT MUZZLE THE OX WHILE HE IS THRESHING,’ and ‘The laborer is worthy of his wages.’ ”

- 1) What kind of support does Paul name specifically in v. 17?
- 2) How does v. 18 say this “**honor**” is to be demonstrated?
- 3) What analogy does Paul borrow to describe the role of the “**Elder who rules well**” and **works hard at preaching and teaching?**” What does this say about the nature of his work?
- 4) What are some other ways that you can support your Elders, besides financially?

B. Submit

Hebrews 13:17, “¹⁷Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you.”

- 1) What are the two commands in v. 17? What does this give to the Elder?
- 2) To whom are the commands given? Why is that important to note?

- 3) What is the reason the author of Hebrews gives for this command?
- 4) What will happen to the congregation if this command is not obeyed?
- 5) What will happen to the Elder if this command is not obeyed?

“Obey” – means literally, “to persuade so as to convince; to win over; to have assurance; to trust so as to yield; to agree and believe.” It is to be persuaded to follow, to be assured about the direction to go, to develop confidence in someone or something. In this context about leadership, used here in the passive voice, it means “allow yourself to be won over and led by the Elders so that you are persuaded and convinced about the direction you are to confidently follow. Allow yourself to be won over. Allow yourself to trust and yield to them. Develop confidence in them and their direction. Seek to agree with them and believe them.”

- 6) What kind of responsibility does this place on the congregation?
- 7) What kind of responsibility does this place on the Elder?
- 8) What would this verse say about “blind allegiance?”
- 9) What would this verse say about “mistrust and suspicion?”

“Submit” – “to yield or surrender oneself to authority and admonition. It is from the same root word in the Greek as the word used to describe how wives are to relate to their husbands, because of the position God has given them – they are to come under. Used here in the active voice, this command is given to members of the congregation to continually seek to place themselves under the authority and admonition of the Elders, whom God has placed over them in spiritual leadership.

10) What does the balance of these two words teach about the responsibility of the congregant to his Elder?

11) How do the following verses relate the congregation and the Elders in decision making and submission?

➤ **Acts 6:1-7**

➤ **Acts 15:1-6, 12, 22, 25, 30**

➤ **2 Corinthians 8:16-21 (cp. 1 Cor. 16:1-4)**

12) What should a church member do if he or she does not agree with the Elders in a decision, based on **Hebrews 13:17**? What if he or she still does not agree?

13) What should the Elders do if a church member does not agree with a decision they have made, based on **Hebrews 13:17**? What should the Elders do even if a member of the congregation still does not agree?

14) What do the following verses say about possible dangers in the relationship between spiritual leaders and the affirmation of their people?

➤ **Galatians 1:10**

➤ **Exodus 32:1-14, 21-28**

➤ **Numbers 14:1-23**

➤ **Numbers 16:1-7, 20-33, 41-49**

➤ **Numbers 20:1-13**