

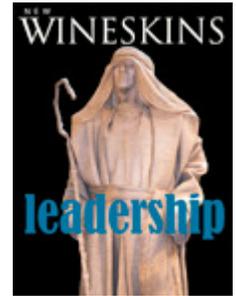
The Eldership of the Church

Descriptive Words - Definitive Work

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Many within Christendom, especially those who have been raised within the Stone-Campbell heritage of faith, are familiar with the concept of "the eldership." Even a child could likely explain that it has reference to those men in the congregation who serve as the "elders" of the church. It is a rather common term; one we've all probably heard many times, as it is used quite frequently in sermons, Bible classes and periodicals. What some of these brethren may not realize, however, is that the Greek word we often translate "eldership" only occurs one time with reference to these men in all the New Testament writings. The apostle Paul urged the young evangelist Timothy, "Don't neglect the gift which is in you, which was given to you through prophecy with the laying on of the hands of the eldership" (1 Timothy 4:14, Hugo McCord's *NT Translation of the Everlasting Gospel*). Some translations, such as the New American Standard Bible, render the term: "Presbytery." Others interpret the word to convey the concept of a "council of elders" (*Holman Christian Standard Bible*) or a "body of elders" (*New International Version*).



The Greek word employed is "presbuterion," which means "a body of elders, presbytery, senate, council" (Thayer's *Greek-English Lexicon of the NT*, p. 535), "council of elders" (Arndt & Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the NT and Other Early Christian Literature*, p. 699), "an assembly of aged men" (Vine's *Expository Dictionary of NT Words*). This word only appears three times within the NT writings: twice to refer to the Jewish assembly of elders, or the Sanhedrin (Luke 22:66; Acts 22:5), and once to refer to a body of elders in the early church (1 Timothy 4:14). Our late brother in Christ, J.W. McGarvey, was very fond of translating this word as "eldership," and he used it quite frequently. Thus, the term "eldership" came to be quite familiar to us in our faith-heritage, although somewhat less so in the religious terminology of many of our Christian neighbors, most of whom tend to prefer "presbytery."

When one undertakes to examine and reflect upon "the eldership," a plethora of possible avenues of profitable study present themselves. The history and development of this body of spiritual leaders in the church, as perceived within the text of the NT canon, is a fascinating course of study. There are also a great many critical questions associated with this group of men; questions that have led to both debate and division for generations. Many of these deal with points pertaining to the "qualifications" -- for example: what is meant by "having children who believe" (Titus 1:6)? What binding force, if any, do the "edicts" of these elders have over a congregation of believers? Is an elder in the church still qualified to serve if his wife dies, or must he step down from leadership in the congregation?

There are also questions asked with respect to various aspects of the work and ministry of an eldership. For example: how does one interpret the statement in **James 5:14-15** about the elders praying over the sick and anointing them with oil? In this present study, however, we shall restrict ourselves to only two areas of consideration: (1) the **Seven Words** employed within the New Testament writings which provide insight into the nature of these men and their ministry, and (2) the **Six Works** of these men which are specifically enumerated in Scripture. The biblical evidence regarding elders in the church, both directly and indirectly (and, in a few cases, even speculatively), is contained in the following passages:

- Acts 11:30; 14:23; 15:2, 4, 6, 22-23; 16:4; 20:17, 28; 21:18
- Ephesians 4:11
- Philippians 1:1
- 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13
- 1 Timothy 3:1-7; 4:14; 5:17, 19-20, 22
- Titus 1:5-9
- Hebrews 13:7, 17, 24
- James 5:14
- 1 Peter 5:1-4
- 2 John 1
- 3 John 1

The Seven Words

There are three major words used in the NT writings to designate these individuals. There are an additional four words employed which shed considerable light on the nature of their work. Each of these terms provide vital insight with regard to position and function within the church of our Lord Jesus. They are as follows:

Presbuteros -- This word appears a total of 67 times in the New Covenant documents. It is the primary word used by the inspired writers to designate these men. By transliterating the Greek word into English, we get the word Presbyter. The meaning of this term is: "One who is old; one who is older than another; advanced in life; a senior; an elder." It comes from the word "presbutes," which simply means: "an old man" (see: **Luke 1:18; Titus 2:2; Philemon 9**). This word is used a number of different ways in the NT Scriptures:

1. With reference to age; also of those born first -- **Luke 15:25; John 8:9; Acts 2:17; 1 Timothy 5:1-2; 1 Peter 5:5**. It is probably also used this way in **2 John 1** and **3 John 1**.
2. With reference to one's forefathers; those who have gone before us -- **Hebrews 11:2**. In **Matthew 15:2** and **Mark 7:3-5** the text speaks of teachings and traditions handed down by these men.

3. In about 25 passages it refers to Jewish leaders; probably synagogue officials and those serving on the Sanhedrin. The pagans, by the way, also used this word to refer to their civil and religious officials.

4. It is used symbolically a total of 12 times in the book of Revelation with reference to the 24 elders who sit on 24 thrones. Many biblical scholars feel these 24 elders represent the 12 tribes and the 12 apostles, which in turn are symbolic of the redeemed under both old and new covenants.

5. It is used 15 times in the NT writings with reference to the spiritual leaders of the church -- [Acts 11:30](#); [14:23](#); [15:2, 4, 6, 22-23](#); [16:4](#); [20:17, 28](#); [21:18](#); [1 5:17, 19-20](#); [Titus 1:5](#); [James 5:14](#); [1 Peter 5:1](#). It may possibly be used this way in [2 John 1](#) and [3 John 1](#) (a point over which interpreters are divided).

In the inspired New Testament writings, in our English versions, this word is most often translated: "elder." "The etymology of the term 'presbuteros,' as well as the qualifications set forth in both Timothy and Titus, points to leadership by men of seniority, prominence, experience, and wisdom. ... The term suggests a leadership built on respect and reverence (cf. [Leviticus 19:32](#)), a reverence that recognizes ability, service, knowledge, example, and seniority" (Dr. Jack P. Lewis, *Leadership Questions Confronting the Church*, p. 18, 21). It speaks of "those who, being raised up and qualified by the work of the Holy Spirit, were appointed to have the spiritual care of the churches" (W.E. Vine, *Expository Dictionary of NT Words*).

Episkopos -- This word appears only five times in the pages of the New Covenant writings, once with reference to Jesus Christ ([1 Peter 2:25](#)) and four times to designate the human leaders of the church ([Acts 20:28](#); [Philippians 1:1](#); [1 Timothy 3:2](#); [Titus 1:7](#)). By transliterating this word from Greek to English we get the well-known term "Episcopal." This Greek word is generally translated: "Overseer, Bishop, Guardian." It literally conveys the vital concept of "looking over; watching over." "Protective care is at the heart of the activity" described by this particular word (Dr. Jack P. Lewis, p. 24). "The term 'elder' indicates the mature spiritual experience and understanding of those so described; the term 'bishop,' or 'overseer,' indicates the character of the work undertaken" (W.E. Vine, *Expository Dictionary of NT Words*).

Two forms of this word appear elsewhere in the NT writings -- (1) "Episkope" appears in [1 Timothy 3:1](#) and means "overseership." Some translations render this word: "the office of bishop" (*King James Version*). However, as W.E. Vine points out, "there is no word representing 'office' used in the text." (2) "Episkopeo," which is the verb form of the word, means to do the work of an "Episkopos," which is to "watch over" and "look out for" those in one's care. It appears twice in the NT -- once with reference to these leaders in the church ([1 Peter 5:2](#)), and once where it is translated "see to it; look diligently to" ([Hebrews 12:15](#)). "The word does not imply the entrance upon such responsibility, but the fulfillment of it; it is not a matter of assuming a position or office, but the discharge of the duties" (W.E. Vine,

Expository Dictionary of NT Words).

Poimen -- This word appears 18 times in the NT writings, but is used only once with reference to these leaders in the church -- [Ephesians 4:11](#). The meaning of the word is: "shepherd," although in [Ephesians 4:11](#) it is generally translated "pastor" (which is simply the Latin word for "shepherd"). The verb form of this word is "poimaino," which appears eleven times in the NT. It means, "to shepherd; to perform the duties of a shepherd." It is used twice to depict the work of the leadership of the church ([Acts 20:28](#); [1 Peter 5:2](#)). In using these words, "it is the guiding and protecting -- not the domineering or ruling -- of the flock that is stressed" (Dr. Jack P. Lewis, p. 27). "In Palestinian shepherding, the shepherd leads the sheep; he does not drive them. We must move from the 'board of directors' mindset in our congregations and create a situation in which the shepherd is leading sheep!" (ibid, p. 30).

Didaskalos -- This is the Greek equivalent of "Rabbi," and simply means: "teacher." It is obvious from several passages that those who serve as elders are to be skilled teachers and instructors ([1 Timothy 3:2](#); [5:17](#); [Titus 1:9](#)). This term also seems to be used of elders in [Ephesians 4:11](#) where we find the phrase "pastors and teachers." The structure of the sentence in the Greek makes it clear that Paul is referring to but one ministry, yet emphasizing dual aspects of that ministry -- i.e., a spiritual leader is both a shepherd and a teacher. Many biblical scholars suggest this phrase in [Ephesians 4:11](#) should be translated: "teaching pastors." Paul speaks of elders "who work hard at preaching and teaching" ([1 Timothy 5:17](#)), which many believe strongly suggests the local preacher, if qualified, may indeed be part of the eldership as well.

"The term 'teacher' should remind us that the church is essentially a school. Its members are 'pupils' or 'disciples.' Jesus is the 'one Teacher' ([Matthew 23:8](#)), but under Him there are other teachers, and among these are the elders. If one is to teach, he must, himself, know. Furthermore, those things said about the family qualifications of the elder and those things said about his being 'an example' make clear that his teaching is not of the 'do as I say, and not as I do' sort. He teaches by what he has been, by what he is now, by what he does, and by what he says" (Dr. Jack P. Lewis, p. 15).

Oikonomos -- This is the Greek word for "steward." It is used of elders in [Titus 1:7](#), where it refers to one who has been "given a trust" to look after the affairs of another's household (in this case: the household of God). See also: [1 Corinthians 4:1-2](#) and [1 Peter 4:10-11](#).

Proistemi -- This word appears 8 times in the pages of the NT writings. The *KJV* renders it "rule," and "if one accepts the *KJV* as final authority, indeed elders do RULE ... however, if he asks what concept 'proistemi' conveys, he might have a modified opinion" (Dr. Jack P. Lewis, p. 30-31). This word is used once with reference to elders in [1 Timothy 5:17](#) (regarding his relationship to the church), and then twice more in [1 Timothy 3:4-5](#) (regarding his relationship to his own family). Some biblical scholars also feel this word is used with regard to elders in [1 Thessalonians 5:12](#), but this is extremely unlikely due to the fact that the congregation had only been established three months prior to Paul's writing of that particular epistle (and elders are not to be new converts).

Although the word does mean "to preside over; direct; govern," one must not overlook the fact that it also has several other meanings as well, and since context must ultimately determine which meaning of a term should be applied in any given passage, these other meanings should be given some consideration. Thus, this Greek word may also convey the following important ideas: "To be a protector or guardian; to give aid; to care for; give attention to" (Thayer, *Greek-English Lexicon of the NT*, p. 539). "To be concerned about; care for; give aid; busy oneself with something; engage in something" (Arndt & Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the NT and Other Early Christian Literature*, p. 707).

"Translations such as the King James Version leave the impression that 'ruling' is an important function of elders ... however, reading into these texts the idea of ruling comparable to political rule is simply not justified by the meaning of the Greek words themselves" (Waymon D. Miller, *The Role of Elders in the NT Church*, p. 36). "The word was usually applied to informal leadership and management of all kinds rather than to definite offices, and was associated with the services rendered ... thus, 'helpful leadership in Divine things' would be approximately the thought suggested" (F.J.A. Hort, *The Christian Ecclesia*, p. 127). Therefore, the task of elders, in light of this Greek word, "is in large measure that of pastoral care, and the emphasis is not on their rank or authority but on their efforts for the eternal salvation of believers. Their attention is primarily directed, not to the exercise of power, but to a sincere care of souls" (Gerhard Kittel, *Theological Dictionary of the NT*, vol. 6, p. 702).

Hegeomai -- This word is used four times with reference to leaders in the church ([Acts 15:22](#); [Hebrews 13:7, 17, 24](#)). Although it may be used of elders, it may also be used of other leadership positions and functions in the church. It refers to "a mental process," according to Dr. Jack Lewis; an "ambition to be chief" (W.E. Vine, *Expository Dictionary of NT Words*). It is often translated: "to think; to reckon; suppose; to esteem." It is a state of mind or mind-set which motivates one to leadership. However, this is leadership not of RULE, but of SERVICE. Jesus said, "I am among you as one who serves" ([Luke 22:27](#)). In the previous verse, He says that the one who desires to be "leader" (same Greek word) must become the "servant" (vs. 26).

The Six Works

What does the Lord God expect of an eldership, both individually and collectively? What do the NT writings convey about their duties? Although, without question, the members will have their own list of expectations for these men, let us be very careful lest we find ourselves binding duties and responsibilities upon these men that God Himself has not! Remember: it is the Holy Spirit who creates elders ([Acts 20:28](#)), not us, and it is through the inspiration of that same Spirit that their duties and responsibilities are enumerated. Let's briefly, in skeletal form, notice the six works (duties, responsibilities) specified by the Spirit for the shepherds of the flock. These are His expectations for these men; their reason for being!

Guide the Flock -- These are to be men of knowledge, experience and wisdom to whom the members of the church may appeal for a "Thus sayeth the Lord" to vital questions and issues relevant to their daily living ([Acts 15:2, 6; 16:4](#)). Elders are thus to be capable counselors of those given into their care, guiding them in the way they should go. At times, they will need to make judgment calls in some given situation, but they do so with the best interests of those they serve in mind, considering the impact of their judgments upon the flock.

Guard the Flock -- Sheep are particularly susceptible to harm from predators. They need a shepherd to guard them and protect them. "Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God" ([Acts 20:28](#)). A good shepherd not only guards himself from the evil predators, but also his flock. The word "overseer," by the way, can also mean "guardian; one who watches over protectively." "They keep watch over your souls, as those who will give an account" ([Hebrews 13:17](#)).

Nourish the Flock -- Elders must feed the flock, not feed off of the flock. One of the indictments against the wicked shepherds over Israel was -- "the shepherds fed themselves and did not feed My flock" ([Ezekiel 34:8](#)). Therefore, God declared, "I shall deliver My flock from their mouth, that they may not be food for them" (vs. 10). "Woe, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding themselves! Should not the shepherds feed the flock?" (vs. 2). The pastors of the One Body must be spiritual nourishers of the

disciples of Christ. Thus, they must be skilled scholars and capable teachers of the Word (1 Timothy 3:2; 5:17; Hebrews 13:7). These men must "hold fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, that he may be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict" (Titus 1:9). One who is not "apt to teach," is not fit to serve as a shepherd of the flock. What good is a shepherd who can't feed sheep?!

Equip the Flock -- The Lord has given "teaching pastors" to the church "for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ" (Ephesians 4:11-12). Their work is to develop these disciples in their faith and mature them in their relationship with Jesus (vs. 13). Thus, good elders are equippers and enablers of those disciples they seek to motivate to acts of service. They are not micro-managers, but rather entrust to responsible men and women in the church the various ministry tasks. They equip and enable, then stand aside and let the members take responsibility.

Example to the Flock -- The apostle Peter cautioned elders never to "lord it over those allotted to your charge, but prove to be examples to the flock" (1 Peter 5:3). Sheep must be led, not driven. A good shepherd knows this; those who don't will "dominate" the flock "with force and with severity" (Ezekiel 34:4). In contrast, the Lord, the good Shepherd, says, "I will lead them" (Ezekiel 34:15). Pastors lead by the example of their lives; lives lived in harmony with the teachings of God's Word. Jesus said, "Follow Me" ... He didn't drive them from behind with a stick. He led; and He did so by the power of the example of a godly life! "Remember those who led you, who spoke the word of God to you; and considering the result of their conduct, imitate their faith" (Hebrews 13:7).



Serve the Flock -- A shepherd is a servant of the flock, not the lord of it. All of the above areas of responsibility can fall nicely under the umbrella of this single term. Shepherds serve. Jesus, the Good Shepherd, said, "I am among you as the one who serves" (Luke 22:27). "The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve" (Matthew 20:28). The members are not at the disposal of the elders ... indeed, just the reverse: the elders are at the disposal of the members! Many elders seem to have forgotten this (if they ever knew it). Elders are not gods, they are guides; they are not saviors, they are servants; they are not lords, they are leaders; they are not executives, they are examples. Until elders get out of the board room and into the pasture where the sheep are, there will continue to be a deadly disconnect between shepherds and sheep, and the latter will continue to wander away and become lost with no shepherd to seek for them, and they will continue to become sickly and die with no shepherd to bind their wounds or heal their diseases. You can't serve a flock from behind the closed doors of a board room; you must be among them! As **one astute author** once declared, "A shepherd must smell of sheep!"

Conclusion

Ezekiel 34 ought to be required, and regular, reading for every elder in the church! It is a powerful indictment against false shepherds, giving extensive insight into the many ways these self-serving little lords abuse the flock of God. The chapter also reveals the attitudes and actions of godly shepherds, as perceived in the Great Shepherd Himself. We can learn much from these negative and positive assessments. The Lord God said, "I will feed My flock and I will lead them to rest. I will seek the lost, bring back the scattered, bind up the broken, and strengthen the sick" (vs. 15-16). "I will care for My sheep and will deliver them from all the places to which they were scattered" (vs. 12). "I will eliminate harmful beasts from the land, so that they may live securely in the wilderness and sleep in the woods" (vs. 25). "And they will no longer be a prey to the nations, and the beasts of the earth will not devour them; but they will live securely, and no one will make them afraid" (vs. 28).

What a wonderful Shepherd we have in the Lord Jesus Christ! Those men who serve as shepherds over the flock of God today must model themselves after Him, and then, "when the Chief Shepherd appears, they will receive the unfading crown of glory" (1 Peter 5:4). Those who lead the flock of our God "will give an account" (Hebrews 13:17), thus they should take seriously their calling. Those who lead well will receive eternal glory; those who do not lead well will face the wrath of God. "Thus says the Lord God, 'Behold, I am against the shepherds'" (Ezekiel 34:10). What a frightful prospect!

False shepherds "dominate" the flock "with force and with severity" (Ezekiel 34:4). However, God will one day step in and "break the bars of their yoke and deliver them from the hand of those who enslaved them" (Ezekiel 34:27). Those leaders who enslave the sheep of their folds, who lord it over them with force and severity, will give an account to their Chief Shepherd. That will not be a pleasant day for many in the church today, I fear. It is my fervent prayer that those who serve as shepherds of the flock, as elders of the church, as overseers of the household of God, will seriously consider the solemn aspects of their work of service, and conduct themselves in a manner worthy of the example of our Good Shepherd Jesus Christ. This will not only result in eternal blessings for them, but the church of our Lord Jesus Christ will be blessed and built up by their godly leadership. Lord God, bless Your flock with spiritual shepherds!

