

# ***“Elders: A Definition of Terms”***

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Several weeks ago, as I started doing some preliminary research for a series of lessons on elders, I was shocked to discover that the last time we studied this subject in depth was way back in April 2002. And so as we begin, I would start this morning with an apology. Especially in a church without elders, it is not acceptable to go for nearly ten years without covering such an important topic. I am telling you now: I will never again go that long without studying such an important subject! We are living in a time when a vast majority of our young people are growing up in congregations without elders. A number of the children in this congregation have never even been to a church that is overseen by an eldership, and many adults here have never been a member of a church with elders. Since we are living in such a time, there is a terrible danger that we may grow accustomed to things the way they are. As a church, therefore, we must rededicate ourselves to studying what the Bible teaches on the subject of church organization. Elders are God’s plan for church government, and this congregation will never operate to its full potential until elders and deacons are appointed.

As we begin, I should point out that it is possible for us to be acceptable to God without elders; however, whether we are acceptable to God depends on the reason why elders have not yet been appointed here. If we are seriously working toward that goal, if we as a congregation have put our hearts into it, if we as individuals are truly straining to become qualified, and then, in spite of our efforts, if there are not at least two men who meet the qualifications, then God will understand. There were apparently some New Testament churches in that situation. However, if we as a congregation are not seriously working toward appointing an eldership, or if we have at least two men who are qualified and we refuse to appoint them, then we as a congregation are operating in open rebellion to the Word of God, and all of us will give an account for that rebellion on the Day of Judgment.

As we look at this issue, then, we see that it is extremely important, and it is something that we as a congregation must approach with a great deal of prayer and Bible study. With that in mind, I would like for us to spend the next several weeks looking very carefully at what the Bible teaches on the subject of elders. This morning, I would like for us to study the various words that are used to describe elders in the New Testament, along with a description of the work that they do. Over the next two Sundays, I would like for us study the qualifications for elders. And then I would like for us to study where we go from here and what the Bible teaches about how a church should be governed in what should be the very temporary absence of elders.

And through it all, I would encourage you to write down your questions, hopes, dreams, fears, and concerns and get those to me at any time over the next few weeks (preferably sooner rather than later)—either by email, or text, or even written with an actual pen on actual paper! As we study, I hope to incorporate some of those comments and questions into the lessons. This morning, though, I would like for us to study the general idea of an eldership by looking at several of the terms that are used to describe elders in the New Testament.

I. **First of all, perhaps the most common and the most familiar word would be the word ELDER itself. As I understand it, the word ELDER is a translation of the Greek word PRESBUTEROS.**

And right away, I think you can see where the Presbyterian Church gets its name—it is structured in such a way that elders (or presbyters) are responsible for governing each local congregation. **PRESBUTEROS** literally refers to **“one advanced in life.”** In fact, in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament that was used in the First Century, the word **PRESBUTEROS** was used to translate a Hebrew word, which meant **“beard”** or **“chin,”** and the idea is that an older man could be identified as being older by looking at his beard. First of all (unlike the Mormon missionaries who might show up on your front porch), an elder is a man old enough to have a beard. And secondly, an elder is old enough to be able to judge his age based on looking at his beard, because the beard would be gray or graying. And so, in a sense, then, I guess you could say that we are looking for men with gray beards! And the general idea is that an elder is someone with experience, someone who is advanced in life.

I don’t know whether you have thought about this before, but have you considered the fact that men in the Bible were appointed as elders? You cannot appoint somebody to be an old man. You cannot say, “I hereby make you old!” But instead, the qualifications are given, and those who meet those qualifications are naturally on the older side of the congregation. And to me, it is interesting that no age requirement is ever given. God never sets a minimum or (for that matter) a maximum age for men to serve as elders. But rather, it seems that the idea of being older is simply a description of those who meet the qualifications. As far as the Bible itself is concerned, the closest we ever get to an age requirement is simply that the man not be a **“new convert”** (1 Timothy 3:6), as you can see in the first passage on the handout. And in that verse, Paul is literally saying that an elder must not be **“newly planted.”** He is not to be a rookie, but he is to be a man with some experience in the Lord’s church. He is to be a man who is old enough to have perhaps weathered some church storms. On the other hand, let us not think that age alone will qualify anyone for serving as an elder. In other words, we are not to just take the three oldest men and appoint them as elders, for example; but rather, there are qualifications that must be met.

As I think about a minimum age for serving as an elder, it reminds me quite a bit of the discussion we sometimes have concerning the minimum age for becoming a Christian. The Bible never tells us how old a person needs to be before obeying the gospel. And the reason is: People mature at different ages. As soon as someone says you must be 12 or you must be 10 or 16 (or whatever), we start finding exceptions. Some people are ready to be baptized at an earlier age, and some people may never be ready. I hope we see the parallel, because in the same way, some men may meet the qualifications a little bit earlier in life, and some men may not meet those qualifications until a little bit later.

I know we plan on looking at the qualifications in more detail next week, but just think for a moment about how Paul said that a man must be respected in the community, that he is to be a married man with Christian children, and so on. When we think about it, we realize that those qualifications can only be met by a man who is probably older than many of the other men in the congregation. On the other hand, let us not make qualifications that are not there. The way I have heard some people talk, you would think that Paul required

elders to have grandchildren or even great-grandchildren! I was thinking about this and looked up the life expectancy of the average man in the United States back in 1900. Just over a hundred years ago, the average man only lived to the age of 46. According to some people, it would have been nearly impossible to have elders during that phase of our nation's history.

But again, although a specific age is not given, the idea behind the word **ELDER** is that a man is respected due to his wisdom and his experience in the church. In this area, like many others, we can again see the wisdom of God. In other areas of life, we also value experience. If we were to look through the Help Wanted ads in today's newspaper, we would find a vast majority of the ads are looking for someone with "experience." I looked in today's paper, and almost all of the jobs required experience of some kind or another. One company was looking for a property manager, for example, and the ad said they were looking for someone with at least three years of hospitality or retail experience. Zimbrick was looking for salespeople with "a strong track record of providing outstanding customer service." They were looking for someone with "proven sales success in achieving results." Gardner Bakery was looking for a maintenance mechanic with "experience in industrial electrical systems." A law office was looking for an Administrative Assistant, and "previous office experience" was preferred. Epic was looking for people with experience in accounting, and human resources, and reception, and HVAC, and so on. Over and over again, experience is required.

Not only is this true in business, but it is also true in politics. We can disagree about this politically and still be Christian friends (I hope), but in my opinion, when it comes to electing any kind of leader, I want to elect a man or woman with some kind of experience. In fact, experience and maturity is so important in our nation that we have even established a minimum age for someone to be elected president. The minimum age is 35, and when anyone even close to 35 is elected, it is rare. Theodore Roosevelt was the youngest to be sworn in at the age of 42, John F. Kennedy comes in second at 43, Bill Clinton comes in third at 46, and the ages go on up to Ronald Reagan who took the oath of office at the age of 69. As humans, we generally see the value of experience, and that is the way it is in the church as well. Those who serve are referred to as being **ELDERS**. Beyond this, there is no minimum age given in the Bible, and to add an age would be to add a requirement that the Bible does not give. Where the Scriptures are silent, and we must also be silent. We have to go back to the qualifications, as we will do next week, and we must allow the Bible to be our guide.

The first term, therefore, is **PRESBUTEROS**. From this term we get our English word "elder." The term refers to one who is "advanced in life," a man with experience, possibly a man with a gray beard, a man some level of seniority and wisdom.

**II. The second term that is sometimes used comes from the Greek word EPISKOPOS, and it is normally translated as OVERSEER.**

And as you can tell, this is where the Episcopal Church gets its name, but the word refers to an overseer or a manager. In some older translations, the word is translated as **BISHOP**, which goes back to what is basically a Middle English abbreviation of the Latin form of this word. Unfortunately, when most people hear the word **BISHOP**, they sometimes think in terms of the modern usage—the denominational idea that a **BISHOP** is a man with authority over a number of local congregations. That is not, however, an idea that comes from the Bible. In the Bible, we do not read about Cardinals, or Popes, or Archbishops; but instead, the elders are the highest form of authority in the Lord's church here on earth. In the churches of Christ, all of our congregations are completely independent, and we have no earthly headquarters. I think we see the wisdom of this as we think about the fact that one man in a position of authority does not have the power to pull multiple congregations away from God. And so, for example, if one congregation goes off the deep end (so to speak),

that congregation's elders have no power over us, but we are independent, we are autonomous, we are self-governing.

The word **EPISKOPOS** occurs only five times in the New Testament—once in describing Jesus as the, *“Shepherd and OVERSEER [or EPISKOPOS] of our souls,”* in 1 Peter 2:25, and then four times with reference to the office of **OVERSEER** in the Lord's church. Those passages are listed in the “see also” section of the handout.

The meaning of this word, according to one Greek lexicon, is this, **“an overseer; superintendent; someone charged with the duty of seeing that things done by others are done correctly.”** It is with this word, then, that we have the idea of the elders **“overseeing”** or being in charge of the congregation. When you look at the word, you might notice that EPISKOPOS has the word “scope” in it – like a microscope, a telescope, or the scope of a rifle. The idea is that an elder is someone who will keep an eye on us spiritually. When we appoint elders here at this congregation, they will look after us, and on the Judgment Day, they will give an account for our souls. Concerning elders, one of the most sobering passages in the New Testament is found in Hebrews 13, as we learn that being an **OVERSEER** carries with it a great deal of responsibility. In Hebrews 13:17, the Bible says, *“Obey 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.”* And so again, part of the responsibility of an **OVERSEER** is to oversee—they keep watch for our souls and will give an account to God for every person in the congregation. In my own mind, I picture elders showing up on the Day of Judgment, and I picture the Lord asking about each member of the congregation: What about so-and-so? It appears that he is not with us today. What happened? What efforts were made to reach this person? As overseers, elders are managers of the congregation and will give an account to God for the souls entrusted to their care. And as we have discussed before, this is one of those passages where we start to see the value of knowing exactly who the members of the church really are. Who are the elders responsible for? They are not responsible for anyone who happens to pass through the area. They are not responsible for members of the church down in Janesville. They are not responsible for members of the church over in Milwaukee. But they are responsible for the members of this congregation. Like the Good Shepherd, they are to know their sheep, and their sheep are to know and recognize the sound of their voice.

While we are on this word, I should point out that from time to time, I will hear people say that elders do not have any real authority—that they can only lead through their good example. However, let us remember that the word **OVERSEER** itself refers to someone who makes sure that a job done by others is done correctly. Elders are the managers, or leaders, or superintendents of the congregation. Like the principal of a school, they are responsible and will give an account to the superintendent, the Lord. That does not mean that elders are to operate as dictators, or that they should take advantage of their authority, but it means that they do, in fact, have authority. As members of the church, we are told in Hebrews 13:17 to **“obey”** our leaders and **“submit”** to them. As **OVERSEERS**, the elders are responsible for managing or leading the congregation.

- III. **At this time, let us go on to a third word that refers to elders. It is the word POIMEN, and it is translated into English by the word SHEPHERD. SHEPHERD is the definition, the translation of POIMEN into English.**

The Latin version of **POIMEN** is **PASTOR**. So, if you would like to put that in the right-hand blank, you will see that **PASTOR** (like **BISHOP**) is perhaps accurate, but it is a little bit out-of-date. Technically, **SHEPHERD** and **PASTOR** are the same, and both words are parallel terms referring to the office of **ELDER** or **OVERSEER**. In the denominational world, however, the term **PASTOR** is usually mistakenly used for the preacher, when, in fact, it

should only be used of elders. You can look up the word PASTOR on Dictionary.com, for example, and the first definition is, “a minister or priest in charge of a church.” In reality, though, the preacher (or evangelist, or minister) is not to be in charge of the congregation. In a church with elders, in fact, the preacher works under the elders, just as the other members are also subject to the elders. Here again we can be very careful with our language by not referring to the preacher as the **PASTOR**, unless, of course, the preacher is really serving as one of the elders. My dad, for example, started out in Crystal Lake as a preacher, was appointed to serve as an elder in the mid 1980’s, served in both roles for many years, has now retired from full-time preaching, and is now continuing to serve as an elder. My point is that the word **PASTOR** has been misunderstood and abused through the years. So, instead of referring to elders by the Latin word **PASTOR**, perhaps we could try to use the actual translation into modern English, which is **SHEPHERD** (even though **PASTOR** might be technically accurate).

It would be similar to the use of the Latin word **FETUS**, which literally means “baby” or “offspring.” Of course, in the big abortion debate, most politicians would much rather talk about a “fetus” as opposed to a “baby,” because nobody really knows what a **FETUS** is—it sounds so scientific! But in reality, the words are the same. Fetus is simply the Latinized version of baby. As Christians, we can either remind people of the original meaning of “fetus,” or we can simply refer to an unborn baby as a baby, and not cloud the abortion issue by using a word that most people no longer properly understand. In the same way, **PASTOR** may be technically accurate when it comes to referring to an **ELDER**, but that word has been so abused and misunderstood through the years, it would be a lot safer to simply refer to elders as shepherds.

**SHEPHERD**, then, is the third major word that is used to refer to elders, and it is a powerful concept, to think of our leaders as being **SHEPHERDS**. To me, it is interesting that when God made plans for how His church would be governed and led, He did not choose the military model. And so, unlike the modern Salvation Army, we do not have commanders, and officers, and generals. Unlike the Roman Empire, we do not have emperors and senators in the church. Unlike the business world, we do not have shareholders and CEO’s. Unlike the representative republic that we have here in the United States, we do not elect representatives. We do not have a legislative, and judicial, and executive branch. God did not choose the dictator model. We are not ruled by one powerful personality within the church. In fact, God did not even choose the model that was used under the Law of Moses, where the people were ruled by kings and led religiously by priests. But instead, God decided that each local congregation would be overseen by shepherds.

And for that reason, over and over again, we find in the Bible references to God’s people as sheep and God’s leaders as shepherds. In one of His most famous parables, Jesus talked about a shepherd who left 99 sheep in the wilderness so that he could go looking for one lost sheep that had wandered away. What a beautiful picture! Jesus pictured Himself as the Good Shepherd who lays down His life for the sheep. Over and over again, therefore, Christians are pictured as sheep and Christian leaders are pictured as shepherds: not dictators, not kings, not rulers, not CEO’s, not emperors, but shepherds!

There are two major passages that refer to elders as **SHEPHERDS**. The first is found in Acts 20, as Paul tries to encourage the elders from the church in Ephesus. Please notice Acts 20:28-31, where Paul says to the elders,

***“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 which He purchased with His own blood. I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples***

***after them. Therefore be on the alert, remembering that night and day for a period of three years I did not cease to admonish each one with tears.”***

We notice here that the **SHEPHERDS** were responsible for guarding the church. We also notice that the **SHEPHERDS** were to be on the alert. The elders were to be on guard, and they were to serve as shepherds, they were to protect the church from **“savage wolves.”** As shepherds of the congregation, elders must know when a sheep is wandering off on its own into danger. They must know when a sheep needs to be rescued. They must be aware and on the lookout for danger at all times. A loving shepherd will never run from a fight involving one of his sheep, but he will lay down his life. As Harold Taylor pointed out in a recent issue of Gospel Advocate (March 2007), the shepherd’s motto will always be, “If you take even one lamb, it will be over my dead body!” We need shepherds like that!

There is another passage that refers to elders as **SHEPHERDS**, **1 Peter 5:1-5**, a passage that especially addresses the attitude that our **SHEPHERDS** will need to have. And as we consider this passage, please notice how Peter identifies himself—**1 Peter 5:1-5**,

***“Therefore, I exhort the elders among you, as your fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed, shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness; nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory. You younger men, likewise, be subject to your elders; and all of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, for God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble.”***

Notice, then, that Peter refers to himself as **“your fellow elder.”** Peter was an apostle, Peter was a preacher, and Peter was also an elder. And for those who claim that Peter was the first Pope, hold on a minute! One of the basic qualifications for elders (which we will discuss next week) is that elders must be married with children. We know that Peter was married not only because of this but also for at least two other reasons. In **Mark 1**, you might remember that Jesus healed Peter’s mother-in-law. If you have a mother-in-law, chances are you are married! And then, there is that passage in **1 Corinthians 9** where Paul makes the argument that preachers have the right to be paid for the work that they do. In that context, Paul says, **“Do we not have a right to take along a believing wife, even as the rest of the apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas?”** In other words, Cephas (or Peter as he was also known) was married. Not only that, but his wife was active in the church, traveling on various missionary journeys along with her husband. Peter, then, was definitely married and even served as an elder.

But beyond this little detail, the passage in **1 Peter 5** also tells us something about the attitude that shepherds in the church need to have. They are to exercise oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily. This is not to be something that is forced upon them, but as mature Christian men, they are to serve willingly. They must not serve for any kind of selfish reasons. And then we learn that they are not to be dictators. They are not to quarantine themselves in some kind of boardroom somewhere, shooting off memos and directives from on high, but they are to serve as examples. They are to be out there with the members, just as a shepherd will often live out there in the field with the sheep.

From these two passages, then, we learn that elders, as shepherds, are to take care of the flock. They are to provide leadership as a literal shepherd would do, and they are to protect the flock from false teachers, just as

a real shepherd would protect his flock from predators. One writer has said that the word **SHEPHERD** indicates “mental toughness,” and that would certainly be a necessary trait for an elder.

If you do not have a history of being close to real, live sheep on a farm, then there is the temptation to think of sheep as rather calm and ignorant animals, but that is not the case! A number of years ago, I went on a visit to one of the member’s homes down near Janesville—to the home of Marv and Linda Delzer. I went to their house for dinner, and it turned out to be a very interesting experience, because I ended up going with them to one of their farms down near Monroe and helping them corral a number of sheep into a trailer. On my way down there, I had this picture in my mind that brother Marv would lift up his staff and just lead the animals onto the trailer. However, on that day, I quickly learned that sheep are strong, and quick, and self-willed animals. When it comes to avoiding the farmer (or the preacher, for that matter), sheep are not stupid. Again I had the idea that brother Marv would just hold up a staff or something, and that the sheep would blindly follow him on the trailer. That did not happen! We had to tackle sheep. Did you know that sheep can jump? Did you know that sheep can bite? In just a few minutes, my image of a shepherd was transformed completely. I hope that some of you had a chance to read an article and watch a video that I emailed out on Friday (and also posted on the church’s Facebook page). The article (*USA Today*; December 23-25, 2010) talked about modern shepherds, men on temporary work visas who come into the United States from places like Peru, men who take on the role of shepherd. And as you read that article, I think you will agree that being a shepherd is tough, very difficult work.

In the same way, being a spiritual shepherd will also be a challenge. It is a job that requires mental toughness, and wisdom, and experience, and a solid knowledge of the Bible. It is a difficult job that is reserved for qualified men.

### **Conclusion:**

This morning, I hope that we have started to get a clearer picture of what is involved in being an elder and what it takes to serve as an elder. First of all, an elder is a man who is respected because of his wisdom and experience in the church. Secondly, he is a man who has taken on the awesome responsibility of overseeing the souls in a local congregation. And finally, he is a shepherd who is responsible for feeding and protecting God’s flock.

As we close, I would just like to emphasize that these three terms are used interchangeably in the Bible. An elder, an overseer, and a shepherd are simply three different descriptions of the same office. For example, in **Acts 20:17**, Paul called the “**elders**” of the church together, and then, in **verse 28**, Paul refers to the fact that the Holy Spirit has made these men “**overseers**,” men who were called to “**shepherd**” the church of God. And again, in **Titus 1:5**, Paul told Titus to appoint “**elders**” in every church, and then (in **verse 7**), Paul went on to give the qualifications for “**overseers**.” All of these words refer to the same position.

As a congregation, we are like a bunch of lost sheep, we are out here in the wilderness on our own, and we are looking for shepherds. Usually it’s the other way around—shepherds looking for sheep—but here, we are sheep looking for shepherds. As we study the issue of an eldership here at this congregation, we need to be aware that we are in a very fragile situation. At the same time, we understand that elders are God’s plan for every congregation. Until we find shepherds, let us remember to pray that shepherds will be appointed.

Our goal at this congregation is to do whatever God wants us to do. When it comes to appointing elders, let us never say, “Oh, we don’t have anybody qualified right now, so we don’t need to worry about this.” No, we do

need to be concerned about this. And so with that in mind, I am thankful for your kind attention this morning. As you can see on the handout, we hope to start looking at the actual qualifications next Sunday morning, and I would invite you to prepare for that study by going ahead and reading those verses in **1 Timothy 3** and **Titus 1**. And again, please feel free to pass along your comments, concerns, or questions during the week.

If you are visiting with us this morning, we want you to know that all people need to understand God's sacrifice, and that sacrifice motivates us to change our lives. At that point, we make an appeal to God for a clean conscience by allowing ourselves to be immersed in water for the forgiveness of our sins. If you have any questions, let us know. But if you are ready to become a Christian right now, please let us know as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: [fourlakeschurch@gmail.com](mailto:fourlakeschurch@gmail.com)



# “Elders: A Definition of Terms”

## I. PRESBUTEROS=\_\_\_\_\_.

1 Timothy 3:6 *“...and not a new convert, so that he will not become conceited and fall into the condemnation incurred by the devil.”*

See also: Acts 14:23; Acts 15:4ff; Acts 16:4; Acts 20:17; 1 Timothy 5:17-19; Titus 1:5; James 5:14; 1 Peter 5:1-5; 2 John 1; 3 John 1; Revelation 4:4 (and several other passages in Revelation).

## II. EPISKOPOS=\_\_\_\_\_ or \_\_\_\_\_.

English (preferred) Latinized (technically accurate, but perhaps misleading due to modern usage)

1 Peter 2:25 *“For you were continually straying like sheep, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Guardian [OVERSEER] of your souls.”*

Hebrews 13:17 *“Obey 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.”*

See also: Acts 20:28; Philippians 1:1, 1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:7

## III. POIMEN=\_\_\_\_\_ or \_\_\_\_\_.

English (preferred) Latinized (technically accurate, but perhaps misleading due to modern usage)

Acts 20:28-31 *“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 which He purchased with His own blood. I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be on the alert, remembering that night and day for a period of three years I did not cease to admonish each one with tears.”*

1 Peter 5:1-5 *“Therefore, I exhort the elders among you, as your fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed, shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness; nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory. You younger men, likewise, be subject to your elders; and all of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, for God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble.”*

See also: Ephesians 4:11

<b>NOTE: The Above Terms all Refer to the Same “Office”</b>	
Acts 20:17-18, 28	<i>“From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called to him the <u>elders</u> of the church. And when they had come to him, he said to them...‘Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you <u>overseers</u>, to <u>shepherd</u> the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.’”</i>
Titus 1:5-7	<i>“...appoint <u>elders</u> in every city as I directed you...namely, if any man is above reproach...for the <u>overseer</u> must be above reproach...”</i>