



New Testament Description of Church Leadership

This article is the second in a mini-series on church leadership. The intent of this series is to present the biblical basis for church leadership portrayed in the New Testament. Part 1 of this series described various church leadership models that exist in churches today and gave a brief summary of each model's strengths and weaknesses.

Part 2 will focus on the biblical description of leaders in the local church, their "job description," and perspective of ministry. When these local leaders are mentioned, Scripture emphasizes a plurality of elders who, under Christ, were to provide spiritual oversight in a church. This leadership model was implemented in various churches in the first century. Could this be the model God intends for today's churches as well?

Since the biblical model of multiple elders is often foreign to many churches today, one of the goals of this series is to answer questions that often arise with regard to this model of church leadership. Two significant questions will be addressed in the current study:

1. Do the terms "overseer, elder, and shepherd" describe different groups of men; or do these terms characterize one group of men in a local church family?
2. What are the differences between bishop/overseer, elder, and shepherd/pastor?

In answering those questions, we will concentrate on two passages that help us understand the New Testament model for church leadership.

Our first passage is in Acts chapter 20. In that chapter, Paul was nearing the end of his third missionary journey. On his way to Jerusalem, he stopped at Ephesus in order to meet with the elders of the church.

Acts 20:17, From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called to him the elders (*presbuteros*) of the church. (*transliteration added in this verse and throughout the article*)

When the elders arrived, Paul reviewed his past ministry (Acts 20:18-21). He announced that he was on his way to Jerusalem where he expected to be arrested (Acts 20:22-24) and that he would see them no more (Acts 20:25-26). In his farewell remarks, Paul reminded them that he had taught them the whole purpose of God (Acts 20:27).

Acts 20:18-27, And when they had come to him, he said to them, "You yourselves know, from the first day that I set foot in Asia, how I was with you the whole time, ¹⁹ serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials which came upon me through the plots of the Jews; ²⁰ how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you publicly and from house to house, ²¹ solemnly testifying to both Jews and Greeks of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. ²² And now, behold, bound by the Spirit, I am on my way to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there, ²³ except that the Holy Spirit solemnly testifies to me in every city, saying that bonds and afflictions await me. ²⁴ But I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself, so that I may finish my course and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God. ²⁵ "And now, behold, I know that all of you, among whom I went about preaching the kingdom, will no longer see my face. ²⁶ Therefore, I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all men. ²⁷ For I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God.

Beginning with Acts 20:28, Paul charged the elders with their ministry responsibilities. In this exhortation, he indicated the dimension of an elder's ministry.

Acts 20:28, 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.

What is the significance of Acts 20:17 and 20:28 taken together? The significance is that three different words are used to describe the same group of men. Let's examine these three words.

The first word, "overseer" (*episkopos*) can also be translated "bishop." It is used a number of times in the New Testament in addition to Acts 20:28.

Philippians 1:1, Paul and Timothy, bond-servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, including the overseers (*episkopos*) and deacons:

1 Timothy 3:2, An overseer (*episkopos*), then, must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, prudent, respectable, hospitable, able to teach,

Titus 1:7, 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,

1 Peter 2:25, For you were continually straying like sheep, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Guardian (*episkopos*) of your souls.

Episkopos indicates the function or commission of an elder, which is to provide the guardianship of spiritual oversight ("be a bishop"). In providing this oversight, an overseer/bishop assumes a protective position over those under his watch.

In addition, the root appears in related words associated with church leadership.

Acts 1:20 (in the context of replacing Judas as one of the twelve), For it is written in the book of Psalms, "Let his homestead be made desolate, and let no one dwell in it"; and, "Let another man take his office (*episkope*)."

1 Timothy 3:1, It is a trustworthy statement: if any man aspires to the office of overseer (*episkope*), it is a fine work he desires to do.

1 Peter 5:2, shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight (*episkope*) not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness;

Not only are church leaders to watch over the spiritual welfare of a church family, but they are to be joined by fellow believers to maintain spiritual unity and purity with one another.

Hebrews 12:15, See to it (*episkopeo*) that no one comes short of the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled;

The second word used in reference to a church leader is "elder" (*presbuteros*). This word occurs more than 125 times in the Old Testament (the Greek Septuagint) and more than 60 times in the New Testament. Most of these references are to leaders of the Jewish people. In the book of Revelation, this same word describes the "four and twenty elders" around the heavenly throne.

In the New Testament church, early Jewish believers adapted the word "elder" (*presbuteros*) and its centuries-old leadership concept to describe leaders in the Body of Christ. It is first used with respect to church leaders in Acts 11:30, specifically with reference to the Jerusalem church.

Acts 11:27-30, Now at this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch.²⁸ One of them named Agabus stood up and began to indicate by the Spirit that there would certainly be a great famine all over the world. And this took place in the reign of Claudius.²⁹ And in the proportion that any of the disciples had means, each of them determined to send a contribution for the relief of the brethren living in Judea.³⁰ And this they did, sending it in charge of Barnabas and Saul to the elders (*presbuteros*).

"Elder" (*presbuteros* and related words) is used 15 other times in the New Testament in the context of church leadership and, similar to its use in the Old Testament, refers to the spiritual maturity or character of a man. (See the list of verses at the end of this article).

The third word describing church leaders is "shepherd" (*poimen*), which can also be translated "pastor." The word is used as a noun 18 times in the New Testament. It refers to shepherds watching over flocks of sheep (Luke 2:15, 20; John 10:12). The word is also used to describe Jesus in relation to His spiritual flock (John 10:14, 16). A compound word with *poimen* as its root is used to describe Jesus as the Chief Shepherd who will one day appear to receive His own (1 Peter 5:4).

The word for "shepherd" is translated as "pastor" only once. In Ephesians 4:11, most Bible translations prefer to use "pastor" to describe the gifted servants that the Lord has provided to the church. These "pastor-teachers" in Ephesians 4:11 could also be called "shepherd-teachers."

In its verb form (*poimaino*), it is translated "care for" or "shepherd" or "tend" or "rule." When *poimen* is used of a church leader, it indicates his concern for the flock. This concern is demonstrated by actions that benefit the flock.

These three words (elder, shepherd/pastor, overseer/bishop) are all used in 1 Peter 5:1-2 in reference to church leaders.

1 Peter 5:1-2, Therefore, I exhort the elders (*presbuteros*) among you, as your fellow elder (*sumpresbuteros*) 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.

From these four verses (Acts 20:17, 28 and 1 Peter 5:1-2), we can conclude the following. Church leaders are elders (spiritually mature men) who are in guardian roles as overseers (or bishops) with the practical ministry description of being shepherds (or pastors).

A simple summary is:

- Overseer/Bishop: WHAT HE DOES (his commission)
- Elder: WHO HE REALLY IS (his character)
- Shepherd/Pastor: HOW HE MINISTERS (his concern)

Therefore, elders, overseers (bishops), or shepherds (pastors) are different names for the same men. It was not possible in the first century church to have an overseer who was not an elder, nor an elder who was not a shepherd.

In fact, the ministry of our Lord Jesus is described with two of these complementary and interchangeable terms in 1 Peter 2.

1 Peter 2:25, For you were like sheep going astray, but have now returned to the Shepherd (*Pastor*) and Guardian (*Overseer/Bishop*) of your souls.

If we understand that God has ordained the same group of men in a church to be “overseers/bishops,” “elders,” and “shepherds/pastors,” then we are on our way to understanding God’s plan for leadership in the first century Church.

In part 3 of this series, we will describe the leadership structure of churches in New Testament times and highlight potential blessings and perceived detriments if this model is followed today. In doing so, we will examine the biblical basis for a plurality of elders to minister in church leadership. Many believers are convinced that a plurality of elders is the primary leadership model that God has ordained for churches in every century.

NOTE: All verses in the following lists are from the New Testament, New American Standard Version.

VERSES USING “ELDER” (*PRESBUTEROS*) AND RELATED WORDS IN REFERENCE TO CHURCH LEADERSHIP

Acts 11:30, And this they did, sending it in charge of Barnabas and Saul to the elders.

Acts 14:23, When they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.

Acts 15:2, And when Paul and Barnabas had great dissension and debate with them, the brethren determined that Paul and Barnabas and some others of them should go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders concerning this issue.

Acts 15:4, When they arrived at Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them.

Acts 15:6, The apostles and the elders came together to look into this matter.

Acts 15:22-23, Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them to send to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas—Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren,²³ and they sent this letter by them, “The apostles and the brethren who are elders, to the brethren in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia who are from the Gentiles, greetings.”

Acts 16:4, Now while they were passing through the cities, they were delivering the decrees which had been decided upon by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem, for them to observe.

Acts 20:17, From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called to him the elders of the church.

Acts 21:18, And the following day Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present.

1 Timothy 4:14, Do not neglect the spiritual gift within you, which was bestowed on you through prophetic utterance with the laying on of hands by the presbytery (*elder body*).

1 Timothy 5:17, The elders who rule well are to be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching.

1 Timothy 5:19, Do not receive an accusation against an elder except on the basis of two or three witnesses.

Titus 1:5, For this reason I left you in Crete, that you would set in order what remains and appoint elders in every city as I directed you,

James 5:14, Is anyone among you sick? Then he must call for the elders of the church and they are to pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord.

1 Peter 5:1, 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,

VERSES THAT REFER TO OVERSEER/BISHOP (*EPISKOPOS* AND RELATED WORDS)

Acts 1:20, For it is written in the book of Psalms, ‘Let his homestead be made desolate, and let no one dwell in it, and let another man take his office (*literally, overseer or bishop position*).’

Acts 20:28, 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.

Philippians 1:1, Paul and Timothy, bond-servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, including the overseers and deacons.

1 Timothy 3:1, It is a trustworthy statement: if any man aspires to the office of overseer, it is a fine work he desires to do.

1 Timothy 3:2, An overseer, then, must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, prudent, respectable, hospitable, able to teach,

Titus 1:7, For the overseer 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,

1 Peter 2:25, For you were continually straying like sheep, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Guardian (*Overseer/Bishop*) of your souls.

1 Peter 5:2, 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.

VERSES THAT REFER TO SHEPHERD (*POIMEN*) USED AS A NOUN

There are various references in the New Testament to “shepherd” as a vocation. However, the following passages have direct reference to Jesus or church leaders.

Matthew 9:36, Seeing the people, He felt compassion for them, because they were distressed and dispirited like sheep without a shepherd.

Matthew 25:32, All the nations will be gathered before Him; and He will separate them from one another, as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats;

Matthew 26:31, Then Jesus said to them, “You will all fall away because of Me this night, for it is written, ‘I will strike down the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock shall be scattered.’”

Mark 6:34, When Jesus went ashore, He saw a large crowd, and He felt compassion for them because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and He began to teach them many things.

Mark 14:27, And Jesus said to them, “You will all fall away, because it is written, ‘I will strike down the shepherd, and the sheep shall be scattered.’”

John 10:2, But he who enters by the door is a shepherd of the sheep.

John 10:11, I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep.

John 10:12, He who is a hired hand, and not a shepherd, who is not the owner of the sheep, sees the wolf coming, and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them.

John 10:14, I am the good shepherd, and I know My own and My own know Me,

John 10:16, I have other sheep, which are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they will hear My voice; and they will become one flock with one shepherd.

Ephesians 4:11, And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors (*shepherds*) and teachers,

Hebrews 13:20, Now the God of peace, who brought up from the dead the great Shepherd of the sheep through the blood of the eternal covenant, even Jesus our Lord,

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

VERSES THAT REFER TO SHEPHERD (POIMEN) USED AS A VERB (POIMAINO)

Matthew 2:6, And you Bethlehem, land of Judah, are by no means least among the leaders of Judah; for out of you shall come forth a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.

John 21:16, He said to him again a second time, “Simon, son of John, do you love Me?” He said to Him, “Yes, Lord; You know that I love You.” He said to him, “Shepherd My sheep.”

Acts 20:28, 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.

1 Peter 5:2, 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;

Jude 1:12, These are the men who are hidden reefs in your love feasts when they feast with you without fear, caring for (*shepherding or pastoring*) themselves; clouds without water, carried along by winds; autumn trees without fruit, doubly dead, uprooted;

Revelation 2:27, And He shall rule (*shepherd/pastor*) them with a rod of iron, as the vessels of the potter are broken to pieces, as I also have received authority from My Father;

Revelation 7:17, for the Lamb in the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and will guide them to springs of the water of life; and God will wipe every tear from their eyes.

Revelation 12:5, And she gave birth to a son, a male child, who is to rule (*shepherd/pastor*) all the nations with a rod of iron; and her child was caught up to God and to His throne.

Revelation 19:15, From His mouth comes a sharp sword, so that with it He may strike down the nations, and He will rule (*shepherd/pastor*) them with a rod of iron; and He treads the wine press of the fierce wrath of God, the Almighty.