



# How Do We Organise the Church?

In the last lesson, we looked at the church and the various ways in which it can be organised. We also discussed the role of deacons within the church.

Today we want to continue our study and look at the role of elders within the Church of Christ as presented in the New Testament.

Jesus is the head over the church, but he has designated a group of servant-leaders called elders to oversee or shepherd the flock today.

## Role of Elders in the Church

The main leadership role to be filled today in the church is that of the eldership. It is a role of servant leadership. In fact all leadership in the Lord's church is to be that of servant leadership (Matt 20:25-28).

Congregational leadership is the form of church government seen in the New Testament with local autonomy for every congregation. Likewise there is a divine pattern of leadership within the local congregation. This leadership is first and foremost based on the headship of Christ (Eph 2:20).

In our last lesson, we looked at the role of deacons. These men are charged with caring for the physical needs of the church. They do not really serve in a role of authority except in any authority delegated to them by the congregation and elders to carry out specific tasks in the church.

## Personal Reflection

Think about the churches of which you have been a part. How many of them had elders? What was their role? What do you remember best about them?

### Three Main Greek Words Used For Elders

*Presbyteros* -- usually translated "elder" (Acts 20:17; 1 Tim 5:17; Titus 1:5; 1 Peter 5:1)

*Episkopos* -- Translated as "overseer" or "bishop" (Acts 20:28; Phil 1:1; 1 Tim 3:2; Titus 1:7; 1 Pet 5:2)

*Poimen* -- Translated as "shepherd" or "pastor" (Eph 4:11; Acts 20:28; 1 Pet 5:2)

### *Presbyteros, Episkopos, and Poimen Used Interchangeably*

It is important for us to see that *presbyteros*, *episkopos*, and *poimen* are used interchangeably to refer to the same group of men. In Acts 20:17 Paul sent to Ephesus and called the “elders” (*presbyteros*) and in Acts 20:28 they are referred to as “overseers” (*episkopos*) who are to “care for” or “shepherd” the flock “*poimen*.”



#### Acts 20:17-25

17 Now from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called the **elders** of the church to come to him. 18 And when they came to him, he said to them: “You yourselves know how I lived among you the whole time from the first day that I set foot in Asia, 19 serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials that happened to me through the plots of the Jews; 20 how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house, 21 testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. 22 And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, 23 except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me. 24 But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God. 25 And now, behold, I know that none of you among whom I have gone about proclaiming the kingdom will see my face again. 26 Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all of you, 27 for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God. 28 Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you **overseers, to care for** the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.

#### 1 Peter 5:1,2



So I exhort the **elders** among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: 2 **shepherd** the flock of God that is among you, **exercising oversight**, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; 3 not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock.

From these passages and others we can conclude that elders, overseers/bishops, and shepherds/pastors are the same position as the words are used interchangeably. This means there is no distinction in the church between elders/pastors/overseers/bishops/shepherds. One part of restoring the Church and providing a Scriptural foundation is to use the terminology of the Bible.

## ELDERS EXERCISE LEADERSHIP

Jack Cottrell in *The Faith Once for All* p. 427, points out that the word “elder” as it is used in the New Testament does not have the generic meaning of “old person,” but rather refers to a position within a family. The people of God have always been a family. In the Old Testament Israel was a patriarchy, which means “rule by the fathers.” “The elders of Israel” are mentioned often in the Old Testament (Ex 3:16, 18; Num 11:16; Deut 21:18-19; 27:1; 1 Kgs 20:7-8). “In a similar way, in the NT era the church is a spiritual family, and the elders are the father figures, the ones in the family who have the experience and maturity to exercise spiritual leadership (1 Tim 3:4-5).

One of the primary ways in which elders are described is by the use of the word *poimen* which means shepherd or pastor.



1. What is the role of physical shepherd and what is his relationship to the sheep?
2. Read Acts 20:28 and 1 Peter 5:2 and describe what you learn about the role of elders within the church.
3. What other role do you see for those who shepherd the flock according to Eph 4:11-16; 1 Tim 3:2; Titus 1:9; 1 Tim 5:17?

Teaching	Protecting	Watching Over	Exercising Authority
Eph 4:11-16 1 Tim 3:2 Titus 1:9 1 Tim 5:17	Ez 34:5 Acts 20:28-31 Eph 4:11-16 Titus 1:9-11	Acts 20:28 1 Pet 5:2	1 Tim 5:17 (Greek word <i>proistemi</i> means manage, rule, direct, or head) 1 Thess 5:12 1 Tim 5:17

None of the roles above indicate a dictatorship; in fact elders are chosen from the congregation and everyone has a voice in the selection of those who lead. Shepherds lead sheep, they do not drive them. Elders are capable of leading because they are spiritually mature men, who know the Scripture, and know and love the flock. Since they know the Scripture and have life experience, they are able to teach, protect, watch over, and exercise authority over the church even as they are subject to Christ as the head of the church. Their goal is to see a church that is growing in spiritual as well as numerical strength and to protect the flock from those forces either within or outside the church which would desire to harm them. It is the responsibility of the flock to be led and to support the eldership.

## QUALIFICATIONS OF ELDERS

4. List and discuss the qualifications that you see for elders.

1 Timothy 3:1-7

3:1 The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. 2 Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, 3 not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. 4 He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, 5 for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church? 6 He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil. 7 Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil.

Titus 1:5-9

5 This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you— 6 if anyone is above reproach, the husband of one wife, and his children are believers and not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination. 7 For an overseer, as God's steward, must be above reproach. He must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or a drunkard or violent or greedy for gain, 8 but hospitable, a lover of good, self-controlled, upright, holy, and disciplined. 9 He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.