

Shepherding the Flock

*"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."
(Acts 20:28)*



Meaning of Eldership

In the Bible all words are important because they are inspired by God (2 Tim 3:16). To fully understand and appreciate the Bible it is sometimes helpful to study the meaning of a single word within a verse or passage. This is especially relevant when we realise that our Bibles have been translated into English, primarily from Hebrew and Greek.

While no knowledge of Hebrew or Greek is essential to understand the Bible, there are times when a word study can enhance or deepen our comprehension of a subject. In most English Bibles, three main Greek words (*presbyteros*, *episkopos*, and *poimen*) are usually translated as elder, bishop, overseer, presbyter, or pastor. Since most of us cannot read or speak first century Greek, we need to translate these words into English. The Greek words listed are nouns, but there are also verb forms of the words and some of the Scriptures below may refer to the verb or participle form.)

Greek Word	Literal English Translation	Common English Bible Translations	Main Emphasis	Scripture References (Not Exhaustive)
<i>Presbyteros</i>	An older man	Elder or Presbyter	Age, wisdom, and experience	Acts 20:17; 1 Timothy 5:17; Titus 1:5; 1 Peter 5:1
<i>Episkopos</i>	Overseer	Overseer or Bishop	Guardian, responsible watching with care	Acts 20:28; Philippians 1:1; 1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:7
<i>Poimen</i>	Shepherd	Shepherd or Pastor	Protection	Ephesians 4:11; Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:2



In the New Testament, *presbyteros*, *episkopos*, and *poimen* are used interchangeably. Paul sent to Ephesus (Acts 20:17) and called the “elders” (*presbyteros*) and in Acts 20:28 these men are referred to as “overseers” (*episkopos*) who are to “care for” or “shepherd” the flock (*poimen*). In 1 Peter 5:1,2, Peter exhorts the “elders” (*presbyteros*) to “shepherd” (*poimen*) the flock, exercising “oversight” (*episkopos*). Paul said that the evangelist Titus (Titus 1:5,7) was to appoint “elders” (*presbyteros*) and then gives qualifications for these “overseers” (*episkopos*).

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 to the pattern found in the New Testament, and providing a Scriptural foundation for what we do, is to use the terminology of the Bible.

1. What does the word “presbyteros” tell us about the qualities of an elder?
2. What does the word “episkopos” tell us about the qualities of an elder?
3. What does the word “poimen” tell us about the qualities of an elder?
4. What meaning should we see in the fact that when elders are discussed they are always in the plural?
5. What significance is there in the fact that the three Greek words translated as elder/ bishop/overseer/shepherd/pastor are used interchangeably?
6. Why are words important and what does this say about the terminology we should use in the church?

What Elders Are and What They Are Not

Elders are not like corporate CEO's. Their role is not to meet behind closed doors to unilaterally make all decisions for the church. Their responsibilities are not primarily finances, buildings, and programming. Though some churches refer to these men as members of the “board” one will not find the word “board” used in the New Testament for any group of people or meeting of people.

The elders are not like officials that are elected to represent us. If we view elders like governmental leaders we may choose elders based on popularity or business savvy. We must be careful to not allow societal, business, and government structures to influence the structure of the church.

Just because a type of leadership is productive or effective in the business or political world does not mean it is appropriate for the church. If we view the Bible as authoritative we will attempt to structure the church after the pattern found in the New Testament. This means a properly modelled church will function differently from all other organisations.



The words *presbyteros*, *episkopos*, and *poimen* are words of purpose and function more than position. The elders are men who are experienced and knowledgeable about the Bible and who are responsible to guard, protect, and care for the members of the church. These men are shepherds who know the sheep and love the sheep. In fact they are to imitate Jesus the chief shepherd who even lay down his life for the sheep (John 10:11).

A. Elders are to Protect the Flock -- Acts 20:28-31

What types of danger did sheep face in 1st century Palestine?

What types of threats did Paul say would come against the church?

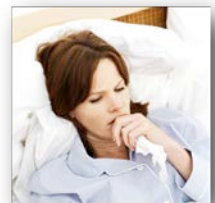
How are these threats manifested against the church today?

B. Elders are to Feed the Flock -- 1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:9

How do elders “feed” the sheep?

C. Elders are to Care for the Flock -- James 5:14

What are some ways elders care for the sheep? Why is illness specifically mentioned in James 5:14?

D. Elders are to Lead the Flock -- 1 Timothy 5:17; Hebrews 13:17

How should elders “rule” or “direct” and what should be the response of the church members to them?

(The word translated as “rule” or “direct” carries the meaning of leading, but also has the sense of “caring for.”¹ Thus the word is not one of harsh rule, but of careful leading.)

¹ Reiche, B. *TDNT* 6:701-702.