The Role of Elders

In Old Testament times (Exodus 18:13ff) Jethro counseled Moses to spread the burden of leadership among able men who were to serve as rulers of thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens. In Numbers, chapter 11, there is the selection of a group of seventy from the elders of Israel to be special officers. Each community had its council of elders, whose duty was to be leaders and exercise oversight.

In New Testament times the Jews had a council of elders, the council of seventy-one (the Sanhedrin), a sort of a supreme court. [Matthew 15:2, 16:21, 26:57; Acts 25:15]


Those appointed were to have some function, some responsibility, some authority. It is not merely an honorary title. As with other words in the New Testament, the words to describe them help us determine their role in the church of Jesus Christ.

The following admonition is addressed to the elders [presbuterous] of Ephesus in Act.20:17,28:

"Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers [episkopos], to shepherd [piomen] the church of God which He purchased with His own blood."

Three designations (elder, overseer, pastor) are found in this passage. Each designation presents a different facet of the same position.

All designations refer to the same position.
New Testament Words

ELDER (*presbuterous*) Act.20:17. Originally meant an older man, then one who by age and experience and wisdom has the capacity of overseeing.

PRESBYTERY (*presbuterion*) 1Ti 4:14. (Form of the Greek word translated elder. Board of elders, or eldership.

BISHOP (KJ) (*episkope*) 1Ti.3:1. Overseership. To superintend, guard, care for, watch out for.

OVERSEER (*episkopos*) Act.20:28. (Same Greek word translated as bishop)

PASTOR (*poimen*) Eph.4:11. One who tends, cares for, feeds, protects (as a shepherd).

SHEPHERD 1Pe.5:2 (*piomen*). (Same Greek word translated as pastor.)

STEWARD (*oikonomos*). Lit., a house manager; metaphorically used to refer to those given charge of the “house of God.” Tit.1:7

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SUMMATION

Qualified older men (**elders**) comprising a body of elders (**presbytery**) that superintends (**oversees**) the congregation of the Lord’s people among them – caring for, feeding, and protecting its members (**shepherding, pastoring**).

The Work of Elders

FEED. Teach; provide teaching. In private, public, in classes, etc.

WATCH. Counseling; guarding and protecting those under their charge from evil and error from without and from within; disciplining (including teaching); reproving, rebuking and exhorting.

RULE. Taking the oversight, assuming the lead. Insisting on a “thus-says-the-Lord” in matters of doctrine. In matters of judgment, doing what is expedient with due consideration for the flock.

LEAD. [Hebrews 13:17] Not pushing; not demanding, but commanding. Not as lords, but as leaders.

EXAMPLE. Example in morals, ethics, work and service, faith and fidelity. Example in personal life involving family, occupation, community.
Qualifications of Elders
(Combined Categories)

Texts: 1 Timothy 3:1-7, Titus 1:5-9

EXPERIENCE:
Not a novice
A married man
Ruling his own house well

REPUTATION:
Blameless (without reproach)
Having a good report of those outside the church

ABILITY:
Able to teach
Able to exhort with sound doctrine
Able to refute those who oppose and contradict sound doctrine
Able to hold to the faithful word

CHARACTER:
Positive:
Temperate
Self-controlled
Sober-minded (serious minded)
Just
Holy
Hospitable
Lover of good
Gentle
Of good behavior; orderly

Negative:
No striker
No brawler
Not contentious
Not soon angry
Not self-willed
Not a lover of money
Not given to wine
Followership

(Yes, there is such a word.) Definition: (1) The act or condition of following a leader; adherence. (2) A group of followers; a following. –The American Heritage Dictionary

It is hard to have leadership without followership. This is true of any organization, including the church. It is incumbent on those who lead to act in such a way as to instill confidence in the followers, and it is essential that the members be good followers, putting their trust in those who lead.

SCRIPTURE REFERENCES
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.
Hebrews 13:17
The elders who rule well are to be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching.
1 Timothy 5:17
But we request of you, brethren, that you appreciate those who diligently labor among you, and have charge over you in the Lord and give you instruction, and that you esteem them very highly in love because of their work.
1 Thessalonians 5:12-13
Do not receive an accusation against an elder except on the basis of two or three witnesses.
1 Timothy 5:19

SUMMATION
The responsibility that elders have to the members: Rule well, fairly and impartially; acting prayerfully and carefully; being aware that they are shepherding a “flock” that belongs to the Lord.

The obligation that members have to their leaders: to submit to their leadership as far as it is in accord to will of God; to respect (honor) them for their work sake; to appreciate them for the work they do; to esteem them highly; to be careful about making an accusation against them; to hold them accountable.