

# THE ROLE OF ELDERS

In Old Testament Times (Exo.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.

Elders appear in the New Testament church first in Jerusalem and Judea, associated with James and the apostles (Act.11:30; 15:2,4,6,22,23; 16: 4; 21:18). Paul appointed elders in churches (Act.14:23); met with the elders of Ephesus (Act.20:17); addressed the Philippian letter to overseers (bishops) (Phi.1:1); instructed Timothy and Titus concerning appointing elders (1Ti.3:1ff; Tit.1:5ff). Peter wrote to them in 1Pe.5:1-4. Those appointed were have some function, some responsibility, some authority. It is not merely an honorary title. As with other terms used in the New Testament, the words to describe them help us determine their role in the church of Jesus Christ.

## NEW TESTAMENT WORD STUDY

ELDER (*presbuteros*) 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 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 (*poimen*). (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

## CLARIFICATION

The following remarks are addressed to the **elders** of Ephesus in Act.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."

All three terms (**elder, overseer, pastor**) found in this verse.

Each term presents a different facet of the position.

All terms refer to the same position.

## ROLE 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); reproof, 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.** Heb.13:17, not pushing; not demanding, but commanding. Not as lords, but leaders.

**EXAMPLE.** Example in morals, ethics, work and service, faith and fidelity.  
Example in personal life involving family, occupation, community.

## SUMMATION

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

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

Are elders limited to ruling by example?

Answer: No. This would weaken their authority. It would remove any decision-making power.

Should elders seek input from members on some matters?

Answer: Definitely.

Are elders limited to ruling by consensus?

Answer: No. This would mean they would have to have the permission of a preponderance of members before making any decision.

Are elders limited to overseeing spiritual matters?

Answer: No

Do elders have legislative power (i.e., make laws)?

Answer: No. They have authority to give directives on how to best carry out the work of the congregation. These rules are not to be bound on other congregations, but are given in order for the local church to do things in decency and order.

May elders delegate their rule and authority?

Answer: No. They may "assign" duties, but they cannot delegate their oversight to others.

What is the members' responsibility to the elders?

Answer: Cooperate, submit to rule, follow lead, support work. (Not following blindly, however). Elders can become corrupt. Act 20:28ff; may need rebuke. 1Ti.5:19-20