

Biblical Eldership

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This study is based on the Greek text. Scripture quotations are from [NASB](#), and Scripture references link to [NASB](#).

OLD TESTAMENT ELDERSHIP

A. Elders Were Leaders of a Nation.

1. They were Influential -- decision-makers. [Exodus 3:15-18](#)
2. They represented the people. [Exodus 19:1-8](#)

B. Elders Were Privileged to Worship God with Moses. (Note: From these two passages, I believe, the NT Sanhedrin, with its 71 members presided over by the chief priest, developed.)

1. [Exodus 24:1](#)
2. [Exodus 24:9-11](#)

C. Elders Served as Administrative Assistants to Moses. [Numbers 11:4-17](#)

D. Elders Served as Leaders of a City.

1. They served almost as judges, authorizing life and death. [Deuteronomy 21:18-21](#)
2. They served as City Officials. [Ruth 4:1-11](#)

JEWISH ELDERS IN NEW TESTAMENT ISRAEL

A. The New Testament clearly indicates that in first century AD Israel there were a group of men called elders.

1. Elders were **leaders** and **official representatives** of the nation alongside chief priests, and to a much lesser extent scribes.
 - a. They viewed themselves this way.
 - b. Gentiles viewed them this way
 - 1) Both those sympathetic to Jews ([Luke 7:3](#)).
 - 2) And those antagonistic to the Jews ([Matthew 27:1, 12](#) etc).
 - c. Jesus never argued their authority as leaders ([Matt. 16:21](#); [Mark 8:31](#); [Luke 9:22](#)).
 - d. Nor did the apostles ([Acts 4:5, 8](#) cf [Acts 4:23-26](#)).

- e. Nor did Luke the historian ([Acts 25:2 cf. 25:15](#))
- 2. Apparently there was in Israel a long history of Godly leaders called elders ([Heb. 11:2](#)). NASB reads "men of old;" the [Greek text](#) reads presbuteroi – elders.
- 3. These elders **taught** a certain body of truth received by others as binding ([Matt. 15:2; Mark 7:3, 5](#)).
- 4. These elders viewed themselves as **guardians** or **protectors** of Israel, both in a theological and political sense.
 - a. They **questioned** and **investigated** those they viewed as dangerous threats to their own "correct" authority and theology.
 - 1) Jesus ([Matt. 21:23](#) and 11 other passages)
 - 2) The Apostles Peter and John ([Acts 4:5](#))
 - 3) "Deacon" Stephen ([Acts 6:12](#))
 - b. They took steps sometimes legally and sometimes, in their zeal, illegally, to **stamp out** or **dispose of** those whom they saw as theological and/or political threats to the nation.
 - 1) Jesus ([Matt. 26:3, 47, 57; 27:1, 12, 20; 28:12](#))
 - 2) The Apostle Paul ([Acts 23:14; Acts 24:1](#))
- 5. The elders formed, along with the chief priests and certain scribes a ruling council (Sanhedrin) out of which they operated ([Matt. 26:57-59; Mark 14:53-55; Mark 15:1; Acts 6:12](#)). Twice, Luke the historian calls the whole ruling body of leaders, chief priests and scribes collectively a "presbuterion" ([Luke 22:66; Acts 22:5](#)). (This Greek word is derived from "presbuteros," the word for elder, and is translated "council of elders" in both passages.)

B. What implications for the New Testaments Elder in the CHURCH can we draw from the Jewish elder?

- 1. As to the selection of the term "elder" (Greek, *presbuteros*).
 - a. There are 67 uses of the noun "presbuteros" in the New Testament.
 - 1) 32 uses refer to leaders of Israel.
 - 2) 19 uses refer to church leaders.
 - 3) 12 uses refer to elders in heaven. (There are 24 elders there. Most likely 12 represent Israel and 12 the Church.)
 - 4) 4 uses refer exclusively to chronologically older people.

- b. By way of contrast, other titles for the leading officer in the local church do not figure nearly so prominently as "**presbuteros**" in the N. T.
 - 1) The noun "**poimeen**" ("shepherd") is used 18 times. Only **once** does it refer to a church leader (Ephesians 4:11, where it is translated "pastors").
 - 2) The noun "**episkopos**" ("overseer" or "bishop") is used only 5 times, 4 of those designating church leaders.
 - c. One is driven to the conclusion that, of all the terms used to denote the leading officer in the local church, "elder" is far and away the most important, and should be given the greatest emphasis.
2. What gave rise to the "church elder" in the N. T.?
- a. The term "elder" ("presbuteros") with reference to the church, first appears in [Acts 11:30](#).
 - b. There is no introduction of the office by the historian Luke.
 - c. The church obviously adopted without comment or question the concept of "elder" already in vogue in Israel for centuries.
 - d. Judging by the apostolic approval and use of the elder (see [Acts 14:23](#); [Titus 1:5](#)) the concept of elders in the church was obviously ordained by God.
3. What is the relation between church elders and Jewish elders?
- a. Throughout the N. T. era there continued to exist two separate lines of competing elders - those of Israel and those of the church.
 - b. The church elders had for their model the Jewish elders.
 - c. Neither Jesus nor the apostles questioned the job description, role, and responsibilities of the Jewish elders. They only questioned the conclusions at which the Jewish elders arrived.
 - d. It becomes apparent then that the elders of the church used Jewish elders as models for **responsibility**, even though they rejected them as models of **theology** and **style**.
 - e. We conclude then, that to understand fully the responsibilities and role of the church elder, one must understand the Jewish elder.
4. How can we summarize the Jewish elder's responsibilities as they bear on the church elder?
- a. Jewish elders were **leaders** and official **representatives** in Israel.

(We shall see that church elders are leaders and official representatives in the local church.)

- b. Jewish elders were **teachers** of binding (though unfortunately sometimes erroneous) "truth" in Israel. (We shall see that church elders are to be able teachers.)
- c. Jewish elders were theological\political **guardians** or **protectors** of Israel. (We shall see that church elders are to guard or protect the local church.)
- d. Jewish elders operated out of a **plurality** of leadership - a council. (We shall see that church elders operate out of a plurality base.)
- e. Jewish elders, unfortunately, exercised their leadership in a self-serving, unprincipled, unbelieving, murderous style. (We shall see, by way of sharp contrast, that church elders are commanded to employ a totally benevolent style of leadership.)

CHURCH ELDERS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

A. The Job Description of Elders

1. In a word, elders are to **SHEPHERD** the flock of God -- the church ([Acts 20:28](#)). [Acts 20:17-35](#) is a **central passage** on elders because
 - a. It identifies "elders" ([v. 17](#)) and "bishops" or "overseers" ([v. 28](#)) as one in the same;
 - 1) [Acts 20:17](#) From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called to him the **elders** of the church.
 - 2) [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.
 - b. It identifies "shepherding" as the main function of an elder (v. 28). [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.
 - c. It details the "guardian" aspect of shepherding v. 28-31.

[Acts 20:28-31](#) "**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. {29}"I know that **after my departure savage wolves will come in** among you, not sparing the flock; {30} and from among your own selves **men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them.** {31} "**Therefore be on the alert**, remembering that night and day for a period of three years I did not cease to admonish each one with tears.

- d. It identifies the Divine placement of elders over the church v. 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.
 - e. It reveals that the resource of the elders is God and the Word of God!: [Acts 20:32](#) {32} "And now I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build *you* up and to give *you* the inheritance among all those who are sanctified.
2. What does the task of **SHEPHERDING** involve?
- a. Shepherds are to **FEED** the sheep. [John 21:15-17](#) This would, of course, involve teaching and communicating the Word of God.
 - b. Shepherds are to **GUARD** the sheep. [Acts 20:28-31; Titus 1:9 - 2:1](#) ff
 - 1) from savage wolves without [Acts 20:29](#)
 - 2) from power-hungry leaders within [Acts 20:30](#)
 - c. Shepherds are to **GUIDE** the sheep. [Revelation 7:16-17](#) This involves leading them to a state of well-being. It necessitates making decisions on behalf of the sheep. The word "guide" is akin to the word "lead" ([1 Timothy 5:17; I Thess. 5:12; Romans 12:8](#)).

B. The Gravity of the Task [Acts 20:28](#)

- 1. It is God's church.
- 2. The church was purchased with God's own blood.
- 3. The elders are appointed by the Holy Spirit to be overseers.
- 4. The apostolic command for elders to guard themselves and all the flock.

C. The Qualifications of Elders [I Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9](#)

- 1. General qualification: "above reproach" [I Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:6](#)
- 2. Domestic qualifications
 - a. "A one-woman kind of man"
 - b. Having his family under control
- 3. Maturity qualifications
 - a. Not a new convert
 - b. Not having an abrasive personality
 - c. Having a good reputation with unbelievers

4. Ministry qualifications
 - a. "Able to teach" [I Timothy 3:2](#)
 - b. "Hospitable" [I Timothy 3:2](#)
- D. The Motivation of Elders** [I Peter 5:2](#)
 1. Must be motivated by **desire**, not **compulsive obligation**.
 2. Must be motivated by **eagerness**, not a **need for money**.
- E. The Style of Elders**
 1. Not **dictatorial**, but **exemplary**. [I Peter 5:3; Acts 20:35](#)
 2. Self-sacrificial [Acts 20:34-35](#)
- F. The Selection of Elders:** Elders are appointed by other elders, not elected. [Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5](#)
- G. The Number of Elders:** Elders in the New Testament are seen as a plurality. [Acts 20:17; Philippians 1:1](#) ("overseers"); [Titus 1:5; Acts 14:23](#), etc. (Note especially [Acts 22:5 and I Timothy 4:14](#), where the word is not *presbuteros*, but *presbuterion* – "the collective eldership".)
- H. The Payment of Elders** [I Timothy 5:17](#)
 1. All elders evidently receive honor. [I Timothy 5:17](#)
 2. Some elders are to receive **double** honor. Possible this refers to "honor" **and** "payment." Payment cannot be excluded from the broader context of [I Timothy 5](#). These certain elders who are to receive double honor are identified as
 - a. Those who are **well-leading**;
 - b. Especially those well-leading elders who **labor** in word and teaching.
- I. The Discipline of Elders** [I Timothy 5:19](#)
 1. Not to be accused by other elders two or three testify against him.
 2. Those elders sinning (present tense) are to be reprov'd publicly.
- J. The Priority of Elders**
 1. The early verses of Acts 6 reveal the priority of the elders. When confronted with flaws in an existing ministry, the apostles, who early on served as elders, reflected the priority that Jesus had drilled into their minds over the three years of His ministry in their presence. They made it a priority not to get "bogged down" with routine administrative details.

This is what the office of "deacon" -- translate "servant" was created for. [Acts 6:1-7](#)

2. Elders chose not to serve tables. Their priorities, instead, were to concentrate on prayer and the "serving" (literally) of the Word. [Acts 6:4](#) (Don't serve tables; serve the Word and pray.)

SOME IMPLICATIONS ARISING OUT OF A STUDY OF NEW TESTAMENT ELDERSHIP

A. As to Church Government

It is difficult to support a full-blown congregational form of church government from a study of New Testament eldership. The evidence is clearly in favor of an "elder-led" church, not a congregationally governed church. In the New Testament church, decisions were made from the top down, and the people supported the decisions ([Acts 6:5](#); [15:22](#)).

The closest thing to congregational government is found in [Acts 6:1-7](#). There, 1. the apostles (serving as elders) identified the management problem, 2. stipulated a procedure to rectify the problem, and 3. actually appointed the prototype deacons into office, presumably retaining veto power. The church at large were asked first to scrutinize potential candidates and then bring a corporate nomination to the apostles. No individual could nominate a deacon; only the church at large could nominate corporately. This turns out to be a corporate nomination, not a democratic election.

One becomes increasingly driven to the conclusion that congregational church government arises not so much out of a detailed study of the Scriptures, but out of historical antecedents.

1. Political Trends

The rise of congregational government into prominence has surely coincided with the American experiment with "democracy" or a republic type of government beginning in the 18th century. The fact remains that neither Old Testament Israel, New Testament Israel, nor the New Testament church were democratically governed.

2. Business Trends

- a. Every state in the United States and every developed nation in the world has established laws regulating the incorporation of businesses. As American churches grow to the point of needing to acquire property and issue tax-deductible receipts, they are forced to conform organizationally with business laws.
- b. While incorporating, churches must file articles of incorporation, holding "an organization meeting to elect the first board of directors and adopt the corporation's bylaws." "As owners of the corporation, stockholders, or shareholders (my substitution:

church members) are entitled to a voice in the control and management of the company (Bold face mine). Stockholders (substitute "church members") with voting stock may vote at the annual meeting and participate in the election of the board of directors. The board of directors is responsible for the overall management of the corporation. Normally, the board selects such corporate officers as a president, one or more vice-presidents, a controller, a treasurer, and a secretary." (Extended quotation from *Financial Accounting: An Introduction*, 4th Ed., by Walgenbach, Hanson and Dittrich, published by Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, copyright 1985, pp. 460, 461.)

- c. It becomes readily apparent that such congregational terms as "church board", "election of officers", "chairman of the board", "annual meeting", "secretary" and "treasurer", not to mention the word "member" (as applied to a local church) all have their origin not in Scripture, but in business law. If there were no need for elections, would there be any need for members"? (Of course, every believer in Jesus is a member of the Universal Church, the Body of Christ ([1 Cor. 12:12-27](#)).
- d. While many Americans feel comfortable with congregational government both from their political and business experience, it would seem that it may sometimes actually hinder the Biblical plan for church life and service of Christ. It may tend to deprive elders of both responsibility and ministry that is rightfully theirs. It may threaten at every election and vote to divide the church and threaten Spirit-commanded unity ([Eph. 4:3](#)). It may empower carnal Christians and women to rule the church, neither of which can be supported from Scripture ([1 Timothy 3:1-7](#); [Titus 1:5-8](#); [1 Timothy 2:11-15](#); [1 Cor. 3:1-4](#); [14:34-35](#)).

B. As to the Relationship Between Pastors and Elders

1. There is no Biblical distinction between a pastor and an elder. As indicated earlier, the term *presbuteros* or elder is far more prominent than *poimeen* or shepherd (pastor) and, ideally, ought to be used more. According to [1 Timothy 5:17](#) and other passages, all elders, whether called elder or pastor, have the identical job description. The elders who lead exceptionally well and really labor in teaching ought to receive pay as well as honor. But all elders are to be leading and teaching.
2. It would seem that a better distinction than "pastor" and "elder" would be "salaried" or "vocational elder" and perhaps "lay elder." But all elders ought to be shepherding the sheep. It would seem that every elder ought to have a regular shepherding / teaching responsibility. If an otherwise qualified man is unable or unwilling to do that, perhaps he had better serve as a deacon than an elder.
3. Since every elder might have varying amounts of the spiritual gifts of leadership and administration, responsibilities should be decided on the basis of giftedness, not title. A pastor (substitute vocational elder) has no more authority as an elder than lay or non-vocational elders. The eldership corporately arrive at decisions, not merely rubber-stamp the pre-conceived decision of the pastor. In fact, elders are commanded to be on

the lookout for and to guard against other “power-hungry” elders ([Acts 20:28-30](#); cf. [3 John 1:9-10](#)).

C. As to the Distinction Between Elders and Deacons. Qualifications for elders and deacons are nearly identical, with these exceptions:

1. Qualifications are given for deacons' wives ([I Timothy 3:11](#)), but not for elders' wives. Evidently deacons' wives can help deacons serve the church, but elders' wives cannot help them lead and teach the church.
2. Elders must be able to teach, but teaching is not necessarily part of a deacon's job description.
3. It is clear that elders, not deacons, have decision-making authority on behalf of the church. From [Acts 6:1-7](#), it seems that the position of deacon was created to free the elders from routine management of programs that would detract them from the elders' priorities of prayer and the ministry of the Word.

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