# Biblical Terms for Elders

There are various terms both in the Old Testament and the New Testament that refer to the person and role of elders.

## Old Testament Examples of Eldering

In the Old Testament, the concept of "eldering" is expressed in a variety of manners. There are some Hebrew words that are the equivalent to "elder" or "eldering" in the Old Testament. They are related to different roles people had in their culture. In each of these examples, the person or persons had recognized roles and responsibilities within which they functioned.

In the Old Testament, there are two key words. One word for elder refers to the idea of being "old" in age (as in an old man; *Strong's* 2205). There is another word for elder whose transliteration is "Saab" (*Strong's* 7868), which refers to the role of elder.

The Old Testament concepts of eldering focused on a role of functioning as an elder to a group of people. It is not focused on an "office" that a man held.

The following are some key examples of "eldering" in the Old Testament, which are understood by the context of the passages.

### Heads of Families

Joshua said, *"Now therefore fear the Lord and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness. Put away the gods that your fathers served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. ...But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord"* (Joshua 24:14-15).

What role did Joshua have when he said that? He was the head of a family. He was speaking as the "elder" of the family.

### Heads of Tribes

Numbers 2:3 says, *"Those to camp on the east side toward the sunrise shall be of the standard of the camp of Judah by their companies, the chief of the people of Judah being Nahshon the son of Amminadab."*

What role did Nahshon have? He was a head of a tribe.

### Priests

In Leviticus 8 we read of the establishment of the priesthood in Israel by Aaron and his sons being consecrated for the office of priest.

## Judges

After struggling with being the lone judge for the people, Moses took the wise advice of his father-in-law, Jethro and he *"chose able men out of all Israel and made them heads over the people, chiefs of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties, and of tens. And they judged the people at all times. Any hard case they brought to Moses, but any small matter they decided themselves"* (Exodus 18:13-26).

## Officials

In the book of Judges, we read of the account where Gideon wanted to pay back the people of Succoth, so he acted harshly with the 77 *"officials and elders of Succoth"* (Judges 8:14).

## Elders of the City

In the book of Ruth, we have the account of Boaz functioning as the kinsman redeemer for Ruth. The account opens and closes with Boaz at the city gates with the "elders" (see Ruth 4:1-2, 11-12). Boaz went to the city gate to meet with the elders of the community. Boaz wasn't in the first position as elder, he was in the second position. So he had to defer to the first elder. But the first elder figured out that if he took responsibility for Ruth he might jeopardize the inheritance of his own children. So he said that he would not redeem Naomi's blood line. As a result, Boaz said that he would be the kinsman redeemer for Ruth.

# New Testament Words for Eldering

There are different words in the New Testament to indicate the leadership role and function of elder. As we will see, these words are often used interchangeably and have overlapping meanings.

## "Elder" (presbyteros)

The term "elder" (presbyteros) in the New Testament could refer to an older person (see Acts 2:17; John 8:9) or to the office of leadership (see Matthew 21:23; 1 Peter 5:1-2).

The function of "elder" was a commonly recognized title given to Jewish leaders during the time of Christ and the early church. They were referred to as *"the elders of the people"* (Matthew 21:23), *"the elders and chief priests and scribes"* (Matthew 16:21), *"the tradition of the elders"* (Mark 7:3), and *"rulers of the people and elders"* (Acts 4:8). It would have been an expected and easy transition to pick up this terminology for leadership use in the early church.

In the New Testament description of the church, the elders were the designated leaders who were to be "appointed" (see Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5), and who were to "rule" (see 1 Timothy 5:17; Hebrews 13:17), "oversee" (see Acts 20:28, 1 Peter 5:1-3), "teach" (see Ephesians 4:11; 1 Timothy 3:2, 5:17; Titus 1:9), "pray over" (see James

5:14), and "shepherd" (see Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:1-3) the people in their charge and care.

An interesting account with regard to the term "elders" occurred when the scribes and Pharisees brought to Jesus a woman caught in adultery. They wanted to see if Jesus would agree with their plan to stone her (see John 8:3-11). Jesus wrote in the sand and said, *"Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her...But when they heard it, they went away one by one, beginning with the older ones* {elders, *presbyteros*}*..."*

- Why were the first ones to leave the "older ones"?
  Perhaps, they were the most aware of their own sinfulness.

- Who really was the eldest there?
  Jesus, the "Ancient of Days" (see Daniel 7).

- Who was the one without sin there?
  Jesus (see Hebrews 4:15).

- Who could have cast the first stone?
  Jesus.

# *"Overseer"/"Bishop" (episkopos)*

The term "overseer" (*episkopos*) is a word used interchangeably with the concept of "elder" (*presbyteros*) in the New Testament.

- For example, in Acts 20 we read that Paul *"sent to Ephesus and called the elders {presbyteros} of the church to come to him"* (v. 17). While addressing them, Paul charges them to *"pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers {episkopos}"* (v. 28). So, in this single event, Paul uses the terms "elders" and "overseers" interchangeably when referring to the same men.

- In his letter to Titus, Paul also uses the terms "elder" (*presbyteros*) and "overseers" (*episkopos*) interchangeably. He instructs Titus to *"appoint elders {presbyteros} in every town as I directed you"* (Titus 1:5), then introduces his description of qualifications by saying, *"For an overseer {episkopos}"* (v. 7).

- In a similar way, when Paul wrote to Timothy, *"If anyone aspires to the office of overseer {episkopos}, he desires a noble task. Therefore an overseer {episkopos} must be above reproach"* (1 Timothy 3:1-2). At that time, Timothy was in Ephesus, which had elders (see 1 Timothy 1:3, Acts 20:17). Also, a little later in the same letter, Paul said, *"Let the elders {presbyteros} who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching"* (1 Timothy 5:17).

## *"Pastor"/"Shepherd" (poimen)*

The English word "pastor" comes from the Latin term that means "one who cares for sheep," which would be more accurately translated "shepherd." Interestingly, although the term "pastor" is commonly used today for an office within the church, the noun form of the Greek *poimen* (pastor) occurs only once in the New Testament. *"And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds* {pastors} *and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry"* (see Ephesians 4:11-12). In this text, the term is plural and the "pastor" is a role alongside other roles that serve the purpose of "equipping" (training, enabling) the people in the church ("saints") to serve ("work of the ministry"). It is not designated as a solitary role or necessarily the lead role within the church.

Although the noun "pastor" is used of a role within the church only once, the verb form meaning to "act as a shepherd" is found in a number of places.

- Paul charges the Ephesian elders to *"Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for* {shepherd} *the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood"* (Acts 20:28). In this passage, Paul even uses the shepherding imagery by referring to the people in the church as "the flock."

- Peter gives a similar charge: *"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:* <u>*shepherd the flock of God*</u> *that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock"* (1 Peter 5:1-3). Similar to Paul, Peter uses a combined shepherd/flock imagery to define the role and responsibility of an elder. Peter follows this charge to the elders with describing Christ as the "chief Shepherd" in verse 4: *"And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory."* Christ himself is the ultimate shepherd in both role and function, who will one day reward those who shepherd well.

In the above mentioned passage in 1 Peter 5:1-3, Peter "exhorts the elders (*presbyteros*)" to "shepherd (pastor) the flock of God" and to exercise "oversight" (a Greek form of *episkopos*). So, here elder, pastor (shepherd), and overseer are used interchangeably.

# Plurality of Elders

The Scripture does not give a specific number of elders each church should have.  But it must be more than one.  There is always to be a "plurality of elders".  Throughout the New Testament, elders are referred to in the plural, indicating there was more than one. For example:

- Elders were appointed in every church (Acts 14:23)
- Paul called the elders of Ephesus to meet with him (Acts 20:17-18)

- Paul instructs Titus to appoint elders in every town (Titus 1:5).

- A council of elders laid their hands on Timothy (1 Timothy 4:14),

- Elders are to pray for the sick (James 5:14),

- Elders are exhorted to shepherd the flock of God that is among them (1 Peter 5:1-2).

- Paul addresses the letter to the Philippians not only to the church (saints) but also to the "overseers and deacons," both in the plural.

The indication of the New Testament is that all churches had elders. For example, there were elders in:

- The church at Jerusalem (Acts 15:2)

- The church at Ephesus (Acts 20:17)

- All the churches:
    - that Paul Founded (Acts 14:23)
    - of Crete (Titus 1:5)
    - founded by the people scattered by persecution in the Roman Empire (James 1:1; 5:14)
    - in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia (1 Peter 1:1; 5:1)

# Qualifications of an Elder

There are three primary passages that list the qualifications of an elder (1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9; 1 Peter 5: 1-5). It is clear from each of these passages the emphasis of these qualifications is on the demonstration of proven character qualities. It should be noted these qualifications are not simply intellectual in nature, nor are they able to be developed quickly. For the most part they are qualities that are the signs of fruitfulness derived from maturity and a seasoned life of walking with Christ.

## 1 Timothy 3:1-7

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

*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—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. 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, but hospitable, a lover of good, self-controlled, upright, holy, and disciplined. 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.*

## 1 Peter 5:1-5

*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: 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; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory. Likewise, you who are younger, be subject to the elders. Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."*

## Qualifications Listed

From Paul's instruction to Timothy and Titus, a list of the qualifications of an elder include:

- above reproach
- the husband of one wife
- sober-minded
- self-controlled
- respectable
- hospitable
- able to teach
- not a drunkard
- not violent but gentle
- not quarrelsome
- not a lover of money
- holding firm to the trustworthy word as taught
- manage his own household well
- with all dignity keeping his children submissive
- not be a recent convert
- well thought of by outsiders
- not be arrogant or quick-tempered
- not greedy for gain
- a lover of good
- upright
- holy
- disciplined

Peter's instruction says that elders must exercise oversight:

- not under compulsion but willingly
- not for shameful gain, but eagerly
- not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock

## Elders as Older Men

It should be noted there is a connection between the term "elder" meaning an "older man" and its use to indicate the role of a leader in the church. The qualifications of an elder indicate a seasoned maturity that comes with the experience and wisdom accumulated from walking through multiple stages of life.

# The Work of an Elder and the Plurality of Elders

Everyone has strengths and weaknesses when it comes to these areas of the "work of an elder." This is why it is important to have a plurality of elders. You can balance each other's giftedness, skills, weaknesses, and experiences (Ephesians 4:11-12; 1 Peter 4:10-11; Romans 12:3-8; 1 Corinthians 12; Acts 6:1-7).

## *Personal but Not Private*

These roles describe the overall categories of the "work of the elders", which should be considered both for the individual elder and for the elder team as a whole. An individual elder may have gifting and strengths that function best in a particular role and he may choose to focus much of his ministry efforts in that area. However each elder must be personally responsible to some degree in each of these categories. The team of elders as a whole must make sure these roles are fully developed, well balanced, and stay on course.

## *Interrelated and Coordinated*

These roles are both interrelated and coordinated. They go together and work together. For example, the intercessory role (prayer) will be involved in all the other roles.

A danger is to tightly compartmentalize each of these roles and responsibilities at the exclusion of the others.

## A Summary of the Roles and Responsibilities

The "work of the elders" may be summarized in five roles and their corresponding responsibilities.

### Doctrinal Role

- Declare the "Whole Counsel of God"
  Acts 20:20, 27; 2 Timothy 2:15; Titus 2:1-6; 1 Timothy 3:2; 5:17-18

- Guard Against Falsehood
  Acts 20:28-31; Titus 1:9; 2 Timothy 4:1-2; Matthew 16:5-6, 11-12

- Model Biblical Truth
  1 Peter 5:3; Hebrews 13:7; 2 Timothy 3:10-11; Philippians 4:9

### Intercessory Role

- Pray Regularly and Consistently
  1 Timothy 2:1; Acts 6:4; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18; Colossians 4:2

- Pray Specifically
  Ephesians 1:15-16; James 5:14; Colossians 1:3,9; 4:2-4; 2 Thessalonians 1:11-12

- Pray Coordinated With Others
  2 Corinthians 1:11; Romans 15:30; Colossians 4:2-4; 2 Thessalonians 3:1-2; Hebrews 13:18-19

## Shepherd Role

- Keep Watch Over Yourselves and the People
  Acts 20:28; Hebrews 13:17; 1 Timothy 4:16; 5:19-20; 1 Peter 5:1-5

- Care for People
  Acts 20:28, 31, 35; James 5:14; 1 Timothy 5:1-2; 1 Thessalonians 5:12-14; Galatians 6:1

- Manage the Affairs of the Church
  I Timothy 3:4-5; 5:17; I Thessalonians 5:12; Acts 6:1-6

- Cultivate Peacemaking and Resolve Conflict
  James 3:13-18; 1 Peter 5:2-3; Romans 12:18; Galatians 6:1

## Missional Role

- Profess the Great Confession
  Matthew 16:13-20; Acts 2:36; 4:12

- Obey the Great Commandment
  Matthew 22:37-40; John 13:34-35; 1 John 4:7-12, 20-21

- Pursue the Great Commission
  Matthew 28:18-20; Acts 1:8; 6:7; 2 Corinthians 5:16-21

## Development Role

- Make Disciples
  Matthew 28:18-20; 2 Timothy 2:2; 1 Corinthians 4:14-17

- Train for Ministry
  Ephesians 4:11-16; Luke 10:1-12, 17-20

- Call into Leadership
  Matthew 4:18-22; Acts 6:1-7; 20:28-31