
Who are Elders, Presbyters, Bishops, Overseers, Pastors, etc.?

The Presbyterian Church has a local government in their congregations ruled by elders who are youths and often female. In the Catholic Church the term "bishop" is often used for a man who is over a particular parish or see. While the term is used in some Protestant denominations to refer to a spiritual leader ordained over a particular district. The Mormon church has elders who are youths often unmarried and without a family. Many denominational preachers are called "pastors." Among all this confusion of denominational terminology which of these reflects the organization of the church found in the New Testament?

A study of the definitions of Biblical terms is critical to an accurate understanding of any Bible topic. Words are vehicles by which thoughts are expressed in a way that the mind can clearly understand. Biblical terms like "bishop," "elder," "pastor," etc. are used in a variety of ways. Six different English words are translated from three Greek words relative to our study. The six English words are: "elder" and "presbyter" both translated from the Greek word "presbuteros"; "overseer" and "bishop" translated from the Greek word "episcopos"; also there is "shepherd" and "pastor" translated from "poimen". These are not honorary titles, but words describing the work to be done by those qualified for the office.

What purpose does this serve? Why didn't God use one term to refer to the same office in church government. The Holy Spirit called the leaders of the New Testament church by different

terms because no single term adequately describes their qualifications and work. The use of equivalent terms for the same office is necessary to call attention to various features of the character and work of this office. Even the same person may be referred to by various terms depending on the relationship or situation. For example, I am known as Mr. Vess, preacher, daddy, Dan, Daniel, husband, Brother Vess, etc. A Biblical example is seen in the way God refers to Jesus as King, Lamb, Christ, Lion, etc. Each term focuses our attention on a different aspect of His work and character. God has maintained a connection between names and the work "Apostle" meant one who was sent. Jesus was the sender, and apostles were sent. Similar connections between the words "patriarch", "prophet", and "priest" and their God-given responsibilities clearly demonstrate this point. Thanks be to God for His great wisdom in using these terms to help give us accurate insight.

Before continuing it must be noted that the six terms under discussion are used interchangeably in the New Testament. In Acts 20:17 the apostle Paul calls for the "elders" of the church at Ephesus to meet him in Miletus. In verse 28 he refers to them as "overseers" and instructs them to "feed" the church. The word "feed" comes from the Greek word "poimainein" which is simply the verb form of "poimen" (shepherd or pastor). Therefore, in this context the same group of men are referred to as elders, overseers, and shepherds. This clearly establishes the fact that they are one and the same. Again Paul uses the terms interchangeably when he tells Titus to "appoint elders in every city" (Tit. 1:5). Then in verse 7 he instructs him: "For a bishop must be blameless". Further evidence comes from the apostle Peter. He exhorts "the elders among you" (I Pet. 5:1) to "feed the flock of God which is among you serving as overseers" (v. 2). The word "feed" once again is the verb form of "poimen"

which is a shepherd or pastor. Peter then uses the three Greek terms to refer to the same office.

presbuteros	elder	presbyter
episcopos	overseer	bishop
poimen	pastor	shepherd

The Greek word "presbuteros" is translated "elder" and "presbyter". The word "elder" is a word of Anglo-Saxon origin meaning "one older" or "an older person". "Presbyter" is the anglicization or transliteration of the Greek word. It is also of Latin origin. It means the same as elder. It needs to be pointed out that some have objection to the use of the term "eldership". They argue that such a word is not found in the Bible. However, the Greek word "presbuterion" in I Tim. 4:14 translated "presbytery" could properly be translated "eldership". W. E. Vine defines "presbuterion" as "an assembly of aged men, denotes (a) the council or Senate among the Jews, Lk. 22:66; Ac. 22:5; (b) the elders or bishops in the local church, I Tim. 4:14." (p. 351).

The Greek word episkopos is translated into two English words: overseer and bishop. The word "overseer" is of Anglo-Saxon origin meaning "over" to be above in rank and authority and "seer" which means to look upon or inspect. The word "bishop" is of Latin origin and is a corruption of a Greek word. It means the same as overseer.

The Greek word "poimen" is found eighteen times in the New Testament. It is most often translated either "pastor" or "shepherd." The term denotes: a keeper of sheep (Lk. 2:8); the work of Christ (Jn. 10:11,14,15); and the work of elders of the church (Eph. 4:11). Vine defines it as

"A shepherd, one who tends heard or flocks 'not merely one who feeds them', is

used metaphorically of Christ's pastors,' Eph. 4:11. Pastors guide as well as feed the flock; cp. Ac. 20:28; which, with ver. 17, indicates that this was the service committed to elders (overseers or bishops); so also in I Pet. 5:1,2, 'tend the flock...exercising the oversight', RV.; this involves tender care and vigilant superintendence." (p. 839).

Let us all resolve to help eliminate religious confusion by calling Bible things by Bible names and organizing the church after the pattern found in the New Testament instead of denominational creed books.

Similarly Thayer says, "...of the overseers of the Christian assemblies..." (p. 527). The verb "poimanino" is found 11 times. Vine says, "Metaphorically of those who act as pastors in the churches, Eph. 4:11." (p. 1032). Again consulting Thayer who defines the verb form to as: "to feed, to tend a flock, keep sheep; b. trop. a. to rule, govern; of rulers,..of the overseers (pastors) of the church, Jn. 21:16; Ac. 20:28; I Pt. 5:2. b. to furnish pasturage or food; to nourish; ... to cherish one's body, to serve the body, Jd. 12; to supply the requisites for the soul's needs..." (p. 527).

Biblically speaking, the terms elder, presbyter, overseer, bishop, pastor and shepherd all refer to the same office in the organization of the early church. Every congregation in the New Testament times that had these men appointed to the leadership would have a plurality of elders, overseers or pastors. Any man claiming to be an elder, presbyter, overseer, bishop, pastor or shepherd must first meet the qualifications found in 1 Tim. 3:1f and Tit. 1:5. Furthermore, a preacher or minister was not the same as the Pastor of a congregation. First, the terms preacher, minister, evangelist are not used interchangeably in the New Testament with the term "pastor" (Eph. 4:11). Pastor is used interchangeably with the terms "elder" and "overseer." Secondly, there would have to be a plurality of men equally serving the congregation as pastors having all met the same qualifications.

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