

Church Leadership -- A Word Study

Bishops (Overseers)

Greek terms sometimes translated as bishops:

episkope (1984) overseership – work of an overseer

episkopeo (1983). Literally, to look upon ; exercising the oversight

episkopos (1985) Literally, overseers – those who watch over

1. Who are the **bishops** referred to in I Tim. 3:1-7?

*This is a faithful saying: If a man desires the position of a bishop, **episkope** (1984), he desires a good work. A bishop, **episkopos** (1985) must be blameless, the husband of one wife ... I Tim. 3:1-2a.*

The apostle Paul, speaking to the elders, **presbuteros** (4245), in Ephesus (Acts 20:17), instructed the elders to:

*Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made your overseers, **episkopos** (1985), to shepherd, **poimaino** (4165), the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. Acts 20:28.*

Paul gives the qualifications of overseers (bishops) in I Timothy 3:1-7. In verse one he identifies the work to be done. “If a man desires the position of bishop, he desires a good work.” The Greek word, **episkope** (1984) means overseership or one who does the work of an overseer. Vine states that **presbuteros** (4245), an elder, is used interchangeably with bishop or overseer (120). Evidence of this may be seen by noting that the word interpreted as bishop, **episkopos** (1985) in verse two is the same word as interpreted overseers **episkopos** (1985) in Acts 20:28 which is used to describe the elders **presbuteros** (4245) referred to in Acts 20:17. Clearly the qualifications given by the apostle Paul in I Tim. 3:1-7 refer to elders who have the responsibility of watching over or shepherding the church of God.

2. What other scripture shows elders to be overseers?

*The elders, **presbuteros** (4245), who are among you I exhort, I who am a fellow elder, **sumpresbuteros** [compound word: **sum** together + **presbuteros** (4245)] and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker of the glory that will be revealed: Shepherd, **poimaino** (4165), the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, **episkopeo** (1983)...I Peter 5:1-2.*

This verse emphasizes that it is the responsibility of elders (note plural) to shepherd the flock of God. The word shepherd, **poimaino** (4165), is the same term used in Acts 20:28. **Episkopeo** (1983) builds on the idea of shepherding by emphasizing the responsibility of the elder to “look upon” or watch over the flock with spiritual oversight. The Amplified Bible further develops the concept of the shepherd who tends, nurtures, guards, and guides the flock of God. This is the responsibility of the elders.

Elders

presbuteros (4245)

The term, **presbuteros** (4245), emphasizes the spiritual maturity required for church leadership. Elders were “raised up” and “qualified” by the work of the Holy Spirit. The term, **episkopos** (1985) or overseers, is applied to elders, **presbuteros** (4245), in Acts 20:17,28 and Titus 1:5,7. The term, **episkopeo** (1983), describes their duty to “look upon” or watch over the spiritual needs of the church (I Peter 5:2). The qualifications are listed in I Tim. 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5,7. In the New Testament there was a plurality of elders appointed in each church (Vine, 351).

Additional Scripture references:

*For this reason I left you in Crete, that you should set in order the things that are lacking, and appoint elders, **presbuteros** (4245), in every city as I command you —if a man is blameless, the husband of one wife, having faithful children not accused of dissipation or insubordination. For an overseer, **episkopos** (1985), must be blameless, as a steward of God...Titus 1:5-7a.*

Note that the term, **episkopos** (1985), is the same term used to describe a “bishop” in I Tim. 3:1-7, and is directly tied to the term, **presbuteros** (4245) or elder in this text. Again, confirming elders are overseers who watch over or shepherd the church.

*So when they had appointed elders, **presbuteros** (4245), in every church, and prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed. Acts 14:23*

Note again that more than one elder was appointed in every church.

*Let the elders, **presbuteros** (4245), who rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and doctrine. I Tim. 5:17.*

The word rule, **proistemi** (4291), means to “stand before” or lead. The Amplified Bible builds on the phrase “laboring in the word and doctrine” to include preaching and teaching. Thus elders rule or lead the church in spiritual matters and minister the word in preaching and teaching.

Pastor

poimen (4166) noun – shepherd, one who tends herds of flocks.

poimaino (4165) verb – to shepherd or provide tender care and vigilant superintendence.

There is one passage of scripture where the noun shepherd, **poimen** (4166), is interpreted as “pastors.”

And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors, and teachers...Ephesians 4:11.

As noted earlier, elders were to shepherd, **poimaino** (4165), the flock of God, were appointed as leaders in all the New Testament churches, and there was a plurality of leadership. So why interpret the term shepherd, **poimen** (4166), as “pastors” when the Bible establishes elders as shepherds? Vine points out that the act of shepherding, **poimaino** (4165), was committed to the overseers or elders (Vine 839). In Biblical context it is the elders who are shepherds, **poimen** (4166), or “pastors” of the church. There is no Biblical basis for assuming the term shepherd in the above verse refers to a single “pastor” of a church. This does not mean that the Bible teaches against one pastor assuming leadership of a church. However, there is wisdom and purpose in the apostolic appointed elder leadership that proved its effectiveness in establishing the saints for the work of ministry and the edification of the church.

Deacons

diakonos (1249) – servants

Are deacons and elders the same?

In his letter to the Philippian church, Paul addresses overseers (elders) *and* deacons,:

*Paul and Timothy, servants of Jesus Christ, to all saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops, **episkopos** (1985), and deacons, **diakonos** (1249)... Phil. 1:1.*

This text shows that there were two offices of leaders in the Philippian Church. Note also that plural nouns are used showing that Philippi had a plurality of leaders. Polycarp, an elder of the church in Smyrna, wrote a letter to the Philippian church about fifty years after Paul wrote his letter to the church in Philippi. In this letter he exhorts the importance of submitting to the elders and deacons as to God and Christ. The letter was written about 115 A.D., thus establishing that elder and deacon leadership continued even into the second century (Strauch, 176-77).

I Tim. 3:1-13 also gives the qualifications of overseers or elders, **episkopos** (1985), and deacons, **diakonos** (1249). Thus the church in Ephesus also recognized deacons and overseers or elders as separate offices.

How are deacons and elders different?

The Bible gives more information concerning elders than deacons. Elders as noted above are overseers who watch over and care for the flock. They are concerned mainly with spiritual concerns. For more information refer to the teaching, *Elder Leadership—A Biblical Perspective* (IBF).

Acts 6:1-7 describes the selection of seven men chosen for the purpose of caring for the practical concerns of the flock, thus, allowing more time for the disciples to minister the word. Although the term deacon is not used in this text, the kind of service was of the character committed to deacons (Vine 265).

The office of deacon as described in Acts 6:1-7, portrays deacons as serving the practical needs of the church. The term *helper*, **prostatis** (4368) as used in Romans 16:2 suggests that deacons succor or provide assistance to those in distress. This was a position of honor.

Neither office is more important or more spiritual than the other. A close examination of the qualification listed in I Tim. 3:1-13 stresses the importance of both positions.

It should be noted that Stephen, believed to be a deacon, was full of faith and power and did great wonders and signs among the people. He also spoke with the wisdom and power of the Holy Spirit (Acts 6: 8-10).

May women hold the office of deacon?

There is one reference found in Romans 16:1-2 that refers to a woman who was a deacon:

*I commend to you Phoebe, our sister, who is a servant, **diakonos** (1249), of the church in Cenchrea, that you may receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the saints, and assist her in whatever business she has need of you; for indeed she has been a helper, **prostatis** (4368) of many and of myself also.*

Clearly this verse speaks of her holding the office of deacon in a particular church. Paul's appeal to assist her and to receive her in the Lord is understandable considering the submissive role of women during Biblical times and as defined in the Bible.

The Bible teaches that women are to learn in silence with all submission and are not allowed to teach or have authority over a man (I Tim. 2:11-12).

A comparison of the qualification of elders and deacons in I Tim. 3:1-13 reveals that deacons were not responsible for teaching. The term, **diakonos** (1249), indicates an office of service not a ruling or governing office. They were under the leadership of the overseers or elders, and it is unlikely that Phoebe taught or exercised authority over men.

An examination of the qualifications for deacons found in I Tim. 3: 8-13 affirms male leadership. "Likewise their wives must be reverent...Let deacons, **diakonos** (1249), be the husbands of one wife...(3:11-12).

Paul instructs the Roman believers to "receive her in the Lord." In the Lord there is neither male nor female, we are all one in Christ (Gal. 3:28).

Following Biblical precepts it appears that deacons are purposed to be men, however, women may also be servants or **diakonos** (1249) in the church provided they do not teach or exercise authority over men.

Deacons, as defined by IBF, are subject to the authority of the elders. Therefore, it is possible for a woman to serve as deacon under the elders with the above limitations just as Phoebe helped Paul and many others.

In the case of elders, however, there is no Biblical basis for women serving in this position.

Conclusion

No matter how one interprets Biblical church leadership, one point is clear. The purpose is to “...to equip the saints for the work of ministry [and] for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of faith and the knowledge of the Son of God...” Eph. 4:12-13a.

Works Cited

Jones, Kenneth. “Elder Leadership: A Biblical Perspective.” Presentation. Interfaith Bible Fellowship, Amberg, Wisconsin. 7 Nov. 2002.

Strauch, Alexander. Biblical Leadership: An Urgent Call to Restore Biblical Church Leadership. Colorado: Lewis and Roth, 1995.

Vine, W. E. An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words. Nashville, n.d.

Scripture references taken from:

Holy Bible. New King James Version. The Open Bible Expanded ed. Nashville: Nelson, 1985.

Abbreviated Greek Concordance

Greek Word	Strong	Pronunciation	English Word	Bible Verses
diakonos	1249	dee ak on' os	servants	Phil. 1:1 I Tim. 3:8,12
episkope	1984	ep is kop ay'	overseership	I Tim. 3:1
episkopeo	1983	ep ee skop eh' o	oversee	I Pet. 5:2
episkopos	1985	ep is' kop os	overseers	Act 20:28 Phil. 1:1 I Tim. 3:2 Titus 1:7
poimaino	4165	poy mah' ee no	to shepherd	Acts 20:28 I Pet. 5:2
poimen	4166	poy mane'	shepherds	Eph. 4:11
presbuteros	4245	pres boo ter' os	elders	Acts 11:30 Acts 14:23 Acts 15:2,4,6,22,23 Acts 16:4 Acts 20:17 Acts 21:18 I Tim. 5:17,19 Titus 1:5 James 5:14 I Pet. 5:1
proistemi	4291	pro is' tay mee	to stand before rule lead manage	Ro. 12:8 I Th. 5:12 I Tim. 3:4,5,12 I Tim. 5:17
prostatis	4368	pros tat' is	helper	Ro. 16:2