

Biblical Eldership Study Sheet #1

I. Introduction to Terms

The New Testament writers use three different terms interchangeably with reference to the leaders of a local church:

1. “Elder” (πρεσβυτερος, presbuteros) – The word “elder” points especially to the idea of maturity, and to leadership authority that flows from that maturity (see for instance 1 Pet. 5:1-5). It carries the idea of age, but age alone is not determinative of a πρεσβυτερος (see for instance 1 Tim. 4:11-16).

- One lexicon (dictionary) renders the term: “A person of responsibility and authority in matters of socio-religious concerns, both in Jewish and Christian societies...” – Louw and Nida 53.77

2. “Overseer” (επισκοπος - episkopos) – The term “overseer” (sometimes translated as “bishop”) refers especially to a role (or an office) of leadership through safeguarding, or watching over, and service. An overseer is one who “serves as a leader in a church” especially by “caring for the needs of a congregation as well as directing the activities of the membership.” – (Louw and Nida 53.71; see also BDAG).

3. “Pastor” (ποιμην - poimen) – The word “pastor” (which might be better translated “shepherd”) appears as a noun with reference to a role in the church on only one occasion (Eph. 4:11). Twice, the idea of shepherding is a verb that describes the work of an elder/overseer (see for instance 1 Pet. 5:2 or Acts 20:28). To pastor is to “shepherd,” and shepherding is the basic job description of an elder/overseer. It is a job that Eph. 4:11 ties especially to the task of teaching.

II. Questions to Consider: The 4 “W’s” and an “H” of Biblical Eldership

Who are biblical elders?

- Read 1 Timothy 3:1-16 and Titus 1:5-9. According to these passages, who are biblical elders?
- Read Acts 14:23; 15:1-22; 20:17; Titus 1:5; Hebrews 13:7, 17, 24; James 5:14; 1 Peter 5:1. What do you notice in these passages about the number of elders in any given expression of the local church?

What are biblical elders charged to do?

- Read Acts 20:28. How would you describe the general job description of an elder?
- Read Acts 11:1-11, 11:30, 13:1-3, chapter 15, 21:17-20a; Titus 1:9; 1 Timothy 3:2, 5:17, 6:2b-10; 2 Timothy 4:1-5; Ephesians 4:11; Hebrews 13:7, 24; James 5:14-15. What do you see elders (or elder-like figures) doing?
- How do Matthew 28:18-20 and Acts 1:6-8 relate to the role of an elder?

When are the elders to do their work?

- Based on your understanding of their charge, what would you say about the “when” of an elder’s work?
- Read Acts 20:9-31. Any thoughts on how this passage might speak to the “when” of an elder’s work?

Where are elders charged to work, or amongst whom?

- Read Acts 20:28 and 1 Peter 5:2. How do these passages serve to define the “where” or the “amongst whom” aspects of an elder’s charge?
- Read 1 Peter 2:25 and 1 Peter 5:2. Who owns the flock ultimately? How does this ownership help answer the “where” and “amongst whom” question?
- What are the practical implications of defining an elder’s “field”?
- How might this question relate to church membership?

How are elders to undertake their work?

- How does the analogy of a shepherd inform our understanding of what it means to serve as an elder?
- Read John 21:15-17; Acts 20:29; Hebrews 13:17; 1 Peter 5:2-3. What do these passages tell us about the “how” of serving as an elder?
- What are the implications of remembering that elders are sheep who lead other sheep?