

THE ELDERSHIP
(Biblical Terms and the Function of the Eldership)
Lesson 10

I. INTRODUCTION.

- A. A Clear Understanding of the Eldership Begins with the Greek Words Used to Describe These Men.
- B. Bible Terms Tell Us Something About Elder's Work, Role, or Function.

II. BIBLICAL TERMS.

Note: The Greek and English word studies here are based on the King James Version. Other versions should be consulted which have slightly different words in the scriptures listed. The scriptures cited are limited to those which refer to local church leaders (the eldership).

A. Elder.

- 1. Greek word: *presbuteros* = "an older person".
- 2. English translations.
 - a) Elders (*presbuteros*) = "an older man" (Acts 11:30; 14:23; 15:2, 4, 6, 22, 23; 16:4; 20:17; 21:18; 1 Tim. 5:17,19; Tit. 1:5; Jas. 5:14; 1 Pet. 5:1).
 - b) Presbytery (*presbuterion*) = "eldership" (1 Tim. 4:14).
- 3. The Greek noun *presbuterion* is similar to the noun *presbuteros* and it means "eldership" (1 Tim. 4:14). The idea of oversight is not inherent in the word "elder". A person may be an "elder" (older) person, but not an "elder" of the local church. The exact age of an "elder" in the local church is not stated in Scripture. The primary meaning of "elder" is "an older person", but clearly there is a special sense in which it is used in the NT to mean a local church leader. The "elders" of the local church are a special group of men who meet certain qualifications. An "elder" is not just someone with experience. He must also be appointed to do the work of an elder (Acts 14:23) after he has been found to be qualified to do that work (1 Tim. 3:1ff; Tit. 1:5ff). The elder, as an elder, displays wisdom and experience as he watches over the local church.

B. Bishop.

- 1. Greek word: *episcopos* = literally, over (*epi*) and to look or watch (*scopos*); "oversee".
- 2. English translations.
 - a) Overseers (*episcopos*) = "overseers" (Acts 20:28).
 - b) Bishop(s) (*episcopos*) = "overseers" (Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:2; Tit. 1:7).
- 3. "Overseer" and "bishop" are taken from the same Greek word and mean the same thing. The English word "bishop" is an Anglo-Saxon word (*biscop, bisceop*) and is a

corruption of the Greek word *episcopos*. The Greek verb *episcopeo* is similar to the noun *episcopos* and it means "taking the oversight" (1 Pet. 5:2; not in some mss). Elders take the "oversight" of the local church (1 Pet. 5:2). The Greek noun *episkopee* is also similar to the noun *episcopos* and it means "overseership" (1 Tim. 3:1). Elders have the function of "overseership". There is no Greek word representing "office" in 1 Timothy 3:1. "Overseership" is "a good work," not just an "office". The elder, as an overseer, looks over, watches over, and superintends the affairs of the local church.

C. Pastor.

1. Greek word: *poimeen* = "a shepherd, one who feeds, tends and herds a flock".
2. English translations.
 - a) Pastors (*poimeen*) = "shepherds" (Eph. 4:11).
 - b) Feed (*poimaino*) = "shepherd" (Acts 20:28; 1 Pet. 5:2).
3. "Pastor" comes from the Latin (*pastoralls*), meaning "shepherd". The Greek verb *poimaino* is similar to the noun *poimeen* and it means "to feed, tend, or herd sheep". Elders "pastor" or "shepherd" the flock (church) of God (Acts 20:28; 1 Pet. 5:2). Jesus told Peter to "feed my sheep" (Jn. 21:16) and Peter did that when he became an "elder" (1 Pet. 5:1). The Greek word for "flock" (*poimion*; Acts 20:28-29; 1 Pet. 5:2-3) is also similar to the noun *poimeen*. The shepherd (*poimeen*) shepherds (*poimaino*) the sheep (*poimion*). The elder, as a pastor, spiritually feeds and nourishes the members of the local church.

D. Three Other Greek/English Words.

1. *Oikonomos* = lit. house (*oikos*) and allot (*nemō*); a "steward" (Tit. 1:7; see "charge" in 1 Pet.5:3). Elders are stewards of the local church.
2. *Didaskalos* = "teachers" (Eph. 4:11; see 1 Tim. 3:2; 5:17; Tit. 1:9; Heb.13:7). The Greek construction in Ephesians 4:11 places "pastors" together with "teacher"; that is, "pastors who are teachers" (the word "some" is in front of "pastors", but not "teachers"). Elders are teachers in the local church.
3. *Typoi* = examples (1 Pet. 5:3). Elders are examples for the local church.

III. OBSERVATIONS ON THE BIBLICAL TERMS ELDER, BISHOP, AND PASTOR.

A. A Summary.

1. If you study the following NT passages you will have a complete picture of the general role of the eldership: Acts 11:30; 14:23; 15:2, 4, 6, 22-23; 16:4; 20:17, 28; 21:18; Eph. 4:11-12; Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:2; 4:14; 5:17, 19; Tit. 1:5, 7; Heb. 13:7, 17, 24; Jas. 5:14; and 1 Pet. 5:1-2.
2. There are more words that must be studied in order to have a complete understanding of the function of the eldership. These words will be examined in our next lesson.

B. Used Interchangeably, Not Exclusively.

1. Paul called for the "elders" (*presbuteros*) of the church. These same men the Holy Spirit had made "overseers" or "bishops" (*episcopos*) and they were "to feed" (*poimaino*) the church (Acts 20:17, 28). Peter exhorted the "elders" (*presbuteros*) to "tend" (*poimaino*) the flock of God by exercising the "oversight" (*episcopeo*) (1 Pet. 5:1-2). Paul wanted Titus to appoint men as "elders" (*prebuteros*) which he later called "bishops" (*episcopos*) (Tit. 1:5, 7).
2. "Elder," "bishop" and "pastor" all refer to the same person. A preacher should not be called "pastor" and a religious leader who is over a group of churches should not be called "bishop" as is commonly done in religious denominations.

C. Used in Plurality.

Each time these Greek words are used for local church leaders they are found in the plural, never in the singular. There is to be a plurality of "elders", "bishops", or "pastors" over a local church, not one elder, one bishop, or one pastor.

D. Key Principles and Implied Functions.

1. Key Principle.
 - a) Elder — mature spiritual wisdom which comes by advanced age and experience.
 - b) Bishop — a watchful position over the local church, managing the local church.
 - c) Pastor — feeding (teaching), protecting, and guiding the local church.
2. Implied Function.
 - a) Elder — a decision-making function.
 - b) Bishop — an administrating / superintending function.
 - c) Pastor — a counseling / teaching Function.
 - d) The three-fold functions of the eldership will be studied in more detail in the next lesson.

IV. CONCLUSION.

- A. The Eldership is Not Just an Office, Title, or Position.
- B. The Eldership Has a Threefold Function (Work): Decision-Making, Superintending, and Teaching.
- C. The Eldership is an Awesome Responsibility Not to Be Taken Lightly.

Lesson Ten Discussion

1. What is the basic definition of each of Greek word and what English words are used to translate them:

Presbuteros –

Episcopos –

Poimeen –

2. In addition to being called "elders", "bishops", and "pastors", the men of the eldership are also called _____, _____, and _____.
3. T or F — "Elder", "bishop", and "pastor" refer to different functions.
4. T or F — "Elder", "bishop", and "pastor" refer to different persons.
5. T or F — The NT speaks of one "elder", "bishop", or "pastor" over the local church.
6. T or F — A member can be "elder" (older) without being an "elder" over the local church.
7. T or F — "Overseer" and "bishop" mean two different things.
8. T or F — Peter was an apostle, but not an elder.
9. Write out the key principle that is behind each word:
 - "elder" -
 - "bishop" -
 - "pastor" -
10. In Acts 11:30; 15:2, 4, 6, 22-23; 16:4; and 21:18 we read of elders in the church at _____, and in Acts 20:17, elders in the church at _____.

11. How, using Acts 14:23 and Titus 1:5, would you demonstrate that an "elder" (older) man is not automatically an "elder" over the local church?

12. What one English word in Ephesians 4:11 would indicate that "pastors and teachers" refer to the same person? What three passages show that elders are to be teachers?

13. Did Philippi have elders (Phil. 1:1)? How about Galatia (1 Pet. 1:1; 5:1)?

14. Is the "presbytery" (1 Tim. 4:14) different from the eldership?

15. A list of qualifications for elders is found in what two NT passages?