

## Leadership in the Local Church

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Q: Why are we Baptist?

A: We don't baptize babies.

Q: Is that the only reason?

A: No. We are also congregationally governed.

One of our Baptist distinctives has to do with our understanding of **church polity**. The word refers to the way authority was structured and exercised within a community. In Christian theology, "church polity" refers to how authority, leadership, and decision making are structured in a local church.

**Episcopal** (*hierarchical*): authority resides in a hierarchy of bishops, who may ordain clergy and make final decisions for regional congregations. This system makes a distinction between bishops and elders, who are often called pastors or priests. This is a system of top-down management, where a single bishop functions as the leader who rules over a given geographical area and has authority over the churches and clergy within that area. Since it is hierarchical, the local bishop answers to bishops at a higher level, and usually there is one bishop at the top who rules over them all. Examples are Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodox, Anglican, Episcopal, Methodist and Moravian churches.

**Presbyterian** (*representative*): authority rests with a board of elders elected by the congregation. These elders are seated in councils or courts. In the local church the elders sit in the body called a *session*, which is considered the lowest court. The elders of the session run their local church, and some are also members of a regional body called a *presbytery*, which deals with appeals from lower courts and matters that concern the regional body. Finally, there is a group that oversees the denomination as a whole called a general *assembly* or *synod*. Examples are Presbyterian and Lutheran churches.

**Congregational** (*autonomous*): authority resides within the local congregation, where members vote on major decisions. Each congregation is its own entity, accountable only to God. There is no higher earthly body or authority to which a congregation answers. This system recognizes the need for leadership to lead, oversee, and serve the church body, and affirms this by upholding the two offices of pastor/elder/oversee and deacon. These offices are a part of the congregation, not above it. Typically, in a congregational system the church (1) selects, appoints, and if necessary, removes church leaders; (2) helps guard pure doctrine; (3) exercises church discipline and decides on church membership; (4) participates in major decisions that affect the mission of the church. Usually, the congregation, while not a democracy, operates in a democratic fashion by way of regular church business (members) meetings at which each member has an equal voice and vote. Examples are Baptist, Evangelical Free, Congregational, Bible churches, Churches of Christ, and many non-denominational congregations.

### ***Baptist Faith and Message 2000: VI. The Church***

A New Testament church of the Lord Jesus Christ is an autonomous local congregation of baptized believers, associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the gospel...Each congregation operates under the Lordship of Christ through democratic processes. In such a congregation each member is responsible and accountable to Christ as Lord. **Its two scriptural offices are that of pastor/elder/overseer and deacon.** While both men and women are gifted for service in the church, **the office of pastor/elder/overseer is limited to men as qualified by Scripture.**

There are four Greek words that we must know in order to accurately understand the NT's teaching about these leadership positions in the local church: **presbuteros**, **episkopos**, **poimen**, and **diakonos**.

**Elders** (n., *presbuteros*) – the word has multiple meanings in the NT, but this definition is the one that matters for our discussion: an elder over an assembly of Christian believers (as an appointed or elected position). This word appears 57 times in the NT as a title.

“And when they had appointed **elders** for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed.” Acts 14:23

“...Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the **elders** about this question.” Acts 15:2

“And the apostles and the **elders** were gathered together to consider this matter.” Acts 15:6

“Then it seemed good to the apostles and the **elders**, with the whole church, to choose men from among them and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas.” Acts 15:22

“Let the **elders** who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.” 1 Timothy 5:17

“This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained in order, and appoint **elders** in every town as I directed you...” Titus 1:5

“Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the **elders** of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord.” James 5:14

“Likewise, you who are younger be subject to the **elders**.” 1 Peter 5:5

The office of **elder** is also described by two other titles: **overseer** and **shepherd** (pastor).

**Overseers** (n., *episkopos*) – a leader who watches over, directs, cares, and is accountable for an assembly of believers. In the Greco-Roman world it frequently refers to one who has a definite function or fixed office of guardianship and related activity within a group, including a religious group. The term was taken over in Christian communities in reference to one who served as overseer or supervisor, with special interest in guarding the truth handed down from the apostles. This word appears 5 times in the NT as a title.

“Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you **overseers** (*episkopous*), to care for the church of God, which He obtained with His own blood.” Acts 20:28

“Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the **overseers** (*episkopois*) and deacons” Philippians 1:1

“Therefore an **overseer** (*episkopon*) must be above reproach...” 1 Timothy 3:2

“For an **overseer** (*episkopon*), as God's steward, must be above reproach.” Titus 1:7

**Oversee** (v., *episcopos*)—the act of watching over; refers to a position of responsibility with engagement in oversight and supervision; used of leaders of Christian communities.

**Shepherd** (n., *poimen*)—this refers to one who serves as a guardian or leader in Christian congregations and churches. This word appears one time in the NT as a title.

And I will give you **shepherds** (*poimenes*) after my own heart, who will feed you with knowledge and understanding.” Jeremiah 3:15

“Son of man, prophesy against the **shepherds** (*poimenes*) of Israel; prophesy, and say to them, even to the **shepherds**, Thus says the Lord God: Ah, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should no **shepherds** feed the sheep?” Ezekiel 34:2

“And He gave the apostles, the prophets, the **shepherds** (*poimenes*) and teachers...” Ephesians 4:11

**Note:** the title “pastor” is not found in the NT, even though some translations of Ephesians 4:11 insert that title: “...**pastors** and teachers” (KJV, ASV, CSB, CEV, NASB). The word “pastor” originates from the Latin word *pastor*, meaning “shepherd,” which is derived from *pascere*, which means “to lead to pasture, set to grazing, or to feed.” It entered Middle English in the late 14th century from Old French *pastor*, denoting a herdsman or spiritual guide. The Greek word is “shepherd.”

**Shepherd** (v., *poimano*)—to watch out for other people; an activity that protects, rules, governs. It is used of both leading or directing a congregation, as well as caring for and nurturing others.

“...**shepherd** (*poimano*) the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight...” 1 Peter 5:2

“He said to him a second time, ‘Simon, son of John, do you love Me?’ He said to Him, ‘Yes, Lord; You know that I love You.’ He said to him, ‘**Tend** (*poimano*) My sheep.’” John 21:16

“**Pay careful attention** to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God...” Acts 20:28

“For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and **He will guide them** to springs of living water...” Revelation 7:17

**Deacons** (n., *diakonos*)—servant, minister, assistant; one who gets something done at the behest of another, an assistant to someone. In the church it refers to one who serves as an assistant, aide, or attendant for ministerial service in a Christian community. This word appears 3 times in the NT as a title.

“His mother said to the **servants** (*diakonois*), “Do whatever He tells you.” John 2:5

“...with the overseers and **deacons** (*diakonois*):” Philippians 1:1

“**Deacons** (*diakonous*), likewise must be...” 1 Timothy 3:8

“Let **deacons** (*diakonois*) each be the husband of one wife...” 1 Timothy 3:12

**Deacon** (v., *diakoneo*)—to render service, to help, to be at one’s service; to carry out an assignment not to benefit oneself but others; to perform unspecified services, to meet an immediate need, to help.

“When He was in Galilee, they followed Him and **ministered** (*diekonoun*) to him...” Mark 15:41

“As each has received a gift, use it to **serve** (*diakonountes*) one another...” 1 Peter 4:10

“Then they also will answer, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not **minister** (*diekonesamen*) to you?’” Matthew 25:44

“And let them also be tested first; then let **them serve as deacons** (*diakoneitosan*) if they prove themselves blameless.” 1 Timothy 3:10

“For those who **serve well as deacons** (*diakonesantes*) gain a good standing for themselves and also great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus.” 1 Timothy 3:13

Understanding the meaning of these words enable us to begin to construct an accurate picture of how the Bible defines these offices and their function in the church. Based on the above definitions, one could conclude that:

**Elders** are an elected or appointed position that serve as leader over an assembly of Christian believers. They function as **overseers**, or leaders who guard the truth handed down from the apostles, and who watch over, direct, care for, and are accountable for an assembly of believers. They serve as supervisors who have the responsibility of safeguarding the church and seeing that things are done in a godly way. They also function as **shepherds**, meaning that they serve as a leader and guardian of the Christian community, and they do this by feeding the sheep and leading them. They rule and govern the flock with tenderness and care.

**Deacons** are also elected and appointed for special ministerial service in a Christian community. Their role is one of an assistant or aide, who gets things done at the direction of another.

Both offices must meet certain biblical qualifications in order to serve. The list of qualifications for **elders** is found in **1 Timothy 3:1-7** and **Titus 1:5-9**. The list of qualifications for **deacons** is found in **1 Timothy 3:8-13**.

**Elders** have an extensive job description listed in the New Testament.

1. **Elders exercise spiritual oversight (govern/lead)**. They provide supervision, leadership and watchful care to the ministries and membership of the church. Their function is leadership, direction, governance and accountability.

“...the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to **care for** the church of God” Acts 20:28  
*Poimainein*: to guide, help, rule, govern, lead

“Manage his household well...**care for** God’s church” 1 Timothy 3:4-5  
*Epimelestetai*: guide, look after, govern, have charge of, manage

“Let the elders who **rule** well...” 1 Timothy 5:17  
“The elders who **direct the affairs** of the church...” (NIV)  
*Proestotes*: rule, direct, guide, lead, preside

“Exercising **oversight**” 1 Peter 5:2  
*Episkopountes*: care for, oversee, give careful attention to, supervise

“...your leaders...are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to **give an account.**” Hebrews 13:17

“For an overseer, as **God’s steward** (*oikonomos*)...” Titus 1:7

**Oikonomos:** a household or estate manager. “God appoints elders to the role of steward and delegates to them the authority to manage His household—the church. The steward must manage church resources, plan budgets, delegate tasks to others, encourage use of member’s gifts, solve problems, make decisions, establish church policies, set up structures to accomplish specific work, and lead the ministries of the church. Moreover, he must carefully teach the Word, judge issues and doctrines, provide counsel and education, resolve conflict among members, and care for those in the household who cannot care for themselves.” Alexander Strach, “Paul’s Vision for Deacons” (2017)

2. **Elders teach and preach the Word.** This includes public teaching, doctrinal instruction and preaching. Their function is doctrinal teaching, biblical preaching and theological instruction.

“Therefore an overseer must...be **able to teach.**” 1 Timothy 3:2

“Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who **labor in preaching and teaching.**” 1 Timothy 5:17

“He [the elder] must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he **may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine...**” Titus 1:9

“Remember your leaders, those who **spoke to you the Word of God.**” Hebrews 13:7

3. **Elders guard doctrine and refute error.** They are to protect the church from false teaching. Their function is theological defense, doctrinal protection and error correction.

“...give instruction in sound doctrine and also to **rebuke those who contradict it.**” Titus 1:9

“...the Lord servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, **correcting opponents with gentleness.** God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth...” 2 Timothy 2:24-26

4. **Elders provide direction and decision-making leadership.** They are to lead major spiritual and doctrinal decisions. Their function is strategic leadership, church direction, and clarity on doctrinal decisions.

“The apostles and the elders were gathered together to **consider this matter.**” Acts 15:6

“Then it **seemed good to the apostles and the elders,** with the whole church, to choose men from among them and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas.” Acts 15:22

“...elders who **rule well**” 1 Timothy 5:17

5. **Elders shepherd/pastor the flock.** They provide spiritual care, feeding, guidance and protection. Their function is pastoral care, soul oversight and spiritual nurture.

“**Shepherd** the church of God...” Acts 20:28

“**Shepherd** the flock of God that is among you.” 1 Peter 5:1-2

6. **Elders pray for the flock and provide spiritual care.** Their function is intercessory prayer, pastoral visitation, and spiritual ministry.

“Call for the elders...let them **pray over him.**” James 5:14

“...he knelt down and **prayed for them all**” Acts 20:36

“In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way **we must help the weak...**” Acts 20:35

7. **Elders lead by godly example.** They are to model Christlike character and conduct. Their function is to be a visible model of Christian maturity.

“Being examples to the flock...” 1 Peter 5:3

“Consider the outcome of their way of life...” Hebrews 13:7

8. **Elders exercise church discipline.** They are to guard holiness, correct sin, and restore believers. Their function is correction, restoration, and promoting doctrinal purity and holiness.

“Rebuke them in the presence of all...” 1 Timothy 5:19-20

“As for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once and then twice, have nothing more to do with him...” Titus 3:10-11

Matthew 18:17—implied leadership role as an elder in the church

9. **Elders equip the saints for ministry.** They are to train believers for service. Their functions are discipleship, leadership development and ministry training.

“And He gave...the shepherds and teachers, **to equip the saints** for the work of ministry.” Ephesians 4:11-12

**Deacons** do not have a clear job description expressed in the New Testament. The office of deacon is only mentioned by Paul in two New Testament books: Philippians 1:1, 1 Timothy 3:8, and 1 Timothy 3:12. But nowhere does Paul define their duties. Whatever they are, they do not include the duties of an elder which are clearly defined. Their responsibility could be summed up like this: **Deacons deacon.** The verb means to “render assistance to someone in need, to meet immediate needs or caring for others in light of special problems.” They serve, help, aid, care for, assist, and attend to physical needs in the church.

The New Testament puts the emphasis on their character, not their function or responsibilities. The verb “deacon,” or what Deacons do, is broad in its scope and meaning and is about fulfilling tasks, not having a set

job description. Unlike elders, who are defined by leadership, spiritual care, and oversight of the church, deacons support the ministry by caring for the practical needs of the church. The lack of a clear description of duties and responsibilities allows for flexibility in serving the church's practical needs as they arise.

The deacons represent the overseers/elders and act on their behalf in service to God's church. It follows then that they, like the elders, need to be properly qualified, examined, and approved by the church. And, as assistants of the elders and office holders, the deacons will exercise a measure of formal authority in the congregation, but always under the authority of the elders. Deacons do significant and needed work in the local church. But they are not elders. Since God blesses what He ordains, then it is unwise for a local church to confuse or conflate these two offices.

<u>Terms</u>	<u>Qualifications</u>	<u>Functions</u>
<b>Elders/Overseers</b> First to be appointed; permanent positions	Described in detail (1 Tim. 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9)	Manage/shepherd in ways that are <i>supra-culturally</i> <i>defined</i> ; e.g., overseeing, teaching, admonishing, praying, delegating
<b>Deacons</b> Appointed only when necessary; position may be temporary	Described in detail (1 Timothy 3:8-13)	Serve in various ways that are often <i>culturally defined</i>