

**What is the name for our church leaders? (E. Radmacher)**  
**A Series on the Question of Elders: Part 1**

While one of the great Protestant distinctions is the sole authority of Scripture for faith and practice, we must never allow a doctrinal statement or a tradition to have equal authority. Thus, we need to regularly check our beliefs and practices by Scriptures lest we find ourselves guilty of transgressing the commandment of God by our tradition. One such area of controversy is the whole question of church leadership and government. Is there to be a single leader over a congregation or is leadership to be multiple? Is the congregation to be a pure democracy? Does each member have an equal say in all the affairs of the church? What does it mean to “rule” and to “obey”? Who is to have final authority? Is the church governed by the elders or by the congregation? What should the leaders be called - deacons or elders - pastors or bishops?

1. Three titles are given to the officers of the local church in the New Testament: *elder*, *bishop*, and *deacon*. The office of the deacon concerns the ordered service of the church. Our focus will be on the governmental leadership of the church. How are the terms elder and bishop related? How do they differ? See Acts 20:17; I Peter 5:1-5; I Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9.

The titles elder (*presbuteros*) and bishop (*episkopos*) refer to the same office, which deals primarily with the governmental leadership of the church. Several lines of evidence in Scripture make this apparent.

First, when Paul summons the leadership of the church at Ephesus, he designates them as “elders,” (Acts 20:17) and then proceeds to identify them as “overseers” (*episkopous*, i.e., bishops) and to speak of their work of feeding (*poimainein*, i.e., pastoring). Peter does the same thing in I Peter 5:1-5. Addressing the “elders,” he charges them to “feed (*poimanete*) the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight (*episkopountes*).”

A second line of evidence demonstrating that the designations are interchangeable is seen in the list of qualifications in Timothy and Titus. I Timothy 3:1-7 gives qualifications for a “bishop” and then for a “deacon” in verses 8-13 without ever mentioning an elder, whereas Titus 1:5-9, in referring to the “elder” lists the qualifications given for the bishop in I Timothy 3:1-7. Furthermore, after instructing them to ordain “elders” in every city, Paul identifies them as “bishops” in verse 7.

Finally, in addressing the church at Philippi (Phil 1:1), Paul omits reference to “elders”: “To all the saints ...with the bishops and deacons.” If there were a third order of ministers, namely, “elders”, Paul simply would not have overlooked them.

2. Why are there two different designations for the same church office? See 1 Timothy 3:1-2; Titus 1:7; Philippians 1:1.

With respect to these two designations of this one office, what conclusions may we draw? First, the designation used is not of paramount importance as long as it truly expresses the nature and function of the position. In other words, this is not an absolute. In fact, there is some evidence that the New Testament writers used differing terms that were common in the vocabularies of the differing peoples to whom they wrote.

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For example, “bishop” was an official title among the Greeks. Lightfoot reminds us that “in Athenian language it was used especially to designate commissioners appointed to regulate a new colony or acquisition...” (Philippians, p. 29). On the other hand, “elder” was uniquely associated with the activities of God’s chosen people. Again, Lightfoot observes: “In the lifetime of the law giver, in the days of the judges, throughout the monarchy, during the captivity, after the return, and under Roman domination, the ‘elders’ appear as an integral part of the governing body of the country... over every Jewish synagogue... a council of ‘elders’ presided. It was not unnatural, therefore, when the Christian synagogue took its place by the side of the Jewish, a similar organization should be adopted with such modification as circumstances required; and thus the name familiar under the old dispensation was retained under the new” (Philippians, p. 96).

Now, it is true that some have concluded that “bishop” refers to the office, while “elder” has more to do with the man. Others, however, believe that “elder” relates to the **dignity** of the office while “bishop” describes the **duties**. Is it possible that there is a more significant explanation of the difference? Gene Getz queries (Sharpening the Focus of the Church): “Could it be that Paul, since he used the word ‘bishop’ more frequently than other New Testament writers, did so to communicate more effectively to the mixture of converted Jews and Gentiles in the New Testament church? This can be seen in Paul’s writing to the Philippians (Philippians 1:1), to Timothy who was stationed at Ephesus (I Timothy 3:1-2) and to Titus who was in Crete (Titus 1:7). All of these churches were found in a pagan world and were composed of both Jew and Gentile converts. If this is true, it means that Paul was again mindful of how important it is to communicate in the language of the people. He wanted to bring both groups together in oneness, to show them there was no barrier or ‘dividing wall,’ but rather ‘one new man’. So whether we call them elders (a term well-known to Jews) or bishops (a term well-known to Greeks), it matters not, implies Paul. The important issue is what these men were like, what characterized their lives. The title was secondary, their qualifications and functions were primary.” It is interesting to note that the title that has become most common in our churches today, namely, pastor, was not used in conjunction with a church in the New Testament. The regularly used terms were “elder” and “bishop.”

I would agree with Getz that we ought not be “locked in” to certain titles. We ought to be free to choose titles from our 20th Century vocabulary and culture that clearly describe the New Testament function. On the other hand, we should not hasten to change simply for the sake of change. Again, I think Getz is “right on” when he concludes that “... the criterion for change is when certain terms become a hindrance, rather than a help to the function of a church. Note, however, that because Paul was flexible in terminology when describing leaders in a church, it does not mean that he was indefinite in other areas. When it came to leadership qualifications and functions, he was definite, precise, and consistent. This helps us to differentiate absolutes from non-absolutes in the area of leadership.”

Perhaps we should seek to determine an appropriate title for our culture. Should we stay with the most common New Testament title, i.e., elder, or the currently popular term, i.e., pastor, or is there yet a better term for this day?

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