

Church Priority #1: Leadership by Biblical Eldership (Titus 1:5)

Preached by Pastor Phil Layton at Gold Country Baptist Church on May 11, 2008

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Some of you read the devotional *Our Daily Bread*, which had the following entry on Titus 1:5, which will be our text today. I like the way it summed up our context:

[The game of golf] ‘teaches us, among other things, that we can't always take the easy way out of a difficult situation. When a ball rolls off the fairway and into the rough, the golfer isn't permitted to pick it up and place it where it will be easier to play. He must hit the ball from the rough.

Young Titus found himself "in the rough." He had been left in Crete, charged with the task of building up the Lord's work there. But he encountered problems. The Cretans were generally deceitful, immoral, and lazy, and this spirit had invaded the churches. Problem people were causing division. Paul realized that his friend needed encouragement, so he wrote to him. He began his letter by saying, in essence, "Yes, things are bad in Crete. But that's exactly why I left you there. God can use you to bring about great and necessary changes." Titus listened, and he succeeded. Although the Bible doesn't record the results of this encouraging letter from Paul, archeologists have found the remains of stately churches that had the name "Titus" inscribed on their cornerstones.

Whenever we are in a difficult place, we don't help ourselves by looking for the easy way out. Instead, by exercising our faith in God and facing the challenge, we can battle our way through the problem. We'll become better people, and we'll discover that God can make us victorious.’

Something I didn't share last time about Titus, which is interesting is that tradition says that Titus returned to the island of Crete and died there in advanced years (one unconfirmed source said he was 94 years old, an unusually old age among first century lifespans).

His successor, Andreas Cretensis, eulogized him in the following terms: ‘The first foundation-stone of the Cretan church; the pillar of the truth; the stay of the faith; the never silent trumpet of the evangelical message; the exalted echo of Paul's own voice’ (as cited by Thomas Constable, *Expository Notes*)

The legacy of his ministry is still felt today where the name Titus is honored in many villages, churches, and monasteries where he ministered. I read one commentator who traced the lasting influence of Christianity in many cities in Crete, by letters they've found written to or from pastors in different churches in Crete in just about every century into the 9th century A.D.

It's encouraging to know that the difficult mission Titus had was successful by God's grace and peace, and to see what an impact a faithful man of God can have. This is the man to whom Paul writes

⁴To Titus, my true child in a common faith: Grace and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Savior. ⁵For this reason I left you in Crete, that you would set in order what remains and appoint elders in every city as I directed you,

Verse 5 in the context of chapter 1 and in the whole book shows us what Paul considered to be Priority #1 in the Church – Leadership by Biblical Eldership.

OUR OUTLINE:

- I. THE IMPORTANCE OF ELDERS
- II. THE IDENTITY OF ELDERS

#1 - THE IMPORTANCE OF ELDERS

Paul begins verse 5 with “For this reason I left you in Crete” – in other words, this is the whole reason you’re there, this is your purpose, your priority #1 – set in order what remains and appoint elders in every city that has a church.

And the first and foremost thing that needs to be set in order and established is biblical eldership, which basically the entire first chapter is devoted to as its most important subject.

The word in v. 5 translated “set in order” literally means to “straighten” - from the Greek word *ortho*. That’s the word that we get orthodontist from, a dental specialist who straightens and aligns crooked teeth or sets them straight. In ancient times, this word was used in general of setting broken bones or straightening bent limbs, which can fall under the medical specialty we call orthopedics.

The man of God is called to:

- straighten out what’s crooked
- to help align things in the church that are out of order
- to take what’s out of line and bring in back into it’s proper place
- to heal what’s broken or hurting
- to set things straight spiritually

There is some work Titus as an individual is to do, but the language and context seems to indicate that once biblically qualified godly elders are leading each local church, *leadership is how* things that remain will be set in order on an ongoing basis (the other part of this twofold task). And really the rest of chapter 1 is all about biblical eldership, and it’s not until chapters 2 and 3 that Paul gets to the other matters that needed to be addressed.

The importance of eldership jumps off the page of chapter 1. If you read Paul’s other letters, you’ll notice he usually begins early in the 1st chapter with a prayer, or an expression of thanksgiving or praise, or some personal remarks, sometimes for several verses.

Here he departs from that pattern and bypasses his standard introduction to get right to the most urgent main mission, the most important imperative, the most significant subject, the most pressing priority, which is leadership by godly elders.

Without his usual greeting protocol, Paul immediately launches into what he clearly considered the most crucial dynamic for the body of believers - the vital need of biblical eldership. Before giving instructions for various church members and aspects of the church (as he’ll do in chapter 2), Paul goes *first* to the important business of getting qualified elders in every church who:

- have a high standard of Christian living both publicly and privately
- have a high view of God and His Word
- have a high emphasis on sound doctrine and will deal with any who teach otherwise or cause people to live otherwise

Without wasting any time, Paul reminds his spiritual protege Titus what the key issue is first and foremost in the church a biblical eldership. There were a lot of issues and problems going on in the church that could detract or distract Titus off course, and Paul will address some of the issues in chapters 2 and 3 of Titus. But virtually all of chapter 1 is devoted to the centrality of biblical eldership. Paul focuses a lot of attention here, and we're going to focus a lot of attention here in the weeks ahead in this chapter, because this is just as important today as it was then.

Paul knew that as the leadership goes, so goes the church. There were apparently a good number of churches on Crete with a good number of problems, and without Divine direction it would be easy for Titus to feel overwhelmed and wondering where to begin. Titus might wonder "with all the different issues and problems in the church that could consume all my time, where am I to focus my energies?" God's Word answers with a focus on biblical eldership who can share the load of ministry and set in order what remains.

This inspired apostolic letter teaches priority #1 was getting biblical leadership in place and functioning, because until you have the right foundation and framework, the building and maintenance of the body of Christ can't move forward with lasting stability.

If the church leadership is weak, the church will likely remain weak, even if you address a lot of practical issues among the people or have a lot of programs going. On the other hand, if the church leadership is strong spiritually, by God's grace they can grow spiritually through many problems.

The first and foremost need of the church is for qualified godly men to lead in character, conduct, and teaching (in that order).

Alexander Strauch, begins his book *Biblical Eldership* this way:

'As I walked into the main foyer of the church ... I immediately noticed the pictures and names of the senior pastor and his staff. The pictures were arranged in a pyramid with the senior pastor at the top, his three associate pastors below, and the rest of the church staff completing the base of the pyramid. As I walked further into the building and down a side hall, I saw another glass encasement with the pictures and names of the church elders. I immediately thought, *What a superb illustration of how the church elders have been pushed aside to a scarcely visible position in the church!* This is quite different from the New Testament model of eldership.'

What's worse (and common) is that in some churches elders aren't visible at all, because the church has no elders. Elders to some are like the 7UP slogan about caffeine – "never had it, never will." There's a pride some seem to take in saying "we've never done it that way before." There are some Baptist churches that not only never had the position, they've *never even heard of* elders as spiritual leaders.

I was in numerous Baptist churches and circles growing up, but I don't remember ever meeting a leader who was called an elder or hearing the term elder used in this way, and if I did hear the term used, I don't think I would have had any idea what they were talking about.

To a large number of Christians, the only "elders" they know of are retired people or senior citizens (*elderly*). There's undoubtedly thousands of Baptist churches across this country who only know the structure of the Pastor (paid preacher) and deacons (some would add trustees). If you talk about elder leadership in some places, you might hear puzzled people say "But we're Baptist, not Presbyterian?"

When I graduated from seminary and was interviewing at different churches, I'll never forget one interview. The deacons and interim pastor were there, and they were interviewing me, and one of the questions was about my belief that God desires the local church to be led by a plurality of spiritually qualified men called elders. The interim pastor (who had been a Baptist pastor for decades and was now retired) didn't seem like he had ever heard of that idea before.

He kept asking with a confused look on his face, "you mean plurality, like hire a youth pastor to help out someday?"

My response: "not necessarily staff or paid pastors, but men who are qualified as elders according to Titus 1 and 1 Timothy 3"

(It was as if I was speaking a foreign language to him)

The importance of eldership that Paul is bringing to Titus here has not always been understood; it's been under-emphasized and in many quarters it is still unknown. But if you read through the Bible you're going to find the word "elder" all over the New Testament, so why has it lost its original importance (or almost its existence!)?

As far as we can tell, virtually all the churches in NT times had multiple Elders installed and functioning as spiritual leaders:

- There were Elders in all the Churches that Paul founded (Acts 14:23 "they had appointed elders for them in every church")
- There were Elders in the Church at Jerusalem (Acts 15)
- There were Elders in the Church at Ephesus (Acts 20:17)
- Titus is making sure all the cities on Crete with churches have elders in every place (Titus 1:5) and history indicates that he did just that
- There were Elders in all the Churches in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia (1 Peter begins addressing all those residing or scattered in those places and Peter says "I exhort *the elders among you*" in 5:1)
- There were Elders in all the Churches of the Dispersion of the Roman Empire (James writes "to the the twelve tribes who are dispersed abroad" and he says when someone is sick "he must call for the elders of the church and they are to pray over him" in 5:14)

This is *the dominant* N.T. term for church leaders and it needs to be restored to that proper place if we want to be more like the N.T.

Many are surprised to learn you don't find any of these other terms in the Bible that we use instead and put so much importance in:

“Senior Pastor” or “Associate Pastor” or “Assistant Pastor” or “Executive Pastor” or “Youth Pastor” or “Reverend” or other financial officers called “Trustees” (who in some cases are qualified as businessmen rather than godly men) or “Executive Board” or “Advisory Board” and certainly not “archbishop” or “Cardinal” or “Pope”

Christians often criticize the Roman Catholic extra-biblical offices and hierarchy they have which is extrabiblical and even unbiblical, but the truth is many evangelical Protestant denominations have very similar hierarchies and inventions that are not based on the Bible, we just feel better when use different names for them

The English word “deacon” does appear in 2 Bible passages (1 Timothy 3 and Philippians 1:1) – this word just means “servant”

The word “pastor” only appears once in Ephesians 4:11 in connection with teachers – this word really means “shepherd”

We've built so much into traditions and titles which the Bible doesn't explicitly teach much on, and at the same time so many have completely ignored “elders” which the New Testament has a lot to say about, mentioning about 70 times in the NT, almost all of those referring to spiritual leadership, whether good or bad, Jewish or Gentile Christians. The OT referred to leadership with the term “elders” well over 100x, which formed the Jewish background for Christian elders as spiritual leaders.

How could the role of elders have almost completely disappeared from so many churches when there are dozens of texts in the New Testament about elders leading local churches?

I thought I'd do a little research on this – *of course my commitment is to the Bible not Baptist tradition*, but it's interesting (even within this tradition I'm in) to trace a little history from past centuries for an interesting perspective.¹

Historically Baptists of all stripes from all parts of the world have held to the view that there are two ongoing church offices presented in the New Testament: Deacons and Elders (for Elders sometimes they used the old English word “bishops” as a synonym or “overseer” but the most common synonym was “pastor” which just means “shepherd” and “elder” used interchangeably for this office of elder):

A SHORT CONFESSION OF FAITH IN TWENTY ARTICLES BY JOHN SMYTH

1609, Article 16

*The ministers of the church are, not only bishops (“*Episcopos*” [or elders]), to whom the power is given of dispensing both the word and the sacraments, but also deacons, men and widows, who attend to the affairs of the poor and sick brethren.*

A DECLARATION OF FAITH OF ENGLISH PEOPLE REMAINING AT AMSTERDAM, 1611, Article 20

That the Officers of every Church or congregation are either Elders, who by their office do especially feed the flock concerning their souls, Acts 20:28, 1 Peter 5:2, 3, or Deacons, Men and Women who by their office relieve the necessities of the poor and impotent brethren concerning their bodies, Acts 6:1–4.

PROPOSITIONS AND CONCLUSIONS CONCERNING TRUE CHRISTIAN RELIGION, 1612–1614 , Proposition 76:

That Christ hath set in His outward church two sorts of ministers: viz., some who are called pastors, teachers or elders, who administer in the word and sacraments, and others who are called Deacons, men and women: whose ministry is, to serve tables and wash the saints' feet (Acts 6:2–4; Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:2, 3, 8, 11; and chap. 5).

SECOND LONDON CONFESSION, 1677 AND 1688, Article 26, paragraph 8:

the Officers appointed by Christ to be chosen and set apart by the Church (so called and gathered) for the peculiar Administration of Ordinances, and Execution of power, or Duty which he entrusts them with, or calls them to, to be continued to the end of the World, are Bishops or Elders and Deacons.

The American Philadelphia Confession of 1742 also speaks of Pastors or Bishops interchangeably and deacons. The New Hampshire Confession of 1833 says the “only scriptural officers are Bishops, or Pastors, and Deacons”

SWEDISH BAPTIST CONFESSION OF FAITH (STOCKHOLM), 1861, Article 9:

We believe that a true Christian church is ... under the guidance of the Holy Spirit to choose among themselves shepherds or overseers and deacons, to administer baptism and the Lord's Supper . . .

CONFESSION OF FAITH AND ECCLESIASTICAL PRINCIPLES OF THE EVANGELICAL ASSOCIATION OF FRENCH-SPEAKING BAPTIST CHURCHES

Part 2, Article 2: *In addition to pastors or elders, the local church may have other responsible servants, for example deacons and deaconesses whose role it is to assist the pastors or elders in their ministry, by assuming especial responsibility for everything that relates to the material interests of the congregation.*

ARTICLES OF THE BAPTIST BIBLE UNION OF AMERICA, 1923, Article 13:

[The church's] officers of ordination are pastors, elders and deacons, whose qualifications, claims and duties are clearly defined in the Scriptures.

***NOW NOTICE A SHIFT FROM 1925 TO 1963 IN THE LARGEST U.S. GROUP:**

STATEMENT OF FAITH OF THE SOUTHERN BAPTIST CONVENTION, *Baptist Faith & Message* 1963, Article 6: *This church is an autonomous body, operating through democratic processes under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. In such a congregation members are equally responsible. Its Scriptural officers are pastors and deacons.*

The word “elder” disappears on paper now, and in practice its *vanishing in importance* was already well underway.

What you write in doctrinal statements and constitutions does matter – that’s why in our new constitution draft we have labored in the beginning of the document to devote 2 full pages to elder leadership and responsibilities and requirements from scripture before addressing the other aspects of the church and ministry. This in some ways is similar to Paul’s approach in the book of Titus, and Lord-willing we’ll be sharing these portions of our new constitution this summer as we finalize our review with the men.

Compare to their 1925 *Baptist Faith and Message* confessional statement:

"A church of Christ is a congregation of baptized believers, associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the gospel; observing the ordinances of Christ, governed by his laws, and exercising the gifts, rights and privileges invested in them by his word, and seeking to extend the gospel to the ends of the earth. Its Scriptural officers are **bishops or elders** and deacons.

The 1963 version shifts the language more explicitly to "democratic processes" and no longer contains any reference to bishops/overseers or elders, but only says "Scriptural officers are **pastors** and deacons" – that's not technically an inaccurate statement if by "pastor" you mean the biblical term "shepherd" (teacher / leader), understanding biblically it's just a synonym for "elder" or "overseer" or "bishop" depending on your Bible translation.

But earlier creeds actually specified "elder" or other synonyms, and the problem with *just saying* "pastors and deacons" is the word "pastor" has evolved in most people's thinking to be *the paid minister* of the church. Since the typical church only has one full-time minister who would bear this concept of "the pastor" then the result is you usually only have one man in the role as pastor (unless you're big enough to have multiple paid staff), and then you have the deacons who help serve but don't help pastor. The problem is that you have one guy in the role of shepherding and spiritually leading the entire church (or trying to). When word "elder" dropped on paper, it also dropped out other men in the congregation who may not work for the church, but who are qualified as godly elders who God intends to help shepherd and lead the local church, whether they are a tentmaker like Paul or in a trade like some other NT ministers.

So as "pastor" and "minister" eventually became a clericalized and professionalized and individualized title only, it effectively undid the NT pattern of a plurality of elders (incl. some *not* employed by church). The whole concept of a group of godly men shepherding and leading and feeding a church was replaced either with:

- one-man show (solo pastor doing it all, or worse, dictator)
- deacons or trustees really controlling everything (or whoever has the most money or clout, power plays)
- or pure democracy like in OT Israel when everyone can do what is right in their own eyes (or some combination)

This is not intended to bash any particular Baptist group (we're a baptist church) but it is to say our allegiance must be to the *text* of Scripture, not *tradition*.

Alexander Strauch documents how the biblical concept of eldership was lost for nearly fourteen centuries and wasn't entirely restored properly by the Reformation. There was still a lot of baggage and carryover from the medieval church in many Protestant churches. In the 19th and 20th centuries there has been much move back to biblical leadership, but Strauch wrote his book because he was surprised to not find any full-length book on biblical eldership. So he wrote *Biblical Eldership* with the subtitle "An Urgent Call to Restore Biblical Church Leadership." We read this book together as elders last year and have also benefitted from his book on Deacons, which we are going through together with the entire board, deacons, and other officers.

So while our allegiance is more to the Bible than to the Baptists, these common misunderstandings about elders, or elders missing entirely, are not problems limited to any US denomination.

Charles Spurgeon in the 19th century in London wrote this in his Autobiography about one of the biggest and best churches there:²

When I came to New Park Street, the church had deacons, but no elders; and I thought, from my study of the New Testament, that there should be both orders of officers ... I am sure it is good to have two sets of brethren as officers, instead of one set who have to do everything, and who often become masters of the church, instead of the servants ... As there were no elders at New Park Street, when I read and expounded the passages in the New Testament referring to elders, I used to say, "This is an order of Christian workers which appears to have dropped out of existence. In apostolic times, they had both deacons and elders; but, somehow, the church has departed from this early custom. We have one preaching elder,—that is, the Pastor,—and he is expected to perform all the duties of the eldership." One and another of the members began to inquire of me, "Ought not we, as a church, to have elders? Cannot we elect some of our brethren who are qualified to fill the office?" ... some enthusiastic young men said that they would propose at the church-meeting that elders should be appointed, and 'ultimately we did appoint them with the unanimous consent of the members. I did not force the question upon them I only showed them that it was Scriptural, and then of course they wanted to carry it into effect.

The church-book, in its records of the: annual church-meeting held January 12, 1859, contains the following entry:— "Our Pastor, in accordance with a previous notice, then stated the necessity that had long been felt by the church for the appointment of certain brethren to the office of elders, to watch over the spiritual affairs of the church. Our Pastor pointed out the Scripture warrant for such an office, and quoted the several passages relating to the ordaining of elders ...

"Whereupon, it was resolved,—That the church, having heard the statement made by its Pastor respecting the office of the eldership, desires to elect a certain number of brethren to serve the church in that office for one year, it being understood that they are to attend to the spiritual affairs of the church, and not to the temporal matters, which appertain to the deacon only."

... Some of the elders have rendered great service to our own church by conducting Bible-classes and taking the oversight of several of our home-mission stations, while one or two have made it their special work to "watch for souls" in our great congregation, and to seek to bring to immediate decision those who appeared to be impressed under the preaching of the Word. One brother has earned for himself the title of my hunting dog, for he is always ready to pick up the wounded bird. One Monday night, at the prayer-meeting, he was fitting near me on the platform; all at once I missed him, and presently I saw him right at the other end of the building. After the meeting, I asked him why he went off so suddenly, and he said that ... [he saw] a woman in the congregation, and she looked so sad that he walked round, and sat near her, in readiness to speak to her about the Savior after the service.

(from *Spurgeon's Autobiography*, Vol. 2, Ch. 61 "Deacons and Elders")

It's always a good thing to go back to the Bible and try and fulfill our role and ministry based on what God's Word says. I praise the Lord that by His grace, our church is more focused on the Biblical text than tradition or denomination. I praise the Lord that we do have godly elders leading this church already, and that the concept of elder is not unknown or foreign to most of you.

I am also so thankful that since I've been here, as we have been studying in-depth the biblical passages on leadership and elders and deacons that we have also seen from the Bible areas where this church is not consistent in our roles and we're seeking to correct those and refine our practices. And I don't have to force or initiate it, we have men who once they see it in Scripture, they want to act.

Even in the past few months both elders and deacons have been really working toward functioning more in line with what the scriptures call us to, and I praise God for that.

In a future message, we'll see more of the role of deacons in relation to elders, but for today, we've been looking first of all at #1 The importance of elders, now ...

#2 The Identity of Elders

Just having some guys called "elders" is not enough – who are they to be and what are they to do?

The apostle Paul answers the question "who they are to be" in vs. 6-8 of Titus 1. And he gives one example of *what they are to do* in v. 9, which involves knowing and teaching sound doctrine.

I said earlier that the first and foremost need of the church is for qualified godly men to lead in character, conduct, and teaching (in that order). That's the order Paul addresses it, starting with character, as it says in v. 6 and 7 twice "above reproach" or "blameless" which is the overarching summary requirement

⁶namely, if any man is above reproach, the husband of one wife, having children who believe, not accused of dissipation or rebellion. ⁷For the overseer must be above reproach as God's steward ...

Not only character, but conduct, as verse 7 continues:

... not self-willed, not quick-tempered, not addicted to wine, not pugnacious, not fond of sordid gain, ⁸but hospitable, loving what is good, sensible, just, devout, self-controlled,

We'll go through each of these qualifications in the future and what they mean, but notice character and conduct is the main emphasis, not charisma or giftedness or popularity or business savvy or anything else. Verse 9 gives one responsibility of elders:

⁹holding fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, so that he will be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict.

So in summary, the elder is described as a man sound in his private life, his public life, and in his handing of God's Word against error

What is the definition of an elder?

- The word is not the same as "elderly."
- The word in Titus 1:5 is *presbuteros* (we get English word presbytery or Presbyterian from this word).

- It's different than the word translated "older men" in Titus 2:2 (*presbutes*) – that other word *presbutes* from 2:2 is the word used in Luke 1:18 when Zecharias questions how he could have a son when he is a *presbutes* ("old man")?
- That other word *presbutes* seems to be the word especially used for a very elderly man, someone advanced in years, as it was in the Greek version of the OT for Abraham when both he and Sarah in Genesis 18 who were "old, advanced in age ... past childbearing" (nearly 100 years old) and it's used of Isaac when he was well over 100 years old. In Philemon 9, Paul uses that word *presbutes* which is translated there as "aged" (NASB).
- The word *presbuteros*, elder, in Titus 1:5 can carry the literal idea of older, as it's used of the Prodigal Son's older brother, but it doesn't require the person be an old man. The Prodigal Son's older brother could not have been that old.
- The Jews might use the title "elder" as a leader as young as in their 30s, to put the term in perspective.
 - Qumran community set 30 as minimum for elder
 - Christ's age of 30 recognized as Rabbi and leader
 - 30 was also the age Levites could enter full service
 - This was the age minimum for entering the Sanhedrin who also had members called *presbuteros*
 - Scripture doesn't specify an age range (was Timothy younger? Spurgeon was unusually gifted and able to lead in his 20s), the point is you don't have to be 50 or 60+ to have this term biblically

The term "elder" in the first century didn't necessarily have the connotation of gray hair or someone very aged, but it did carry the connotation of maturity or dignity or venerability or respect.

Look at Titus 1:7, where there's a word used interchangeably with "elder" - "overseer" (or in some older English translations "bishop"). Bishop is probably not as helpful today, if it brings up connotations of high church hierarchy or elaborate garments or big hats on their head that are tall and pointy and shaped like cones.

So let's stick with the word "overseer" for verse 7. If you have the NKJV it reads "bishop" but may say in the margin on this word "lit. *overseer*." The original language grammar clearly connects the individual in verse 7 as the same man described as an "elder" in v. 5. The Bible also uses the word "shepherd" or "pastor" to refer to his role or responsibility.

AN ELDER IS AN OVERSEER / BISHOP (not 2 roles or ranks)

1 Peter 5:1-4 (NASB95)

¹ Therefore, I exhort **the elders** among you, as *your* fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed, ² **shepherd [verb form of "pastor"]** the flock of God among you, exercising **oversight [verb form of overseer]** not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to *the will of God*; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness; ³ nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock. ⁴ And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.

Peter himself had Christ tell him “**shepherd** my sheep” (Jn 21:16)
So Elder = Overseer = Shepherd/Pastor

Acts 20 (NASB95)

¹⁷ From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called to him the **elders** of the church ...

²⁸ “Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the **Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd [verb form of “pastor”]** the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.

Shepherd or Pastor or Elder or Overseer all refers to the same man, each with a little different emphasis as *The Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* brings out (p. 59):

Overseer. In secular Greek the word *overseer* (*episkopos*) was used of men with responsible positions with the state and of officials in religious communities. It implied overall supervising, ordering, evaluating and setting direction. This term is used interchangeably with “elder” for leaders in the local congregations (Phil 1:1; 1 Tim 3:1; Tit 1:5, 7; Acts 20:17; 1 Pet 5:1, 2) ...

Elder. The term *elder* is used most frequently for leaders of the NT congregations. Its basic meaning is “someone who is older” [or mature spiritually]. In the Jewish community ... as heads of families they held basically unchallenged authority and were responsible for judicial, political and military decisions. The elders in the Jerusalem church receive the gift for famine relief from the church at Antioch (Acts 11:30) and help decide the basis on which Gentiles should be received into the church (Acts 15) ...

Shepherd. One of the most familiar and best-loved images of spiritual leadership is the shepherd ... familiar from passages like Psalm 23 and Ezekiel 34. Although Jesus clearly describes himself in shepherd terminology in John 10, he applies this term only indirectly to his disciples (sending the Twelve to the “lost sheep of Israel” in Mt 10:6 and telling Peter to feed and care for his sheep in Jn 21:15–17). However, after the ascension, when Jesus is no longer present to give personal leadership to his flock, the shepherd metaphor becomes more prominent. Paul exhorts the leaders of the Ephesian church in Acts 20:28: “Take heed to yourselves and to all the flock” (RSV). Also speaking to elders, Peter says, “Tend the flock of God that is your charge” (1 Pet 5:2 RSV). Notice that in both cases the flock belongs to God, not to the shepherd; the shepherd is a servant, assigned the task of caring for God’s people ...

The shepherd image conveys ideas of tenderness, nurture and devotion; but it also implies discipline (the rod and the staff), the setting of limits (protection against wolves) and the right to establish direction (leading to pasture). In fact, the verb *poimanō* is sometimes translated as “rule” (Rev 2:27; 12:5; 9; 15; cf. Ps 2:9)

*Shepherd leadership is the main role of elder

Overseer emphasizes oversight, leadership, authority; *Elder* indicates dignity, maturity; *Pastor* = shepherding and feeding

Alexander Strauch again writes:

‘When most Christians hear of church elders, they think of an official church board, lay officials, influential people within the local church, or advisers to the pastor. They think of elders as policymakers, financial officers, fund raisers or administrators. They don’t expect church elders to teach the Word or be involved pastorally in the lives of people ...

this common view of the elder's role [is that] elders are not assistant pastors. They *assist* their pastor ... elders help facilitate and strengthen the working relationship of the church staff. [sound reasonable?]

Such a view, however, not only lacks scriptural support but flatly contradicts the New Testament Scriptures [!] ... According to the New Testament concept of eldership, elders lead the church, teach and preach the Word, protect the church from false teachers, exhort and admonish the saints in sound doctrine, visit the sick and pray, and judge doctrinal issues. In biblical terminology, elders shepherd, oversee, lead, and care for the local church.' (*Biblical Eldership*, p. 15-16)

If I had to pick one phrase to summarize what the Scriptures teach about biblical eldership, it would be "Shepherd Leadership"

Let me in closing give you another word that also starts with "S" that will help round up and summarize this study on the identity of elders:

SERVANT-LEADERSHIP

Back in Titus 1:1, Paul has already introduced himself as a "bondservant of God and an apostle" – one term includes leadership and authority (apostle) and the other term includes lowly service as a slave (*doulos*)

This is not the way of leadership according to the world, but it is according to God's Word.

We already read from 1 Peter 5 where elders are told to "shepherd" the flock (which combines leadership and lowliness in one term) and to "exercise oversight" (there's leadership) but "not yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge" (servant leadership)

There are people allotted to your charge that you're responsible for, but there's a difference between leading and lording over.

Servant and Leader go together in the church of Christ, because that's what Christ Himself taught in Mark 10:42:

"You know that those who are recognized as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them; and their great men exercise authority over them. ⁴³But it is not this way among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant;

- The fact that even the Son of Man came to serve is our example of servant-leadership. You can be a servant and not be a leader, but a leader who is not a servant is not Christlike
- Both "servant" and "leader" are there - the fact that Jesus was a servant did not nullify His leadership or authority at all.
- The fact that Jesus washed the feet of the other disciples like a slave did not mean He was *not* also their leader. But it shows us the proper garment and posture and power is not in a cleric's robe, but is in the servant's towel and wash basin (which should motivate us to gladly stoop to minister as Christ did).
- The fact that Paul identified himself in humility as a *doulos* (slave) did not cancel out his role or authority as apostle, but it does remind us that his leadership was servant-leadership.

- The fact that elders are servant-leaders similarly doesn't mean they have no leadership role or authority, but the example of under-shepherds is the Chief Shepherd, who is the true authority over all and who requires leaders in His church to be servants.

And Christ as head of the church does delegate authority to godly men to lead His church, as we'll see next time.

1 Peter 5 wouldn't have warned the elders against abusing their authority by lording it if they had no authority to abuse. Humility and a servant mindset does not cancel out leadership, instead it establishes its character.

Chuck Colson, who served as Special Counsel to the US President from 1969 to 1973, speaks from personal experience of the dangerous enticement of power and high position when he writes: 'Nothing distinguishes the kingdoms of man from the kingdom of heaven more than their diametrically opposed views of the exercise of power. One seeks to control people, the other to serve people; one promotes self, the other prostrates self; one seeks prestige and position, the other lifts up the lowly and despised.' (as cited by Strauch, p. 87)

God is opposed to the proud and gives grace to the humble. Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven

If you have not repented of your sins and recognized your poverty of spirit, your spiritual bankruptcy and inability to do anything on your own to please God or make yourself worthy of heaven, today is the day. Humble yourself. Repent. Come to Christ. He gives grace to the humble.

¹ Quotes from historic various Baptist creeds as cited in John Piper's lectures on Biblical Eldership (www.desiringgod.org). Full-text of these and other historic Baptist confessions are available at www.reformedreader.org.