

# Christian Elders in the New Testament

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## 1. The Background of the Term “Elder” in Judaism

1.1 Almost all early societies or religious communities were guided in some way by elders, that is, by the older, experienced wise men of the group. According to Genesis 50:7 there were “elders of Egypt” and according to Numbers 22:7 there were elders of Moab and Midian. So there is nothing unique or unusual about having elders in positions of authority.

1.2 The early church was born on Jewish soil, its first members and leaders were Jewish, its Lord was Jewish, and it saw itself as the fulfillment of the Jewish Scriptures and as the true Jewish people of God. Therefore it is understandable that the church, as it emerged from Judaism, would in some ways pattern its life and structure on the life and structure of God’s people in the Old Testament of which they were now the true posterity.

The “elders of Israel” are referred to in the Old Testament from the beginnings of the nation in Egypt (Exodus 12:21) down to the period of the rebuilding of the temple after the Babylonian exile (Ezra 6:7). In Ezekiel 7:26 they are grouped together with prophets and priests, each group having its special concern: “They seek a vision from the prophet, but the law perishes from the priest and counsel from the elders.” In Leviticus 4:15 the elders have a representative function in certain worship practices. In Numbers 11:16 they are described as officers over the people.

In general, then, we can say that, while through the long history of Israel the role of the elder no doubt changed, they were the older men of the community who, because of their wisdom in counsel and the natural honor due to them (Leviticus 19:32), became the official administrators or leaders of the community.

In the Judaism of Jesus’ day the elders of Israel were still dominant. The most frequent use of the word “elder” in the New Testament refers to the Jewish elders who opposed Jesus during his lifetime. Within the gospels and Acts “elders” are most often viewed as forming a closely knit group with the “chief priests.” Again and again we read of “the chief priests and elders of the people” (Matthew 21:23; 26:3, 47; 27:1, etc.). The term elder was probably very broad and would include members of the scribes as well as the Pharisees and Sadducees (cf. “traditions of the elders” Matthew 15:2; Acts 22:6).

Therefore it is evident that the Judaism out of which the early church emerged was one in which elders played a distinctive and well-known leadership role. This familiar role in Jewish society was no doubt where the early church got the title “elder.” But just what the character and function of the early Christian elder was can only be determined by studying the New Testament texts. It would be wrong to assume that the Jewish concept

was taken over with no modifications, because the church is not simply a carbon copy of Judaism or of Old Testament Israel.

It is worth noting in passing that the office of priest, so prominent in the Old Testament, is not taken over by the early church. Prophets and elders (cf. Ezekiel 7:26) have their counterparts in the church and these titles are used. But there is no official counterpart to the priest, for, as the New Testament teaches, the whole church is a “holy priesthood” (1 Peter 2:5), or a “royal priesthood (1 Peter 2:9). We who are in Christ have all “been made priests to his God” (Revelation 1:6). Each individual has access to the holy of holies, God’s throne of grace, because of the once-for-all atoning death of Christ. No officer in the church has the function of mediating between the believer and God.

## 2. Christian Elders in the Church at Jerusalem

2.1 The elders of the early Jerusalem church appear in three situations in the Book of Acts. The first reference is in Acts 11:30. The disciples of Antioch had decided to send relief funds to the church in Jerusalem “and they did so, sending the elders by the hand of Paul and Barnabas.” No mention is made of deacons or apostles here. The elders are apparently the older men responsible for the general welfare of the church. We know nothing about how they became elders, and we can only surmise that the reason they were elders at all is because of the pattern already set in Judaism.

2.2 The second situation where we meet the elders is at the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15. They are mentioned five times—verses 2, 4, 6, 22 and 23. Some Jewish Christians had gone to Antioch preaching that you had to be circumcised in order to be saved (15:1). Paul and Barnabas debated with them until “Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question” (15:2).

It is noteworthy that while funds were sent only to the elders (11:30) a doctrinal issue was sent to the apostles as well as the elders. The authority of the apostles was recognized, but even this authority is not wielded without an effort to persuade and unify through a council meeting.

When Paul and Barnabas arrived in Jerusalem “they were welcomed by the church, and the apostles and the elders” (15:4). Here we see three groups—the church as a whole, the twelve apostles, and the body of elders. The issue of circumcision surfaced soon enough (15:5) and the result was that, according to verse 6 “the apostles and the elders gathered together to consider this matter.”

In the debate which follows, Peter, then Barnabas and Paul, then James spoke in favor of not requiring circumcision. Apparently the discussion, at least initially, was confined to the apostles and elders. It is probable that members of the congregation were present, in view of the reference to the “multitude” (KJV, πλῆθος) in verse 12, and in view of the fact that when all was said and done verse 21 says, “Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders with the whole church” to send a letter to the gentile churches about their decision.

Verse 28 adds that it also seemed good to the Holy Spirit that circumcision not be required. When the letter was delivered, for example in Acts 16:4, Luke comments that the decision about circumcision had been reached by the apostles and elders. This confirms 15:6 which says that “the apostles and elders were gathered together to consider the matter.”

So the picture in chapter 15 is that the elders, along with the apostles, have the responsibility under the guidance of the Holy Spirit to make decisions regarding ethical (15:29) and doctrinal matters. We may assume that these significant decisions were laid before the whole church where they were approved (15:22).

In seeking guidelines from this incident for today’s church we would have to keep in mind that the office of apostle, being linked to the witnessing of his resurrection, was an unrepeatable office. The irreplaceable function of the apostles remains for us now in the apostolic word which we have in the New Testament. Thus the leadership of the church using only the Jerusalem model would be a group of elders under the Holy Spirit in humble conversation with the apostolic word, the New Testament.

2.3 The third situation in Acts where the elders appear is Paul’s final visit to Jerusalem (21:18). Paul goes in to James (the Lord’s brother) and with all the elders present he lays before them what God has been doing among the gentiles through his ministry. Then the elders urged Paul not to give offense to the Jewish Christians; he accepted their advice and purified himself and entered the temple.

Here the function of the elders is to receive the distinguished apostle and hear his report. They take pains to see that there is a good rapport between Paul and the whole church. It is interesting to note that James, who was not an apostle, (James the apostle was killed in 44 A.D., Acts 12:1-3) is mentioned separately, apparently as a chief leader. This could be due simply to his unique status as the Lord’s brother, or it could suggest that from the early days as the apostles dispersed and died off a central figure emerged among the body of elders who was recognized as the main leader or administrator.

2.4 In conclusion, we know nothing about how the elders of Jerusalem were chosen unless we equate the seven of Acts 6:3 with the elders. But there is no good reason to do that. We may assume they emerged naturally in the community because they were taken for granted in Jewish society. They were apparently responsible for the general welfare of the church (11:30); and with the apostles under the guidance of the Holy Spirit (15:28) they made decisions respecting the doctrine and morals of the church (15:6; 16:4). These decisions then met the approval of the whole church (15:22).

### 3. The Elders in the Churches of Paul

3.1 The term “elder” as a title for a church leader occurs in the Pauline letters only three times—1 Timothy 5:17, 19 and Titus 1:5. Obviously the title, as such, was not of great importance to Paul. It could well be that he may not have even used the title in his work until near the end of his life when he wrote the pastoral letters, except that they presuppose some prior acquaintance with the term.

3.2 There are two references in Acts to elders in the churches of Paul. Let's look at these one at a time.

3.2.1 In Acts 14:21 Paul begins to head back to Antioch of Syria, retracing the steps of his first missionary outreach to the churches of southern Galatia: Derbe, Lystra, Iconium and Antioch of Pisidia. While visiting each of these churches which Paul had recently founded he "strengthened the souls of the disciples and exhorted them to continue in the faith" (14:22). Then Luke tells us in 14:23 that Paul and Barnabas "appointed elders for them in every church" and that after "praying with fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they believed."

Concerning the elders here we may note first that it does not say Paul called them elders. This may be Luke's word for a church leader to which Paul may have given no name at all except perhaps "the ruling ones" (1 Thessalonians 5:12) or "the overseers" (Acts 20:28). But whether Paul called them elders or not, Luke saw them filling the same function as what he knew as elders.

Secondly we may note that in each church were appointed several elders; we don't know how many. Third, their installation was by appointment, not election, a feature we will find true to elders throughout the New Testament. Fourth, they must have been relatively new Christians, since the churches had just been founded. This shows that the principle laid down in 1 Timothy 3:6 (no new convert bishops) is not an absolute in the missionary context. Nothing at all is said here about the function of the elders. Luke apparently assumed that in his day the office was so common that it needed no explanation.

3.2.2 The second reference to elders in Paul's churches in Acts comes in Acts 20:17. Paul is on his way to Jerusalem at the end of his third missionary journey. He stops off at Miletus, just south of Ephesus, and "calls to him the elders of the church" of Ephesus. When they come down to him, Paul gives a very moving farewell address.

In verse 28, Paul admonishes them with these words, "Take heed to yourselves and to all the flock unto which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers to feed the church of the Lord which he obtained with his own blood."

Concerning the elders here, again we note that Paul does not call them elders, but rather "overseers" (v. 28). The Greek word is επισκοπους (episkopous) which means literally overseer and is sometimes translated "bishop." Hence to the elders is entrusted the task of spiritual oversight. This task has immediate relevance because the next verse warns of wolves that will come, not sparing the flock. Hence it is obvious that for Paul the term "overseer" is virtually synonymous with "shepherd," since the congregation is pictured as a flock. This gives, incidentally, clear foundation for our use of the term "pastor" and "pastoral staff," since "pastor" means "shepherd" (cf. 1 Corinthians 9:7 and Ephesians 4:11 for Paul's only other uses of the shepherd metaphor for church leader).

In addition, the responsibility of the elder/overseer is to "feed the church," no doubt in the sense in which Jesus said to Peter, "Feed my sheep," (John 21:17). In context, the food is no doubt "the word of grace, which is able to build you up" (20:32), or "the whole counsel of God" (20:27). The elders/overseers are thus ministers of the word. But more

than that, according to verse 35 the elders are to imitate Paul and labor to support the weak; that is, to provide for the needs of those who because of sickness cannot provide for themselves. This task, which is not unlike the task of the so-called “deacons” in 6:1-3, raises the question whether the term elder in Acts may not subsume what we know as the diaconate. It is impossible to answer this with certainty.

Finally we should note that the elders had been “set as overseers” by the Holy Spirit. This fills out the picture somewhat when we add to it the fact that Paul appointed elders in all the churches. The appointment no doubt occurred after the manner of Paul’s own appointment by the prophets and teachers in Acts 13:1-3. Through prayer and fasting the Holy Spirit makes plain who shall be appointed, and then the leaders lay hands on them and appoint them. Paul’s appointments were not capricious or merely a reflection of his own desires.

3.2.3 From these two texts in Acts we can see that from the earliest times in the churches of Paul there have been appointed leaders who function as overseers of the flock, to guard it, feed it, and help supply its physical needs. Luke applies the term “elders” to these and makes plain that there were several in each church and apparently at Ephesus a large number (cf. 20:25).

3.3 Within the letters of Paul themselves the term “elder,” as a designation for a church leader, occurs only three times—1 Timothy 5:17, 19 and Titus 1:5. We will look at these in reverse order. As we do we should keep in mind the unique character of the Pastoral letters (1 and 2 Timothy and Titus): they are the last letters Paul wrote and reflect a situation fifteen to twenty years after Paul’s first missionary journey. Unlike all his other letters they are addressed to individual church leaders and spell out some of their duties.

3.3.1 Paul writes to Titus (1:5-9):

This is why I left you in Crete, namely that you might set in order what was left undone and that you might appoint elders in each city as I directed you. Only appoint someone if he is irreproachable, the husband of one wife, and has believing children who are not open to the charge of profligacy or rebellion. For it is necessary that an overseer be irreproachable as God’s household steward, not self-willed or quick tempered or a drunkard, or pugnacious, or greedy for gain, but rather hospitable, loving what is good, prudent, righteous, devout, self-controlled, holding fast the faithful word in accordance with the teaching, in order that he might be able both to exhort with sound teaching and to reprove the opponents.

We see right away that Paul here uses the term elder and overseer (or bishop) with reference to the same persons. Verses six and seven can be paraphrased, “elders shall be irreproachable” (anengklētos) for an overseer must be irreproachable (anengklētos).” The function of the elders is thus summed up as oversight just as it was in Acts 20:17, 28. Also, as in Acts, the emphasis falls on the ministry of the word: the elder/overseer should be well-grounded in doctrine (didachē, verse 9) and able to “exhort with sound teaching and reprove the opponents” (verse 9). Beyond this nothing is said about the task of the elders.

Verses six to eight give the requirements one should meet in order to be an elder-overseer. In his community relations he should be irreproachable, and his marriage and family should be exemplary. His own personal character should be one of spiritual maturity which fits him to help others.

Finally, we note again that the elders are appointed. The situation is like that in Acts 14:23 in which the churches seem to be relatively new since there are as yet no elders in the churches. Paul has apparently had to leave Crete (verse 5) before having a chance to appoint elders as he customarily did. So he orders Titus to do it in his place. The fact that Paul spells out the kind of person who is to be appointed shows that the work of the Holy Spirit (Acts 20:28) in the appointment process does not rule out the human activity of assessing a person's spiritual character.

3.3.2 The other two places where the term "elder" occurs in Paul's letters is 1 Timothy 5:17 and 19. In 5:3-16, Paul describes the procedures to follow in caring for widows in the church. "Real widows," that is, godly, older women who have no relatives to care for them, are to be supported by the church (5:3, 9, 16). They are thus to be honored.

Then in verses 17 and 18 Paul says, "Let the elders who rule well be worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and in teaching; for the Scripture says, 'You shall not muzzle an ox when it is treading out the grain,' [Deuteronomy 25:4] and 'The laborer deserves his wages' [Luke 10:7]."

This text raises a number of questions: What does the honor consist of in verse seventeen? Verse eighteen makes it plain that financial support is in view, at least partly: "the laborer (cf. "labor in word," verse 17) deserves his wages." So the term "double honor" in verse seventeen must mean at least double pay. But this raises the question, What is to be doubled?

When Paul says that elders who rule well are to be accorded double honor, does he mean that elders who rule poorly are to get \$5,000 a year and the elders who rule well are to get \$10,000 a year? This is doubtful, since Paul says nothing about honoring elders who rule poorly; in fact, in verse twenty he speaks of rebuking an elder who persists in sin. There is in the context a reference to honor, however, which may be the one that is to be doubled, namely, the honor accorded to widows (verse 3). This honor involves both esteem (verse 2, 10ff) and financial support (verse 16). If we telescope verses 3-17 they would read: Honor the widows who are real widows, but give double honor to the elders who rule well.

Another question is raised by the phrase, "especially those who labor in the Word and in teaching" (verse 17). This seems to imply that there are some elders who labor in the word and teach and some who don't. J.N.D. Kelly suggests in his commentary that those who teach are the so-called "overseers" or "bishops" and those who don't are the deacons. In other words, he thinks that the term "elder" embraces both bishops and deacons.

This solution has in its favor that every time the overseer's role is described in the pastoral epistles it includes the ability to teach (1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:9) and when the role of the deacon is described, it does not (1 Timothy 3:8-13). The problem with this

view is that, as we said, Titus 1:5-7 seems to equate elder and bishop.

But perhaps in retrospect we should say that Titus 1:5-7 need not imply an identification of elder with bishop, but only an overlapping of terms. That is, all bishops or overseers are elders, but not all elders are overseers. I think we cannot be absolutely certain on this point.

In either case, it is not so much the structure of the church that is at stake as it is the titles one applies within that structure. In the one case “elder” is a broad title applying to both overseers and deacons. In the other case “elder” is a narrower term interchangeable with “overseer.”

Two new features about the ministry of elders emerges in 1 Timothy 5:17-22. Their work is described as ruling. The Greek word means to stand before (proistemi). It was used by Paul in 1 Thessalonians 5:12, “We beseech you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and who rule over you in the Lord and admonish you.” Perhaps the meaning comes out best in 1 Timothy 3:4, 5 and 12, where the word is translated “manage” (RSV) or “rule” (KJV) and refers to the function of a father in the family. Thus the elders are to the church what a father is to his family: he leads, manages the affairs and supervises.

A second feature of the ministry of elders which we have not seen before is that they are apparently ordained by the laying on of hands. After telling Timothy how to handle an elder who persists in sin, Paul warns Timothy not to “be hasty in the laying on of hands” (5:22). In other words, don’t make decisions quickly about who to ordain as an elder. (For Timothy’s own ordination by the laying on of hands see 1 Timothy 4:14; 1:18; 2 Timothy 1:6.)

3.4 We have not looked at all the texts where Paul uses the term “elder.” But since we have noticed both from Acts 20:17, 28 and from Titus 1:5, 7 that “elder” and “bishop/overseer” are sometimes interchangeable, we should perhaps look at two other texts where the bishop is mentioned.

3.4.1 In 1 Timothy 3:1-7 Paul gives the qualifications for one who “aspires to the office of bishop” (episkopēs). They are similar to those listed in Titus 1:5-9. The task of teaching is again mentioned (verse 2) and the function of the overseer is summed up in verse 5 as “caring for God’s church.”

3.4.2 The second and last text where Paul refers to the bishop is Philippians 1:1, “Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus. To all the saints in Christ who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons.” No further mention is made of these people in the letter, nor do we even know for sure if two distinct groups are in view here, though that would seem to be the most natural interpretation. The chief value of this reference, historically, is to show that the technical terms of “overseer” and “deacon” are not restricted to the Pastoral letters, which some scholars say Paul did not write.

3.5 Now we can try to summarize what we have learned about elders in the churches of Paul. Their role can perhaps best be summed up in the phrase “overseeing” and hence the term “elder” or “overseer” or “bishop” are sometimes used interchangeably (Titus

1:5, 7; Acts 20:17, 28). However, it is uncertain whether the term “elder” was a more inclusive one also embracing the role of deacon as well (Acts 20:35; 1 Timothy 5:17).

This oversight of the church involves guarding the flock spiritually, like a shepherd guards his flock from wolves (Acts 20:28), and feeding the flock. The feeding happens as the elders “labor in the Word and teaching” (1 Timothy 5:17; 3:2, Titus 1:9; Acts 20:27, 32). But 1 Timothy 5:17 may mean that there were ruling elders who were not involved in preaching and teaching. In addition to the spiritual ministry, the elders were also responsible for certain physical needs of the flock (Acts 20:35).

In the New Testament elders attain their position by appointment either by Paul or Barnabas (Acts 14:23) or by Timothy (1 Timothy 5:22) or by Titus (1:5). The Holy Spirit was active in these appointments so that it could be said that he had made them overseers (Acts 20:28). But this divine guidance did not short circuit the normal assessment of a person’s character since according to 1 Timothy 3:2-7 and Titus 1:5-9 the elder/overseer had to have an exemplary family, a spiritually mature character, and an ability to give sound teaching. The appointment was a kind of ordination to a sacred calling which was performed by the laying on of hands (1 Timothy 5:22; cf. Acts 13:3).

Finally, it is apparent that each city church had several elders rather than just one. Probably at the beginning being an elder was not a full-time job and was performed in addition to one’s vocation. But by the time Paul wrote 1 Timothy the elders in Ephesus were to be paid for their labor.

#### 4. Elders in the Non-Pauline Churches

4.1 There are a number of uses of the term “elder” outside Paul which we will now discuss. In the Book of Revelation the term occurs twelve times with reference to the twenty-four elders in heaven. There is no agreement among biblical scholars who these people represent. 2 and 3 John begin with the designation, “The elder to...” Apparently the author is so well known to his readers that he need not even give his name, but only call himself “The elder.”

4.2 In James 5:13-15 we read,

Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is any cheerful? Let him sing praise. Is any among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church and let them pray for him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; and the prayer of faith will save the sick man, and the Lord will raise him up; and if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven.

The only thing new we learn here is a specific illustration of the kind of practical ministry the elders were to have in the churches of the Dispersion (James 1:1).

4.3 Finally, in 1 Peter 5:1-4 the term “elder” is used.

So I exhort the elders among you as a fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ and sharer of the glory which is about to be revealed. Tend (poimanete)

the flock of God among you, overseeing not under compulsion but willingly according to God, neither for shameful gain but eagerly, neither as lording it over the portions assigned to you (tōn klēron) but being examples to the flock. And when the chief shepherd is manifested you will receive the unfading crown of glory.

Here the first thing to note is that Peter calls himself an elder. This, of course, does not mean there is no distinction between elders and apostles (see section 2). Rather, by virtue of its superior authority and pastoral obligation, the apostolic office overlapped with that of elder. Peter refers to this elder status to illustrate the very point he is making, namely, he does not want to “lord it over the elders” but by example and exhortation to help them fulfill their calling. He draws attention to Christ’s suffering and glory, which has immediate relevance for the elders who are called to take the lowly role of examples to the flock and to await the unfading crown of glory which only Christ can give (verse 4).

The main point of these verses is to instruct the elders how to exercise their authority. Peter uses three pairs of admonitions. The first pair (verse 2a) is ambiguous in the RSV: “not by constraint” sounds like Peter is urging the elders not to force people to do things. But the opposite of this is that the elders are to do things “willingly.” In view of this second half of the pair, I would translate the first half as “not under constraint.” In other words, in verse 2a Peter is not admonishing the elders not to use force, but not to need force for their own motivation.

Another reason for choosing this translation is that this avoids a needless repetition with verse 3a where Peter tells them not to lord it over the flock. Therefore the first pair of admonitions calls the elders not to act as if they were being forced to do their job, but to do it as of their own accord. In short, enjoy your work, for if you don’t you cast a shadow across the wisdom and goodness of him who called you to it.

The second pair of admonitions in verse 2b spells out a specific example of how not to be motivated by external constraint: “neither for shameful gain but eagerly.” One way you get people to do a job they aren’t very eager to do is to pay them. Since most people love money and the power and pleasure it can buy, they will do things they don’t love to do in order to get money. But this is a terrible motive for an elder, for it shows that his heart is in the wrong place, for where your treasure is there will your heart be.

Again, elders are to love their work. They are to do it eagerly. Blessed is the cheerful giver, for only the cheerful giver is not constrained to give by some external motive. Giving itself is blessed moreso than receiving. It was, in fact, to elders that Paul quoted Jesus’ words: “It is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35).

The third pair of admonitions is an echo of Jesus’ teaching in Mark 10:42-44. The same word for “lording over” is used in Mark 10:42 and 1 Peter 5:3 (katakuriēuō). The context in which Jesus warns the disciples against lording it over their brothers is when they were thinking about who was the greatest among them (cf. Luke 22:24-30). In other words, the evil of lording your authority over others is that it shows you are seeking glory from men, you are trying to exalt yourself in others’ eyes and so have the worldly pleasure of human praise.

Now here in 1 Peter 5:3, Peter warns the elders (as an elder who has seen the sufferings of Christ) that they are not to be motivated by a love of human praise or of power. On the contrary, they are to assume the lowly role of example just like Jesus did in Luke 22:24-30 and John 13:1-20. The glory will then follow, and not from men but from Christ himself, and not a fading human glory but an unfading one. Assured of this unfading glory, the elders can surely forsake all worldly motives like money and power, and eagerly do their overseeing as humble, Christ-like examples to the flock.

That Christ himself is the proper pattern for the elder/overseer is seen clearly not only from the allusion to his earthly teaching in 5:3, but also from 1 Peter 2:25. There Peter says, "You were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the shepherd and overseer (episkapon) of your souls." Christ is the "chief shepherd" as 5:4 says, but he is also the "chief overseer" (2:25) and may we not also say, "the chief elder"? This is the highest thing that can be said of the role of elder in the church. It is a summons from Christ (by his Spirit) to do his work under him in his likeness and for his sake.

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