

elders

THERE ARE THREE INTERCHANGEABLE TERMS FOUND IN THE NEW TESTAMENT THAT DESCRIBE THIS WORK OF SERVICE.

Each of these terms point to one of the various roles played by these leaders.

GREEK

PRESBUTEROS
EPISKOPOS
POIMENOS

ENGLISH

elder, presbyter
bishop, overseer
shepherd, pastor

FUNCTION

wisdom, experience, counsel *Acts 20:17; Titus 1:7*
administration, oversight, guidance *Acts 20:28; Titus 1:5*
watch, protection, care *Acts 20:28; Ephesians 4:11*

Acts 20

vs17 elders **PRESBUTEROS** **vs28** overseers **EPISKOPOS** shepherds **POIMENOS** *verb form*

Titus 1

vs5 elders **PRESBUTEROS** **vs7** overseer **EPISKOPOS**

1 Peter 5

vs1 elders **PRESBUTEROS** **vs2** shepherd **POIMENOS** *verb form* overseers **EPISKOPOS**

General uses of these terms:

elder Luke 7:3; Acts 4:5; 1 Timothy 5:1, 2; Titus 2:2

overseer (verb) Matthew 25:36, 43; Acts 7:23; Hebrews 12:15

shepherd Matthew 9:36; 26:31; Luke 2:8, 20

The presbyters, for their part, must be compassionate, merciful to all, turning back those who have gone astray, visiting all the sick, not neglecting a widow or orphan, or poor person, but always aiming at what is honorable in the sight of God and of men, avoiding all anger, partiality, unjust judgment, staying far away from the love of money, not quick to believe things spoken against anyone, nor harsh in judgment, knowing that we all are in debt with respect to sin.

Polycarp to the Philippians

elders must be blameless¹ in ATTITUDE, CHARACTER & EXPERIENCE

¹ "blameless" is a general category or heading, as evidenced in its use in Titus 1:6 *and* Titus 1:7

ATTITUDE toward this work

desires it...1 Tim. 3:1
willingly serves...1 Peter 5:2

CHARACTER

positive...he **IS**

temperate...1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:8 (self-controlled)
sober/sensible...1 Tim.3:2; Tit. 1:8
patient...1 Tim.3:3
good behavior...1 Tim.3:2
just...Titus 1:8
holy...Titus 1:8
hospitable...1 Tim.3:2; Titus 1:8
lover of good...Titus 1:8

negative...he **IS NOT**

quarrelsome...1 Tim.3:3
soon angry...Titus 1:7
self-willed...Titus 1:7
violent...1 Timothy 3:3
given to much wine...1 Tim.3:3; Titus 1:7
covetous...1 Tim.3:3
given to filthy lucre...1 Tim. 3:3; Titus 1:7

EXPERIENCE

God's Word

apt to teach...1 Tim. 3:2
holds fast...Titus 1:9
able to exhort...Titus 1:9
convince the gainsayer...Titus 1:9

in his home

of-one wife husband...1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:6

OF-ONE WIFE HUSBAND
MIAS GUNAIKOS ANDRA -- *see also* 1 Tim. 5:9

rules household well...1 Tim. 3:4
children in subjection...1 Tim.3:4,5
believing children...Titus 1:6

progress in the Lord

no novice...1 Tim. 3:6
good report...1 Tim. 3:7
good example...1 Peter 5:3

Our discussions have too often turned only to the "qualifications" and structural patterns of leadership. Consequently, the discussion has often focused only on the discrete and isolated qualifications that are mentioned (i.e., what does "believing children" mean?). We have overlooked the larger issue which is involved in the list of qualifications. When the qualifications are taken together, we recognize the New Testament's continuing emphasis on the character and exemplary life of leaders. Our search for leaders cannot be divorced from the devotion and commitment of the leader. Leaders should not be chosen simply because they meet the technical requirements for leadership, but because they follow the One who was a servant.

Churches need the authority of those who have devoted years of service. The will of the majority is no substitute for the wisdom of experienced Christians. Those of us who have served in churches where issues were settled by a majority vote have seen the bankruptcy of the church where inexperienced leaders emerge to be "helmsmen" for the church. Strong leaders are needed to guide the destiny of the church.

The role of the elders as "helmsmen" demands that they have the major role in establishing the direction of the church. In this situation, the "helmsmen" must make important decisions, for such decision-making cannot be divorced from their role as the church's teachers and leaders. While it may be inexcusable for elders to make decisions that are autocratic, they nevertheless make decisions affecting the direction of the church.

The contemporary church, like the church in the first generations, continues to face an uncertain future when strong leadership must emerge to assist the church in maintaining its identity. The church has not rediscovered a biblical pattern only when it has some structural similarities to early churches. Churches need to recognize that Jesus inaugurated a new form of leadership which transcends cultural changes. The church continues to need for its survival those "faithful men" who are able to teach others and whose authority is rooted in selfless love.

James W. Thompson