

Elders, Pastors, and Overseers

Introduction

The office, role, and function of Elders/Pastors/Overseers as well as gender roles in the church have become contentious topics among evangelical churches and a major point of confusion for Christians in these churches. Many have adopted views in contradiction to Scripture's clear teaching and intended meaning. Whether these views arise from a conscious desire to depart from the historic practice of evangelical churches or arise from a genuine desire to understand the biblical texts, we cannot ignore the fact that the Bible's teaching is clear and authoritative on this topic. This is our attempt to show the clarity of Scripture as well as clarify the position and practices of Grace Church of Orange.

This paper will briefly present our convictions on...

1. The Bible's teaching on the office, role, and function of the terms elder, pastor, and overseer.
2. The Bible's teaching on gender roles in relation to the offices and roles of elder, pastor, and overseer.
3. How Grace Church of Orange aligns itself with the Bible's teaching on this issue.

One final introductory note; while this issue in itself is not central to the gospel, it touches upon an issue that is central, the authority of the Scriptures. While Christians may disagree on a variety of issues in the Scriptures there is a necessity for local congregations to hold convictions as to how God intends the Scriptures to be understood. It is our conviction that the Scriptures teach clearly on these issues and

therefore to minimize the issue or relinquish our conviction would amount to a rejection of God's authority in our life as a congregation. Until persuaded otherwise from the Scriptures, it is God's call to the shepherds of His church to hold their convictions with courage and humility in honor of His authority through His Word in His church.

The Bible's Teaching on Pastors, Elders, and Overseers

A number of evangelical churches follow a model in which a board of elders and a team of pastors serve as two distinct entities within the church's leadership structure. Such a distinction allows these churches to place women or other individuals who would not normally qualify as elders into the role of "pastor." The argument generally runs that Paul is prohibiting women from preaching in a gathering of adult men and women, and from filling the office of elder, but not from filling a pastoral role.

A second argument becoming increasingly common is that Paul's list of gifts in Ephesians 4:11 describes not roles but giftings. For example, this interpretation argues that Paul is not saying that Christ gave apostles, prophets, shepherds, evangelists, and teachers to the church, but that Christ gave the gift of apostleship, the gift of prophecy, the gift of shepherding, etc. to certain individuals within the church. This argument is strained however not least because in Ephesians 4 Paul uses a number of masculine plural accusative nouns whereas when referring to these roles as gifts (e.g. "apostleship" instead of "apostle") he uses a distinct form (both in 1 Cor. 9:2 and Rom. 1:5) which differs from that used in Ephesians. In short, the grammatical construction in Ephesians 4 refers distinctly to persons- Christ gives to the church persons and those persons are called apostles, prophets, etc. To claim that Ephesians 4 describes Christ giving the gift of apostleship, prophecy, etc. to individuals within the church stretches the grammar beyond its breaking point.

Finally, it is also noteworthy that the New Testament uses "shepherd(ing)" and its various forms seven times, and it never includes a command to "shepherd one another." While a wide variety of commands are encouraged to be done amongst the church generally (love one another, honor one another, encourage one another, counsel one another, admonish one another, stir up one another, submit to one another etc.)

there is no instance of shepherding being an activity engaged in by the church in general. Instead, each of the uses of the term in the NT either refer directly to Jesus as the “chief shepherd” or to elders as shepherds/pastors of the church.

One, Two, or Three Roles?

The Bible uses the terms "elder," "pastor," and "overseer" interchangeably to refer to a single role within the church. The primary function of this one role is to "shepherd the flock of God" (1 Peter 5:2). The following passages reveal that the New Testament does not separate the roles of pastors, elders, and overseers. Each of these passages uses 2 or 3 of the nouns describing the person who shepherds God's church.

Acts 20

“17 Now from Miletus, he sent to Ephesus and summoned the **elders (Greek: presbuteros)** of the church” (Acts 20:17).

“28 Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has appointed you as **overseers (episkopos)**, to **shepherd** (poimaino- the verb form of ‘pastor’. See Ephesians 4:11 as well) the church of God, which he purchased with his own blood” (Acts 20:28).”

Summary: Notice Paul calls the "**elders**" and then describes the same men as "**overseers**" and tells them to "**pastor**" or most literally, "**shepherd**" God's flock. **This passage gives a clear picture that the three words refer to a single group of men within the church referred to by various nouns (pastors, oversees, elders) with a single role- shepherding God's people.**

1 Peter 5:1-4

“1 I exhort the **elders (presbuteros)** among you as a fellow **elder (presbuteros)** and witness to the sufferings of Christ, as well as one who shares in the glory about to be revealed: 2 **Shepherd (poimaino - verb form of the word ‘pastor’)** God's flock among you, not **overseeing (episkopos)** out of compulsion but willingly,

as God would have you; not out of greed for money but eagerly; 3 not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. 4 And when the chief Shepherd (**archipoimen**) appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory” (1 Peter 5:1–4).

Summary: Here Peter tells the "**elders**" (noun) to "**pastor**" (literally, "**shepherd**") and then also tells them to "**oversee**" God's people until the “arch-Pastor” (shepherd) appears. **Again, the words overlap revealing a single role in the church, the pastor/elder/overseer who shepherds under the chief shepherd.**

1 Peter 2:25

"For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the **shepherd (poimen)** and overseer (**episkopos**) of your souls."

Summary: While not talking explicitly about human pastors it reveals that Peter uses shepherd (**poimen**) and overseer (**episkopos**) interchangeably to refer to the same thing/person- (in this verse it is Jesus).

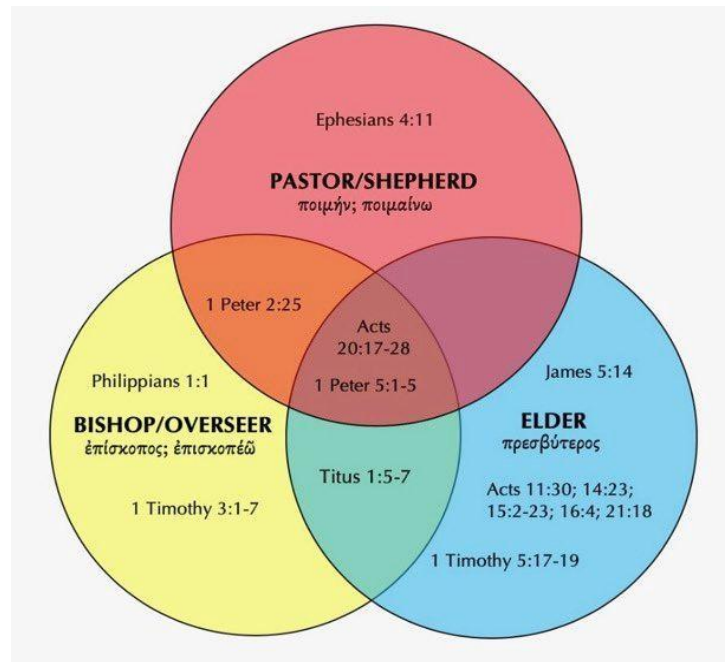
Titus 1:5-7

“... appoint elders (**presbuteros**) in every town as I directed you— 6 if anyone is above reproach, the husband of one wife, and his children are believers and not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination. 7 For an overseer (**episkopos**), as God's steward, must be above reproach.

Summary: Here Paul is referring to the same role using both nouns "elder" and "overseer."

Visualizing the NT Usages

The following chart gives a visual representation of how the NT uses the words "pastor," "overseer," and "elder" revealing that they are used interchangeably to refer to a single role.



Summary: Based on these passages it appears the New Testament acknowledges a single role in local gatherings of Christians filled by a group of men who are described in three primary ways; shepherd/pastor, overseer, and elder. Both apostles refer to these men interchangeably as "elders," "pastors/shepherds," and "overseers." Further, these men are described as those who labor to "present everyone mature in Christ" (Col. 1:28-29) which Paul and Peter describe with the verbs "shepherding/pastoring," and "overseeing." Paul limits this role to men who possess Christ-like maturity and teaching ability in his letters to Titus (Titus 1:6-10) and Timothy (1 Tim. 2:11-15; 3:1-7).

The Bible's Teaching on Gender Roles in the Church

As we describe our convictions and the Scriptures from which we derive those convictions the following list is helpful (We rely significantly on the Danvers Statement <https://cbmw.org/about/the-danvers-statement/>).

We are convinced...

1. Both Adam and Eve were created in God's image, equal before God as persons and distinct in their manhood and womanhood (Gen 1:26-27, 2:18). This distinction in masculine and feminine roles is ordained as very good by God before the entrance of sin in the world (Gen 2:18, 21-24; 1 Cor 11:7-9; 1 Tim 2:12-14).
2. The Old and New Testament affirm the equally high value and importance which God attached to the roles of both men and women (Gen 1:26-27, 2:18; Gal 3:28) and the goodness of male headship in the family and the covenant community (Gen 2:18; Eph 5:21-33; Col 3:18-19; 1 Tim 2:11-15).
3. The redemption secured by Christ aims to undo the distortions sin causes in the exercise of masculine and feminine roles in familial and church relationships without erasing the roles assigned to male and female (Eph 5:21-33; Col 3:18-19; 1 Tim 2:11-15).
4. The role of pastor/elder/overseer, which primarily finds its expression in shepherding God's people through preaching and teaching the Scriptures, is intended by Paul to be filled only by men who lead with humility and love.
5. The primary function of the pastor/elder/overseer is to lead God's people which includes preaching and teaching the Word of God and thus it is not appropriate for women to function in ways that exercise leadership of a local church¹ or to teach in situations over men.

¹ This refers to roles that function to lead the gathered church in worship, prayer, or other aspects of church life which exhibit a strong degree of spiritual authority that we see as most appropriately done by pastors or men exhibiting maturity and potential pastoral qualification.

Aligning Ourselves with the Biblical Model

While it is a challenge for a church to attempt to align itself accurately with every command of Scripture, our desire is to continually conform our practice to God's Word under its authority. In regard to Elder/Pastor/overseer and gender roles, this means that at Grace Church of Orange we understand the Bible to teach that...

1. There is only one shepherding role in God's church and this is described by the terms elder, pastor/shepherd, and overseer.
2. This role of pastor/elder is only to be filled by men as a demonstration of restored Edenic leadership and submission.
3. The primary function of the pastor/elder is to lead via preaching and teaching the Word of God and thus it would be inappropriate for women to exercise these functions in the church.
4. Women and men are equally charged with participating in the mission of the church to make disciples and although the role of pastor/elder is limited to men this does not diminish the unique role of women in participating in the church's commission to make disciples of all nations. The body of Christ has no superfluous members.

As a final note on our practices at Grace Church; there has historically been a trend to separate the roles of pastor and elder in the American evangelical church for at least two reasons. First, the separation occurred because many churches adopted a corporate model. In this model the elders function as the primary decision-makers in the church and are less concerned with issues of shepherding and pastoral ministry. In this model the paid-staff pastors often handle all the ministry and report to the board of elders. A second reason is that by splitting the two roles churches are able to give the title of pastor to younger men who are practically carrying out pastoral ministry in the church but who may not yet meet the requirements for elder outlined in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1.

With regard to our Grace Church of Orange practices, our current language and practice mirrors the common practice of separating the offices of elder and pastor. This has been done for many reasons that were both wise and reasonable in our ministry context. That said, the weight of the biblical evidence suggests that we would be well-served to align our titles and language to reflect the New Testament pattern. Because of the clarity of God's Word on this topic and the Word's authority over God's church the elders of Grace Church are in a process of coming to consensus on the wisest way to handle pastoral titles to both align with the biblical text and communicate clearly to the congregation.

Appendix 1- Usage of Key Terms Relating to Pastors/Elders

Elders (presbuteros)

- Acts 11:30 – Elders (presbuteros) received material gifts from other churches in order to distribute them to the needy among their own congregation.
- Acts 14:23 – Multiple elders (presbuteros) were “appointed” by Paul and Barnabas in “every church” in Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch.
- Acts 15:1-29 – Elders (presbuteros) are listed beside the Apostles as leaders of the church in Jerusalem.
- Acts 16:4 – Elders (presbuteros) are listed beside the Apostles as having made an authoritative decision regarding the clarity and extent of the gospel.
- Acts 20:17-38 – Paul addressed the elders (presbuteros) in Ephesus, calling them to be “overseers” (episkopos) of God’s “church”.
- Acts 21:17-26 – “All the elders” (presbuteros) were gathered in Jerusalem to listen to Paul’s account of God’s work through his ministry, and Paul submitted to their counsel regarding his actions in their Jewish community.
- 1 Timothy 4:14 – A “council of elders” (presbuteros) commissioned Timothy for the task of ministry.
- 1 Timothy 5:17 – Elders (presbuteros) are those who “rule” or “manage” (προεστωτες [literally ‘stand over’]), and some elders make their living by “preaching and teaching”.
- 1 Timothy 5:19 – Christians are to be alert to the possibility of slanderous accusations against an elder (presbuteros).
- Titus 1:5-6 – Elders (presbuteros) were appointed to churches in every town, and such appointments were necessary to put things in their appropriate order. Note in this passage that more than one elder was to be appointed in each singular

town (i.e., church). This – a plurality of elders in each church – is the universal reality in the New Testament.

- James 5:14 – The elders (presbuteros) of the church (ἐκκλησιας) are to pray for ill church members.
- 1 Peter 5:1-3 – The Apostle Peter wrote to the elders (presbuteros) among the dispersed Christians as a “fellow elder”, calling them to “exercise oversight” or “oversee” (episkopos) the affairs of their respective congregations.

Overseer (episkopos)

- Acts 20:17-38 – Paul says that the elders in Ephesus have been made “overseers” (episkopos) in the “church” by God Himself.
- Philippians 1:1 – Paul addressed his letter to the “saints” and the “overseers” (episkopos) and the “deacons” (diakonos) in Philippi.
- 1 Timothy 3:1 – Paul labels the teaching and managing office in the church that of an “overseer” (episkopos).
- 1 Timothy 3:2-7 – Paul describes the qualifications for anyone who aspires to the office of “overseer” (episkopos).
- Titus 1:17 – Paul again describes the teaching and stewarding office in the church as that of an “overseer” (episkopos).

Pastor (poimen)

- Ephesians 4:10-14 – Paul says that “shepherds” (poimen) are gifts from Christ to the local church.
- 1 Peter 5:1-3 – Peter exhorted “elders” (presbuteros) to “shepherd” (poimen) the “flock of God among them.”