

ELDERS AND DEACONS

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The New Testament authorizes two offices, that of the elders and deacons, with each having specific qualifications. The qualifications of elders are found in 1 Timothy chapter three and Titus chapter one. The qualifications of deacons is found in 1 Timothy chapter three. As these two offices are ordained of God as part of the organization of the church which Jesus purchased with his own blood (Acts 20:28), it is of great importance that we all understand the qualifications and the particular jobs that these offices involve.

Terms used in scripture

There are three major New Testament words for the office of elder in God's church.

One is the obvious one, the word "elder." The Greek word is *presbuteros*, and means "older man." The Greek language has masculine, feminine, and neuter gender.

Presbuteros is always masculine in the context of the office of elder, precisely meaning older *man*. The language does not allow for application to women, and the qualifications themselves are also very specific on this point. Thus, one of the first qualifications for being an elder is to be of male gender. The other two words used for elders in God's church are descriptive of their job. One is the Greek word *episkopos*, translated

"bishop," which means *an overseer*. This is *not* a separate office from that of an elder, as Titus 1:5 introduces the context of the office of an elder, and uses the word "elders," and then Titus 1:7 says, "For a *bishop* must be," and then proceeds with more of the qualifications for being an overseer. Similarly, Paul called for the *elders* of the church at Ephesus in Acts 20:17 and then told them that the Holy Spirit had made them *overseers* of the church (Acts 20:28). Thus, the terms elder and bishop (overseer) are used interchangeably for the same office. The New Testament does not authorize the common denominational hierarchical system with multiple layers of different offices.

Also, as we have noted previously, every time the New Testament speaks of elders in the church, a single church or congregation *always* has a plurality of elders (Acts 11:30; 14:23; 15:2,4,6,22-23; 16:4; 20:17; 21:18; Php 1:1; Titus 1:5; Jas 5:14; 1 Pet 5:1). Never in God's word do we read about one individual ruling over a congregation. Thus, the popular denominational system of having one man to rule over and guide the church is not unauthorized in God's word and is therefore wrong. The final term used in the New Testament for the office of elder is the word "pastor," the Greek word *poimen*, meaning

"shepherd." It is used interchangeably with "bishop" in reference to Christ's work with our souls in 1 Peter 2:25. The sole occasion in which it is used for elders in the church is in Ephesians 4:11. We also know this is in reference to the office of elders, as the *elders* (Acts 20:17) are instructed to take heed to themselves and "to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood" (Acts 20:28). The same instructions are repeated in 1 Peter 5:1-3: "The *elders* which are among you I exhort, who am also an elder, and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that shall be revealed: feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind; neither as being lords over God's heritage, but being examples to the flock." It is interesting to see both Acts 20 and 1 Peter 5 using the words for elder and overseer together, with the description of the work of elders taking care of God's flock, which is what shepherds do. Once again, this cannot apply to a single individual ruling over the church as pastor. An eldership must contain a plurality of qualified men. Finally, for the office of deacon, there is but one word used, the Greek word *diakonos*, from which the English word "deacon" is

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(continued)

transliterated, the word itself literally meaning “an attendant” or servant. This word well describes the function of the deacons in the church.

Distinct roles of elders and deacons

We read about elders and deacons together in 1 Timothy 3:1-13 and Philippians 1:1. At first glance, it may be tempting to conclude that God’s will is for elders *and* deacons to be the authority in the church. However, that is not the case. In actuality, only elders have authority in the church. The deacons are servants of the church under the authority of the elders. What kind of authority do elders in the church possess? It is not merely as examples to the church. Elders have the “rule” over the congregation (1 Tim 3:4-5; 5:17; Heb 13:17,24). This is real authority and they must be obeyed (Heb 13:17) and submitted to (1 Pet 5:5). Elders are not to exercise this authority as lord’s over God’s heritage (1 Pet 5:3), but are to be examples to the flock (1 Pet 5:3). But the fact that they are to be examples and should not act harshly does not in any way diminish the fact that they have full authority over the church. But neither elders in God’s church nor any other man (or angel, according to Galatians 1:6-9) has authority to change anything that God has established or taught in His word. Only God has the right to tell mankind what is right or wrong in His sight. Jeremiah 10:23 says, “O Lord, I know that the way of man is not in himself: it is not in man that walketh to direct his steps.” Jesus Christ taught in Matthew 4:4 that “man shall not live by bread alone, but *by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God.*” And the words that have proceeded out of God’s mouth, by which we live, will *never pass away*. “For all flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of grass. The grass withereth, and the flower thereof falleth away: *but the word of the Lord endureth for ever.* And this is the word which by the gospel is preached unto you” (1 Pet 1:24-25). The Lord warns of the dire consequences that will befall any soul who tries to alter what he has said (Prov 30:5-6; Gal 1:6-9; Rev 22:18-19). Therefore, elders do not have authority in matters of right and wrong. It is true that the elders must watch over the souls (Heb 13:17), and are responsible for directing them to follow God’s commandments (Acts 20:28-31; 1 Tim 5:17). But the matters in which elders have authority are matters of judgment. The elders decide who is to preach and teach in the church (Acts 15; 21:18-26; 1 Tim 4:14), who is to carry out other duties, where the church meets, at what times (as long as it includes Sunday), how the contribution is spent (Acts 11:29-30), etc. The overall job of the elders is to shepherd and edify the congregation until all the members have the perfect love, like Christ (Eph 4:11-16). To accomplish this, they must feed the flock with the word of God (Acts 20:28; 1 Tim 5:17; 1 Pet 5:2; Jer 3:15). This spiritual food is what will cause the members to grow to be like Christ (Acts 28:32; Heb 5:12-6:1; 1 Pet 2:1-2; 1 Jn 2:5). Along with giving the proper food, the elders must protect the sheep from the wolves who would devour them and keep them from reaching the goal (Acts 20:29-31; Heb 13:17). The job of the deacons is “the office of a servant” (1 Tim 3:10,13). They are to serve in whatever capacity the elders assign them. The elders are the authority and the deacons are men to carry out various duties given them by the elders. Deacons have no authority or decision-making abilities. Yes, the office of elder and that of deacon are distinct, with different functions and responsibilities and also different qualifications. Both of these God-ordained offices are important for the proper functioning of the Lord’s body.