

# Biblical Eldership - Lesson 3

by John Piper

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*John Piper discusses the essential principles of biblical eldership and local church governance, emphasizing the importance of spiritual qualifications in leadership roles.*

**Duration:** 1:14:43

**Scripture:** Matthew 6:33, 1 Timothy 3:1, 1 Timothy 5:17, James 1:1, James 5:14

**Topics:** "Church Leadership", "Spiritual Maturity"

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## Description

In this sermon, the speaker discusses the importance of assessing individuals who want to be involved in church planting or leadership roles. He shares the example of a missionary in Uzbekistan who faced criticism for focusing too much on financial and business matters rather than spiritual aspects. The speaker emphasizes the need for a group of spiritually mature individuals to assess candidates, asking tough questions and delving into their personal lives. The process involves volunteers who know the candidate well, meeting with them to determine their readiness for leadership.

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## Transcript

The following message is by Pastor John Piper. More information from *Desiring God* is available at [www.DesiringGod.org](http://www.DesiringGod.org) Okay, we're back now with our third hour of five. We have almost finished point number three on the outline called *Biblical Principles of Local Church Governance*.

This is, for any of you who are new this morning, this is a Bethlehem Institute seminar entitled *Biblical Eldership*, part of a larger class called *Issues in Spiritual Leadership*, and different ones of the seminars are given throughout the year, some on Wednesday night, some on weekends, some on Sunday morning, and you're sure welcome at any of those, though we certainly would not want to pull you away from your ministry or your involvement at your local church, but rather strengthen you for it. So those right there on the overhead now are the last three of the eleven principles of local church governance. Keep in mind that these were all articulated back in the mid to late 80s as guidelines for how Bethlehem would rethink our governance structure to move us little by little towards a more flexible, lean, ministry-oriented, biblical governance structure.

These were not the result of that, but the guidelines for it. So let's take these last three and then we'll move on to another point. Feel free along the way, like you did last night, to get my attention and ask your questions.

If I feel like we're slowing down too much, I'll say so, but otherwise I don't want you to misunderstand or I don't want to make a mistake that should be corrected. Number nine, spiritual qualifications should never be sacrificed to technical expertise. For example, deacons or trustees or what we call now, and I added this yesterday, financial and property administrators should be men or women, and I do say that carefully because while we don't install women as elders at Bethlehem, we will and do believe it would be biblical to have deacons or trustees or financial and property administrators who include women, should be women or men with hearts for God, even more importantly than they have heads for finance, and best of all, both.

But I stress this because as I contemplated our change in government, I saw at Bethlehem in those early days something that I hadn't seen in many churches, namely that both our trustees and our deacons in those days who were governing the church, as remarkably godly spiritual people who put a premium on Christ-likeness, being biblical people in the way they think, and saturating their meetings with prayer, and walking in the power of the Holy Spirit, not in human wisdom, and I wanted to preserve that so bad, and so this principle made its way in, whereas in many churches, I've even heard the phrase used that the elders or the deacons do the spiritual work, spiritual work, and then you have to have businessmen know how to do budgets and finance and others. That's a horrible bifurcation, isn't it? As though how you handle your money, give me an illustration here. We have a missionary in Uzbekistan, Oscar Huerta, and I've been on the inside of some of his emails back and forth with his supervisor in London in the last few days.

I'll be careful here now that I don't say too much, but suffice it to say this. He's being called to give an account with the energy he devotes to thinking through, talking about, and organizing how money is handled and how business things are handled when the supervisor wanted to see a little more energy, effort put into the more spiritual or church planting things. I sense the need to be careful here.

To send out tent makers who spend all their time on tents and never get around to planting the church is not a good investment of human resources, probably. But Oscar's answer, and I know Oscar well, I've known him for 12 years, and Oscar wrote back an impassioned answer to the effect that money is probably where most people are destroyed spiritually. Jesus talked more about money than about the second coming and about marriage.

Jesus was unbelievably concerned with how we handle our possessions because they kill. They really kill. It is hard for a rich man to get into the kingdom of heaven.

So, to put money into the hands of your least spiritual people is deadly in a local church. So, however you lead in this matter, your standards of spiritual depth and biblical awareness and passionate commitment to radical Jesus-like living should be the kind of people who are handling your business affairs. That's principle number nine.

Don't sacrifice spiritual qualifications for business expertise. Better to have bumbler, spiritual bumbler, than carnal experts. I don't know if you agree with that.

I agree with that. I just said it. Obviously, I agree with it.

But you don't have to. I think God covers for much bumbling for people who love Him with all their heart and many experts who are not spiritual can get us into big trouble. Number ten.

The selection process should provide for the necessary assessment of possible leaders by a group able to discern the qualifications mentioned in number eight and that the process provide for the final approval of

the congregation of all the officers. Now, we have that in place now. We didn't have it then and we didn't know quite what it would look like and I just wanted to make sure that we avoided what was happening in those early days at Bethlehem even though God was blessing while I was watching and happened to keep us from going off the deep end and the problem was if you have a nominating committee and the nominating committee is elected by the congregation little interviewing for the nominating committee is going on and so a nominating committee who are usually chosen mainly because you ask who knows the people.

That's what you ask. Who knows the people? You got 300 people, 200 people, 100 people, 1,000 people. Who knows the people? And you put those people on the nominating committee and those nominating committee may not have studied for years the list of qualifications in 1 Timothy 3. They may not understand any of them.

They may not know what the Greek word *sophroneo* means. Sober. Translated sometimes dignified.

They might read dignified in a version and say we'll have a man who wears a three-piece suit be on the committee or something like that. You can't just have popular people serving on a... or people who know people. You have to have a group who is spiritual, who knows the Bible, who can take the time, give the effort to interview candidates, get to the root, who are gutsy, who are gutsy, who will say, Now, don't take offense at this, but tell me about your little 9-year-old.

He seems to be acting out in some school in a way that seems really troublesome and we just need to try to get inside what's going on here. Is there something wrong there? And that may not keep a man from serving as an elder because there may be things going on there that are physiological or whatever. But very few people have the guts to ask questions in the interview process.

So now our elders do this and I'm hoping and trusting that they do it carefully when they interview candidates. So we have, some of you asked last night what our actual process is and do we have documents that guide them and the answer to those is yes, we do have lists of questions and we have lists of the qualifications and how to get at those. Here's the process we follow.

We're in it right now so I'll just tell you what's happening. Somebody, anybody in the congregation or on the council can give us names. So we assemble names.

Possible elders. And we have a long list right now. As a council, we pray over those names.

We look at those names and we study those names and then in conversation, we just say okay, who seems to be rising to the surface here as somebody we should pursue and we start sharing names. At that moment, anybody around the council can say but did you know this or are you concerned about this or what about this and that if others share it might be enough to put that on hold while somebody deals with that or if you don't get that then you move ahead. Once you've got a smaller list then we either go in person or we send a letter saying would you be open to a conversation about this? Would you be willing to talk about this or come to a seminar like this? And if so, then we send two elders go and meet with this person if they're willing to go to that next step and that is I think the key moment in assessment.

And we get volunteers for that. We just say who knows this person best? Anybody know this person well? And somebody says I know them well. And then one other person to go with them and so they'll meet for however long it takes over lunch or before or after service or somewhere and try to get into their lives and

see if they are ready to move ahead.

Then the next stage, if it's thumbs up, they bring a report back. They share their thoughts. We could stop it right there.

We have or we could go to the next step which would be invite the person in. Jeff Jacoby is there. He's at that step now.

Jeff came in and we grilled Jeff as a whole council. You got about 15 guys there and Jeff is answering questions about that. When that's done, then the council comes to a mind and we really try to come to a mind.

I resist running. I don't run it, but I resist. I try to say, I'd rather not have quick, call for the question type meetings, but rather let's talk about this.

David, you haven't said anything. What do you say? Dan, you haven't said anything. What do you think? Let's get everybody not under the table.

We want to hear what these men say and we've been able to remarkably come to pretty large consensuses over big things. Though we don't have to. We don't have any rule that says you have to have a consensus.

Some elderships do. We said thumbs up to Jeff Jacoby and now Jeff will be put before the people if he's willing. If he's willing to go to that next step, then when the congregational meeting rolls around, he will be affirmed.

Oh, here's another piece. We put a little biography of Jeff and whoever the candidates are in our church mailing list and say, this person is about to come. If you know anything that would make this person unfit, please get to the elders.

So that's sort of the process. Any questions about that in particular? The question for the tape is if you're sitting on such a committee where a person is being assessed and somebody says, I know something about this person that unfits them for this work but I don't think I should share the details, should they share the details? I don't know. Probably there are situations in which you shouldn't.

If there's a legal issue involved maybe or a pledge or a promise that you would break at that moment and then yes, yes, we would have to trust. At least I would with great hesitation. On the other hand, I would press the person and I would say, no, why? Why are you holding back on this? Is there a promise, a vow you'd be breaking or is there a legal thing that you'd get the church into trouble with? And if they just said, that's just too hard to talk about, I think what I'd probably suggest is why don't we appoint a little subcommittee here since we don't want the dirty laundry maybe hung out wider than it should be.

There's no point in doing that. Just would you share this with two or three others if you can do that and let them say, thumbs up, yes, this should not be shared. That would be one possible compromise.

Yeah, go ahead. We've never had a case like that. The question was, is there a case where the council has recommended a person and the church has said no? You know, Leith Anderson over at Wooddale takes this principle not just on nominations but on virtually every church action.

Leith says, if you ever get a no vote from the church, the leaders haven't done their job. Meaning, you do so much careful work in teaching and educating at the Sunday school level, the house group level, the congregational meeting level, you're getting feedback, you're discussing, you get all the negative before the vote and then you adjust and tailor. You don't put half-baked motions on the floor and you don't put people who are unprepared for a leader on the floor, but you don't put the leader on the floor.

Now, whether that's a principle that can be carried through consistently, I see the wisdom in it. Just do a lot of careful homework. Do your homework so that your people have this sense of trust.

These men really work hard and they bring to us such good people or such good motions or such good plans. It's a thrill to say amen to this leadership. You know, I didn't say this last night but I thought about it as I was going to sleep.

I know that if people don't like the elders or don't like me, say, as the preaching elder, they will call that rubber stamp. You can find negative terminology to describe positive things. Like in this church, the congregation just rubber stamps the elders.

Well, that's a negative way of describing what might be a very positive thing. There probably is such a thing as a rubber stamp, meaning a mindless, thoughtless concession to people who say good things and bad things, and it doesn't matter whether they're good or bad. They're our leaders and that would be rubber stamp.

But to so trust your leaders and to have such competent, rigorous, spiritual, careful leaders that it's a joy to affirm what they do, that's not rubber stamp. And there are other ways too. Just briefly, the question is, if we have women deacons, how do we distinguish in the list of qualifications where it says the elder shall be the husband of one wife and the deacon shall be the husband of one wife, and clearly a woman can't be the husband of one wife.

I don't want to go into detail here because I'm teaching on this on Wednesday nights. I know you probably can't be here and most of you can't, but I separated out these issues. Manhood and womanhood issues on Wednesday nights, I've got five whole weeks devoted to that question and ones like it.

This, I'm kind of assuming Wednesday nights here, but I'll try to give you a brief, routine answer and it may not be satisfactory and we can talk afterwards. I think there's a section where it says, and the women, and it can be translated either wives or women, let them be, and it gives some qualifications there under the deacons. What? Yeah, verse 11.

That is missing under the list for elders? Now, if it's wives, why isn't it there for the elders' wives, I ask. If you're going to list some qualifications for the females and they're the wives of the deacons in verse 11, aren't the wives of the elders even more significant to have spiritually fit than the wives of the deacons? So, if you're going to list qualifications for the, and the word in Greek is just women. It can mean wives or women.

So, I conclude, and here I don't have, I can't prove this, I just say it looks to me like we're talking women deacons here. So, he adds it precisely to answer your question. I've just said there to be the husband of one wife.

I don't mean that only men, I mean the men who are chosen should be the husband of one wife. Husband of one wife, not husbands. The accent falls on one wife, not they have to be husbands and therefore

women can't be that.

But rather women, if they're going to be deacons, should have these qualifications and then they're listed. But here's my, that's an exegetical answer, contextual answer. My principal answer is the thing that distinguishes an elder from a deacon in the list of qualifications and in the duties are elders are to be apt to teach, verse 2, and elders govern, chapter 5, verse 17.

Deacons do not have to be apt to teach, they're not oriented mainly around the gift and authority of teaching, but rather serving in other ways, and deacons are not seen as governors, general overseers of the congregation. Which is why, I think, in 1 Timothy 2.12, when Paul says to women, or to the church, I do not allow a woman to teach or have authority over men. Those two things, teach and have authority over men, are the very two things that distinguish an elder from a deacon.

Which means that in principle then, a deacon who doesn't function as a teacher and doesn't function as an authority figure could be a woman. That's my brief answer. Now when I say that, I want to be careful here, because I know there are women in the room who are probably very gifted in teaching.

I don't think 1 Timothy 2.12 means women can't teach at all. And the brother back here pointed out last night that you've got the text about the older women teach the younger women, for example. I think the teaching of children, the teaching of youth, the teaching of women is a wide open field for women, and they should therefore then be qualified spiritually to do that.

I wouldn't say they're deacons because of that. That's just part of the giftedness. I don't have any problem with the gifts being given to men and women as long as they exercise them within the biblical parameters.

Okay. One more, and then I'm going to move on. Let me just say a word about it.

What about singles and elders? There again, it would come down where it says, one woman man. Literal translation. The elder must be a one woman man with the accent on one.

Not, you've got to have one. But if you've got one, it better be one. Now that's my interpretation.

The accent is falling on be a one woman man, not be sure you have one. Therefore, I would have a hard time saying Paul could not be the elder in a local church. Jesus could not be the elder in a local church.

And John Stock could not be the elder in a local church. Number 11. Terms of active service should not be dictated by the desire to include as many different people as possible in leadership.

See number three above. But by the careful balance between the need, on the one hand, to have the most qualified leaders, and, on the other hand, to guard against burnout and stagnation. The tension there that I'm pointing out is, the balance is, the most qualified leaders might need to keep serving.

Because there might not be as many as you would like to have in a smaller church especially. And yet you have to guard against burnout and overwork. And so you need to constantly be cultivating from the wider group of available candidates depth and giftedness by prayer and study and discipleship.

So those are my 11 principles of local church government. Let's go now to... I don't want to spend a lot of time on this illustration from Baptist Confessions. I think that's what's next.

Baptist church government. Let's just take a survey and I'll judge by what we've got here. How many are related to a Baptist church? Raise your hand.

Okay. How many of those in those Baptist churches are part of churches where you do not have a group of people called elders? Called elders. Okay.

Just briefly then, I want to show you what's available. I mean, what you could do. There's a little green book called Baptist Confessions.

I forget the name of the... Do I remember who edited that? I don't remember either. It may not even be in print anymore. But I just got these out of there to show that from the earliest days, these are the early days of Baptist history, 1609, there have been two offices in the church, elder and deacon.

And when you follow these confessions of faith through, that begins to drop out in the early 1900's. It's very interesting. And Ian Murray, in his biography of Jonathan Edwards, has some interesting explanations for why that is, which I'm not going to go into, but if you're interested in tracking that down, pages 344-46 in the new biography of Edwards by Murray.

Let's just look at two or three of these. A short confession of faith in the 20 Articles by John Smith, 1609. Article 16, the ministers of the church are not only bishops, episkopos, this word bishop here is the New Testament translation of this episkopos, overseer, so bishop is just a fancy word in English for overseer, to whom the power is given of dispensing both the word and the sacraments, but also deacons, not only bishops, but also deacons, men and widows.

So the earliest Baptist confession I know about talks in terms of bishops are overseers and deacons as the two offices. 1611, a declaration of faith of English people remaining in Amsterdam. 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, or deacons, men and women, isn't that interesting? I didn't add that.

That's there in 1611. Men and women who by their office relieve the necessities of the poor and impotent brethren concerning their bodies. In fact, in Germany, I studied in Germany for three years and I remember the Lutheran church, you've got two big churches in Germany, Lutheran and Catholic, and both of them have huge ministries, all involved with the government because it's the state churches, called the deaconal ministries.

Parts of the government are the deaconal ministries. And these are men and women who run hospitals and do social things and so on. So those are the two offices.

Again, they're in 1620. Here's 1612-1614, Propositions and Conclusions Concerning the True Christian Religion, Proposition 76. That Christ hath set in His outward church two sorts of ministers, namely, some who are called pastors, teachers, or elders, treating those three as the same, 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.

The London Confession, 1644. It's a little bit difficult to read here. Article 36.

That being thus joined, every church has power given them from Christ for their better well-being to choose to themselves meet persons into the office of pastors, teachers, elders, deacons. I put these little asterisks here because pastors and teachers are omitted in later editions here because I believe to clarify

that these three, pastors, teachers, elders, were considered the same person. Deacons being qualified according to the word as those which Christ has appointed, etc.

Second London Confession, 1688. Article 26, paragraph 8. A particular church, gathered and completely organized according to the mind of Christ, consists of officers and members. And 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.

Those two offices. That's probably enough. Here we're into 1923.

We believe, Articles of the Baptist Bible Union of America, 1923. Article 13. We believe that a church of Christ is a congregation of baptized believers, that its officers of ordination are pastors, elders, and deacons.

Now there it's not clear that these are the same. Pastors, elders, and deacons. And now, 1963, Statement of the Faith, the Southern Baptist Convention, 1925 and 1963.

The church is an autonomous body operating through democratic processes under the lordship of Jesus Christ. In such a congregation, members are equally responsible if scriptural officers are pastors and deacons. the church is an autonomous body under the lordship of Jesus Christ.

Which is what, then, most of us inherit when we go to a Baptist church. Like I did. You bring up elder, and they say, that's not Baptist.

That's not Baptist. 1925, it's gone. The word is gone.

And so, not easy to accuse. I mean, it's easy to understand that the body of believers who grow up in a church, you have deacons, and you have a pastor, or maybe a multiple staff, but you don't have this animal called elder. And so, you hear that across the town, all the PCA churches, and the PCUSA churches, and the reformed churches, they have elders.

And so, this is not Baptist. And that's just historically naive, as I hope you now see. And I have come in on tradition just to say, that doesn't prove anything.

I mean, confessions of faith do not prove that it's biblical. I just want you to know that wise and godly leaders have concluded, in Baptist traditions, that the two offices of the church are elder and deacon. Questions about Baptist history, or anything like that? I don't want to spend too much more time on that.

Let's get back to the Bible here. Yeah, go ahead. Okay.

A vocational elder. You mean an ordained person. He shouldn't be a pastor.

Now, but let me clarify. Because I think when most people here are apt to teach, or able to teach, they think of what I do on Sunday morning, or what a very popular Sunday school class teacher does who attracts a lot of people, and say, well, if only those people can be elders, they're few and far between. Kind of charismatic types who make a lot of noise and use their outside voice.

Here's the way we understand apt to teach. We bring in alongside that text in 1 Timothy 3.2, Titus 1.9. It goes like this. He must hold firm to the sure word as taught so that he may be able to give instruction in

sound doctrine and also to confute those who contradict it.

Elders have to be able to do that. But I don't think they have to be able to do it in public. In other words, to be a charismatic up-front figure who is a dynamic leader and a winsome communicator, that's not necessarily what the apostles are looking for.

What they're looking for are people who can recognize the sure word as taught. That is, as the apostles have taught it. They can get in the apostolic mind.

They read their Bible carefully. They understand what it means. They can articulate it plainly, maybe in a one-on-one setting, counseling setting, crisis setting.

They can sniff out false teaching and spot it, and they can go to the Bible and find answers for the false teaching and present their answers. So there's a difference between, I think, apt to teach, meaning competent in the Word, able to correct false doctrine at different levels. But every elder should have that gift.

Otherwise, he's not going to be a contributing member to this council with the kind of biblical insight that he should. So there probably are pastors who don't have that gift who shouldn't be pastors. But don't judge them on some kind of style issue or upfront kind of charismatic gifted issue.

Let's go to our next unit, which is other names. We're on number five now. Other names for elders in the New Testament.

My aim here is to argue that four terms in the New Testament, bishop, overseer, elder, and pastor are the same person. Not that the words are identical in meaning, but that they refer to the same person or office from different angles. So, let's start with number one.

Bishop slash overseer. There are not two Greek words in the New Testament, one for bishop and one for overseer. Episkopos is the word behind both of those translations.

The English term bishop means overseer and is sometimes used to translate the Greek word episkopos, which means one who over, epi, sees. Skapos. There are at least four reasons to consider this term bishop or overseer.

As equivalent to elder in the New Testament. Reason number one. A comparison between Titus 1.5 and Titus 1.7. Here's Titus 5-7.

I'll read it. For this reason I left you in Crete, Titus, that you would set in order what remains and appoint elders in every city as I directed you. Namely, if any man is above reproach, the husband of one wife, having children who believe, not accused of dissipation or rebellion, for the overseer must be above reproach as God's steward, not self-willed, not quick-tempered, etc.

Now, my understanding of that is that that switch is not a switch in meaning. Just a switch in the way you look at the same person. Because there's no indication here that I can see that a new group is being addressed here.

But rather, here the group is called elders and here the group is called the overseer. And this gets at his task and this gets at his maturity. So that's argument number one.

Anybody think I'm missing something here? That looked like the same person to you? Presbyteron. The Greek word for elder is presbyteron from which we get Presbyterian. Presbyteros.

Presbyter. Reason number two. Comparing Acts 20.17 and 20.28. Here's the point.

Acts 20.17 From Miletus Paul sent to Ephesus and called to him the elders of the church. And then he gives this long message to them. And in verse 28 he says now to these elders, be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers.

You elders. Overseers. He's made you overseers.

To shepherd. That's going to be one of my arguments for seeking pastor to mean the same thing. To shepherd.

So here you've got all three. You've got their maturity, their overseeing, and their shepherding. Pastoring.

The church of God which he purchased with his own blood. So that's argument number two. Why bishops or overseers and elders are the same persons.

Argument number three. 1 Timothy 3.1 compared to 1 Timothy 5.17 In 1 Timothy 3.1 If anyone aspires to the office of bishop or overseer, episkopos, he desires a noble task. And then he describes the leadership qualifications for those.

When he gets to chapter 5, verse 17, he says the elders who rule well are to be considered worthy of double honor especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching. And my observation is this. In 1 Timothy 3.1 Paul says if anyone aspires, etc., then he gives the qualifications for the overseer bishop.

Unlike the deacons, the overseer must be able to teach. And in verse 5, he is said to be one whose management of his own household fits him to care for God's church. These two functions are ascribed to elders in the fifth chapter of this book.

1 Timothy 5.17 Teaching and governing. Those who rule well, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching. So, it is very likely that in Paul's mind, the bishops and overseers of 1 Timothy 3.1-7 are the same as the elders in 5.17. That's reason number three.

Reason number four is that in Philippians 1.1 compared to 1 Timothy 3.1 and Acts 14.23 you have, well let's look at it. First, in Philippians 1.1 Paul writes, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi with the bishops and deacons. So, he says, I'm writing to you and there are two offices among you.

Episcopoi and Diakonoï. There are overseers and there are deacons. I'm writing to the church and I mean to get the special attention of these two groups.

Which is a remarkable confirmation that the two lists in 1 Timothy 3 here of elders and deacons are, I think, paralleling these two. These then seem to be the two offices of the church just as in 1 Timothy 3.1-13 the qualifications only for these two are given. But Paul appointed elders in all the churches.

And so it is very likely that the elders of the church at Philippi were the bishops and overseers referred to in Philippians 1. In Acts 14.23 it says Paul appointed elders in all the churches. Then when he writes to the church in Philippi he writes to the bishops and deacons. In 1 Timothy 3.1-13 those two groups are called or treated as elders as well as bishops and deacons.

Those are my arguments for why I would take the term bishop slash overseer as the same person as elder speaking of the office from two different angles. One, the functional angle of overseeing and the other, the maturity angle of elder. Question about that? The next term to be concerned with is the term pastor then.

The term pastor as a noun occurs in the New Testament only once in reference to persons. The term shepherd occurs more than once. You've got shepherd referring to shepherds in other places like John's Gospel.

But in reference to an office in the church the term poimen or a person in the church poimen, noun, pastor it occurs only here. Ephesians 4.11 He gave some as pastors and teachers. But there is a verb that corresponds to poimen shepherd, namely poimēnen to shepherd or to feed which is closely related to the noun pastor which helps us to discover how the role of pastor was related to the role of elder and bishop.

So here are my observations on this. And the reason here I'm talking about reason number one is the reason that pastor and elder should be considered the same person. Ephesians 4.11 treats pastors and teachers as one group and thus suggests that the chief role of the pastor is feeding the flock through teaching a role clearly assigned to bishops and overseers.

In 1 Timothy 3.2 an elder must be apt to teach. And to elders in Titus 1.9 he will be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to confute those who contradict. This suggests that the pastor is another name for elder and overseer.

That's argument number one. Number two. In Acts 20.28 we've seen this already now the elders of Ephesus are encouraged in their pastoral their shepherding thus showing that Paul saw the elders as the shepherds or pastors.

Here's the verse. Acts 20.28. Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers to shepherd. He could have switched those around and said made you shepherds to oversee.

But he said made you overseers to shepherd the church of God which He purchased. So clearly elders, overseers, bishops are to shepherd, that is be pastors. The English word pastor means shepherd and it comes from this Greek word poimen.

And then my last reason. Reason number three. In 1 Peter 5.1-2 the elders are told to tend the flock of God that is in their charge.

In other words, Peter saw the elders essentially as pastors or shepherds. I exhort here's the actual text. 1 Peter 5.1-2 I exhort the elders among you as your fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ so he considered himself an elder and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed shepherd the flock of God among you.

So elders shepherd. Elders shepherd. That is pastor.

Separate functions between shepherd and pastor. Pastor means shepherd. Here's my conclusion.

The New Testament only refers to the office of pastor one time. It is a functional description of the role of elder stressing the care and feeding of the church as God's flock just as overseer, bishop is a functional description of the role of elder stressing the governing or oversight of the church. We may conclude

therefore that pastor and elder and bishop overseer refer in the New Testament to the same office or person.

This office stands alongside deacon in Philippians 1.1 and 1 Timothy 3.1-13 in such a way as to show that the two abiding officers instituted by the New Testament are elder and deacon. We will treat the function of these two offices in turn. That's not true.

That was part of a document. Questions about this terminology. This is major.

The implications of this in my mind are very significant. Here are a couple of them at Bethlehem and then I'll take your question. This means that John Piper for example is an elder and a part of a council or college or camaraderie of elders and that the pastor which is still in the vocabulary of many of our people Yeah, but who's the pastor? Well, you don't get it.

You don't get it yet. We're all pastors and we're all elders and we're all overseers on this council. John has an assignment from this church to do certain things as an elder.

He's not the pastor which is probably why my title senior pastor is a little bit, the word senior what does that mean? I think I am in fact after Irv the oldest elder. Irv is our oldest elder. I'm next.

So you're the senior pastor. That's cool. I never thought of that.

That's one implication. I'm one and I have one vote on this council. That's another implication.

I don't legally or officially make choices that these other men have to follow. We make choices. This group governs the church.

Okay, back to the question back there. That's right. I know though what this is communicating to the average church.

I better repeat the question. The question is does my disaffection with that 1925-1963 Southern Baptist article on offices that says there are two offices, namely pastor and deacon and really I don't have a problem with that if I fill up the word pastor there with all this teaching I just gave you in the last ten minutes. That's true.

However the average person doesn't fill it up with that teaching and when they think pastor they think preacher on Sunday morning and then there's a board and they are deacons and they run the church by and large in the average Baptist church. They are the governing board. They don't think of the in fact in some of them the pastor isn't a part of that board.

He may sit ex officio on all boards which may or may not mean he votes. I mean there's all kinds of different variations of it. I could tell you some stories here but I think I'll get too far afield.

So you're right. Literally you're right. I shouldn't fault the terminology there.

I should simply try to fill it up with a New Testament meaning that when it says there are two offices pastor and deacon what it means is there are pastors, elders, overseers they are always a plurality in the New Testament and they are together not one of them is the overseer, governor, guide of this church and then there are these helpers and assistants who carry out the nitty gritty financial and practical things called deacons. Other question or comment? Mike. That's a good question.

There were teachers and prophets and what are the three things? Prophets and teachers gathered fasting and worshipping there. Huh. I hadn't thought about that.

Probably. The question is does the noun teacher in a text like Acts 13.1 mean that's just another synonym of the same office. Probably in view of Ephesians 4.11 he appointed some pastors and teachers.

Pastors slash teachers. Good question. What's the Biblical support or warrant for saying that there should be such a thing as vocational pastors or elders if they all have the same task.

Here's Ross Anderson who's a medical doctor and here's Irv who's a retired teacher and here's Dan Elder who is a flight attendant for Northwest and I could just go right around here and say why do you hire somebody like me and pay me full time when we're all really to be doing the same thing. And the easiest Biblical answer to that is 1st Timothy 5.17 where it says the elder is worthy of double honor who rules well especially those who labor in Logokai Didaskalia. That's the especially.

Some among the elders rise to the surface of being called by God and affirmed by the church as devoting their whole life to this whereas others are tent maker type elders you might say. At least that's my understanding of why some come to do it full time because it becomes a more full time job the larger the church gets and I'll tell you how I think I think that at any time any one of these lay elders as we call them could stop working and become full time here if the church called them to do that. They wouldn't have to go back to seminary either.

They would just prove over the years that there's a competency there's a gift, there's a special thing that they're good at and maybe, I mean Irv already kind of does that full time because he's retired now at least a lot of time and some put in more and more and God can do that. And I think we probably should structure the elders so that elders do grow up into that. That's one of the reasons we have a TBI, the Bethlehem Institute.

We just want to teach and disciple and lead in such a way that at Bethlehem and then for anybody who wants to come besides, there's this constant rising of the general tide of biblical understanding so that God can just touch different ones around the church and bring them up into effective ministry in different ways and who knows when that may become full time. At any given time, God just may burn into a man's heart. I'm tired of punching computers.

I just burn to do evangelism full time or burn to do counseling or to do visitation or something and I just can't stand spending my time at work anymore. That's a good sign of a call. Another question before we move on? Question is, if a person is a teacher, does it mean he's an overseer or an elder? The answer is no.

We must distinguish here between office and gift. There are a lot of gifted Sunday school teachers for example, guys who teach little kids and youth and adults and there are women who are gifted teachers who teach women and children and others. They fulfill that function does not automatically make them an elder because there are a lot of other things that have to be in place as well.

Question, when we hire staff vocational staff, are we intentional about bringing them on as elders? The answer is sometimes and not other times. Here's the example. We automatically treat ordained pastors as elders because I think you'd have a built in contradiction because that's what it means to be ordained.

It means to be a pastor slash elder slash overseer and if you hire somebody then say, and you can't serve on our council you say, well you're breaking your own terminology here and we do. So that's a given. However we hired Sally Michael along with her husband to be a minister for parenting and children's discipleship.

Very consciously thinking through the terminology here. Minister, not pastor, not elder, not overseer because she's a woman. She's excited about this and so she has this incredibly important job of nurturing, guiding helping our children.

She has a gift to teach big time and that doesn't make her an elder automatically so we don't call her with a view to the eldership. Chuck Stedham, our associate for worship and music is not ordained. May move towards ordination and move towards the council.

He may or may not serve on the council. He would be like anybody else in the church then who they would call on to the council or not. So sometimes yes and sometimes no.

That's right. Yes. The question is do we assume the ordination process has evaluated people adequately? Yes and no.

We're more rigorous in calling staff than anybody. I mean they get grilled more and longer than even our own elders because we've known them a while whereas a marriage after a few weekends is a dangerous thing. Next unit.

All the New Testament churches had elders. Let's verify this as much as we can with some texts. There were elders in the church at Jerusalem.

Acts 15 2. When Paul and Barnabas had great dissension and debate with them, the brethren determined that Paul and Barnabas and some others of them should go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders concerning this issue. So already the apostles had seen to it that not only according to Acts 6 had deacons been appointed by the congregation but somehow or other elders had come into existence. Didn't tell us how.

Just said they did. So you've got elders, you've got some people functioning like deacons at least even if they weren't called deacons who managed this feeding of the widows and you've got elders who are going to help solve this theological dispute. So the church in Jerusalem has elders.

Secondly, there were elders in all the churches that Paul founded. Acts 14 23. When they had appointed elders for them in every church having prayed with fasting they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.

So Paul on his return from the first missionary journey, I believe that's when this is happening, appointed elders in all the churches. That's what we hit on last night in the missionary situation. How in the world when you're planting a church among a tribe who is totally pagan, never had any Christian background whatsoever and you go in there, you preach the gospel, learn the language some years and begin to announce the gospel.

God moves and ten people profess faith. They begin to gather for study. The missionary kind of de facto functions for a little while as the teaching elder.

Then what? Well, something has to happen to bring them about at the beginning and then those processes we talked about earlier can carry on after that perhaps. There were elders in Ephesus. Acts 20 17 From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called to him the elders of the church.

And what's so remarkable about some of these verses is that there's no great to do about observing that there are elders here. This is just assumed. You read a verse like this and you say Paul is just assuming they're elders in all the churches.

It's a given. Elders in all the churches of Crete. This island of Crete.

Titus 1 5 For 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. So there's this broad sense that it doesn't matter what culture. You've got a Crete culture.

You've got an Ephesian culture. You've got a Roman culture. You've got an Antioch culture.

You've got a Jerusalem culture. Culture is not an issue here. There's got to be elders.

Or something corresponding to that role. Finally No, two more. Elders in all the churches of the dispersion of the Roman Empire.

James 1 1 James, a bondservant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ to the twelve tribes who are dispersed abroad. Greetings. Now I just put verse 1 1 up there and then we're going to jump to chapter 5 to show to whom this letter is written.

It's written like a shotgun approach to all the either Christians scattered like Jews or Jewish Christians. There's a disagreement about how to interpret that verse. But it's very broad.

All over the dispersion. Now chapter 5 14. Is anyone among you sick? Then he must call for the elders.

It doesn't say, and if there happen to be elders in your church, make sure you use them. It's an assumption. He writes this broad letter all over the world and he says, now when you get sick call the elders.

And he didn't expect anybody to be reading this letter and say, what are they? Which is what would happen in many Baptist churches today is that people say, we don't have elders. So how are we going to obey this verse? And they don't obey this verse. Many don't.

We do a lot of this. We keep oil in our prayer room. We keep oil in the offices.

We meet with people. Just to show you practically, in a big church like this with a lot of sick people, we do try to piggyback on services when elders are here already so they don't have to come here or go elsewhere if they don't have to. So after a service, somebody will call and say, my child is going in for surgery, so and so.

It's really serious. Would you please anoint my child with oil and pray over her? And we'll say, how about 12 15 on Sunday? And we'll just send out the word to the elders. Come if you can.

And 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 elders show up in the prayer room and they say, how do you anoint? What does anoint mean? Why do you anoint? Answers are very varied. I'm not sure why, but we do it. And when I do it, I

basically pour a little bit on my hand and rub it on the forehead here or put it on the head.

I haven't gotten the nerve to just pour the whole bottle on anybody's head yet, although I know that I had one person. Who was that? It was Glenn. It was Glenn Larson.

He wouldn't mind me telling you this. I went to visit Patty. She died 38 years old of cancer.

We anointed Patty with oil several times. Prayed over her a hundred times. And it was God's time for some reason we can understand.

Left her four kids behind. But we went out there one time. She was in her living room in her bed near death.

He said, just pour the whole bottle on her. We did. It was small.

She hardly had any hair anyway. She had no pretenses to keep up anymore. Maybe it just means pour it all out.

Last one. Elders in all the churches in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia. I get that from 1 Peter 1.1. Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ to those who reside as aliens scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, Bithynia.

In other words, all those people in what's now Turkey near east there. Then he gets to chapter 5 and he says, therefore, I exhort the elders among you, shepherd the flock. No question if there are elders among you.

The assumption is by James, by Peter, by Paul, from Jerusalem to Rome and everywhere in between that every church has elders. It's a given. There's not a church in the New Testament without multiple elders.

And so, one of the brothers here was pointing out to me that Believers Chapel down in Dallas, they don't think church structure is very ambiguous in the New Testament. But that is pretty clear and they're pretty firm in what they teach about it. And you can see why on something like this.

Now, question about anything like that. The presence of elders in every church in the New Testament implying that probably if you're leading a church right now or if you're a lay person, you should patiently teach on these things until your people are ready to put in place a good... The observation is there were elders in the Old Testament. I just read about numbers of 70 elders, for example.

There were groups of elders who helped Moses. There were elders in the... The concept of elders is not the creation of the early church. It was there already.

What's interesting though, isn't it that quite apart from cultural differences, you might expect it then to be in Jerusalem where you've got a Jewish church, but all these churches in Cappadocia and Asia and Bithynia and all the churches in Rome and then probably in Spain. It seems like this is something we're taking with us right across the cultures here. I don't think you have to call them that.

Though, why not since the New Testament does. But, any other observation or question? The question is, what do we say to distinguish office of elder from old men? The word can mean both. In fact, there's one place in Timothy where it says tell the younger men how to treat the older men as fathers or something like that.

And it's the same word. And how do you then distinguish? I suspect that in Paul's mind there is a maturity factor that you just shouldn't overlook. They should be older.

But then the question becomes what does that mean? And what if your church is all young? And here's a possible answer to the first one. I just read also in Numbers I think it's in Numbers, maybe it was Leviticus that the priesthood serves from age 30 to 50 and then he must retire and become one who then teaches and equips the others. The cutoff is age 50 and starts at 30.

So, it may be that if you wanted a round number, 30 might be when a person enters into the elder half of his life. Keep in mind also, life expectancy in the first century. What would it be? Maybe upper 40s? I don't know.

Depends on the culture probably. So, probably a person and keep in mind this too, in America we have institutionalized adolescence so that it lasts until you're about 22. In that culture at 12, 13 you enter into manhood through some fairly significant processes of passage you begin to work as an apprentice with your father or something and you get married when you're 16, 17, 18 years old and you're having children by the time you're 22, 23, 24 and you are a seasoned man in your mid-20s probably.

So, to wait until 30 would mean stretching it. These men say, I'm not going to live much beyond 30 I'm already feeling worn and old and so and yet here in America we drag out growing up horribly. I don't know what to do about it.

It's just a mess the way we bring children up into adulthood in this country. That's another factor to take into consideration. However, it looks to me like in 1 Timothy elders and deacons the word is taking on an official not just an age meaning.

So that I want to be careful saying it has to be an old verse. That's the best I can do. I don't have any lines to draw for you.

We don't have any here at Bethlehem. We don't have anything written in our constitution can't be under 30 or 25. I don't know, who would be our youngest elder? Anybody have an idea? Are you the youngest, Dan? How old are you? 37? Dan's probably our youngest elder.

I would not be opposed to calling somebody younger than Dan. Another one back there. People are coming.

I'm sorry, I've wasted ten minutes. People are coming and saying anybody who's older in the church is what the term is referring to when it says elder. That just won't work in 1 Timothy 3. Let the elders be above reproach.

Because they're going to fulfill an office and then you'd be tested to enter into this office. I don't think that would be too hard to answer. Any other questions? The question is, in a missionary context, polygamy is the norm perhaps and yet you're saying the elder has to be the husband of one man, one wife and then also preliterate culture so they can't even study the Bible yet, how are they going to be apt to teach and so on.

Do you then this is not your question but part of the answer do you then put in place missionary structures, temporary, maybe not ideal, to bring them along and do you compromise the principle on polygamy? I don't think I want to speak the last word on that. I would not stand in judgment on missionaries at this point

who went either way on that issue frankly, who said if you're willing not to take any more keep the two that you have be a faithful and loving husband to them, recognize it's not God's ideal teach your children not to do it this way and help us lead this church because there aren't any other kind but this and then after a generation or two polygamy falls away. If a missionary said that's the way we're going to do it, I wouldn't say oh you're disobeying because there are several reasons for that one is it seemed like God did that in the Old Testament David did you want to make a comment? David's been missionary in that kind of situation Yes Divorce and remarriage I can't The comment I repeat these even if you're here for the tape Does Paul refer in One Woman Man to polygamy or to divorce and remarriage and David doesn't think he can refer to both and I'm wondering if he can't We're going to talk about qualifications Thank you for listening to this message by John Piper Pastor for Preaching at Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota Feel free to make copies of this message to give to others but please do not charge for those copies or alter the content in any way without permission We invite you to visit Desiring God online at [www.desiringgod.org](http://www.desiringgod.org) There you'll find hundreds of sermons, articles, radio broadcasts and much more all available to you at no charge Our online store carries all of Pastor John's books, audio and video resources You can also stay up to date on what's new at Desiring God Again our website is We are most satisfied in Him

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