

Church Leadership

Summary: The two primary offices of leadership in the New Testament church are the bishops and deacons. 1) The bishops in a church are the mature men (elders) who are morally and spiritually blameless in character. Elders in every church are to be ordained as bishops to oversee the church. The elders are to rule, feed, teach, oversee, admonish, and take care of the church. Since the word “pastors” speaks of men who feed the flock, the elders are obviously pastors, since feeding the flock is one of their primary duties. So, the words elders, bishops, and pastors are all valid scriptural names to refer to those spiritually mature men who have been duly appointed to feed, rule, and oversee the church. 2) The deacons are spiritual men who have been appointed to the business of the ministry which would be neglected otherwise. Their use of the office of deacon allows the elders to give themselves wholly to their duties without interference.

Elder - The word “elder” or “elders” is found 130 times in the Old Testament scriptures and 69 times in the New Testament scriptures. The term “elders” speaks of those who are mature, being contrasted with those who are younger (1Pet 5:1,5; 1Tim 5:1). In the context of the church leadership (not the Jewish leadership), the word speaks of the mature men in the church who are to feed, rule, teach, oversee, admonish, and take care of the church (Acts 20:17, 28; 1Tim 3:1-10; 5:17; Titus 1:5-9; 1Pet 5:1-4; Heb 13:7,17,24; 1Thes 5:12). The elders, who meet certain moral and spiritual qualifications, are to be ordained as bishops to officially oversee the church. Elders are to be ordained in every church (Acts 14:23).

Bishop- The word “bishop” or “bishops” is found five times, only in the New Testament scriptures. It is the primary office of leadership in the church (1Tim 3:1). A bishop must be an elder, for he must have certain spiritual and moral qualities that only an elder has (Titus 1:5-7). A bishop is an elder who has been ordained (i.e. duly appointed) to take care of the church (1Tim 3:1-5; Titus 1:5-7). The word “bishop” never infers oversight over several churches as the word has been wrongly applied in hierarchical forms of church government. Since the bishops were to be elders, the men who lead the churches are called by both names in scripture. The word “bishop” speaks of the man’s position or office; the word “elder” speaks of his maturity. The New Testament pattern is a plurality of ordained elders (i.e., bishops) in every church (Phil 1:1; Heb 13:7,17,24; James 5:14; Acts 14:23; 20:17, 28; 1Tim 5:17; 1Thes 5:12). If a man desires the office of a bishop, he desires a good work (1Tim 3:1).

Pastor - The word “pastor” or “pastors” is found eight times in the Old Testament scriptures and one time in the New Testament scriptures. Pastors are gifted men in the church, who, along with apostles, prophets, and evangelists, are given for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, and for the edifying of the body of Christ (Eph 4:8-11). There are no separate qualifications associated with the word “pastor”, nor are the words, “office” or “ordained” connected with the word “pastor”. The word “pastor” is not directly connected to the words “elder” or “bishop”. However, in the Old Testament scriptures, the pastors of Israel were to feed the flock (Jer 3:15; 10:21; 23:1,2). This same shepherd imagery is used for the elders of the New Testament church (Acts 20:17,18; 1Peter 5:1-4). Therefore, although the word “pastors” could have a broader application than that of the elders, to refer to elders as pastors would certainly be scripturally valid.

Church Leadership

Deacon - The word “deacon” or “deacons” is found five times, only in the New Testament scriptures. It is the secondary office of leadership in the church. To be a deacon, a man must have certain moral and spiritual qualities which are specified in the scriptures (1Tim 3:8-12; Acts 6:1-5). The deacons’ duties, although not directly specified in scripture as are the elders’ duties, are generally taken from Acts 6:1-7. In this scripture, the Hebrews’ widows were neglected in the daily ministrations. At the apostles’ instructions, the multitude of disciples sought out seven honest men, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom. Seven men were appointed to the business of ministering to the widows. This ministry involved serving tables (Acts 6:2). This appointment was to allow the apostles to continue to give themselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word. The men appointed in Acts 6:1-7 are considered by many to be the first prototype of the deacons, although these seven men were not called deacons. From this interpretation, the deacons’ position of service is to relieve the elders from any business that would interfere with their duties. This perhaps is the reason that the deacons’ duties are not specifically listed one by one in the scriptures. Their tasks may be too diverse to specify. Deacons should seek to do whatever needs to be done which is being neglected, to allow the elders to perform their duties. Although they must be spiritual men with faithful wives, the deacons are not necessarily elders. They that use the office of a deacon well purchase to themselves a good degree, and a great boldness in the faith which is in Christ Jesus (1Tim 3:13).