

Text: 1 Peter 5.1

Last week we talked about *Proper Shepherding in Troubling Times*, as we covered 1 Pt 5.1-4.

Tonight, I want to go back to verse 1, where Peter exhorts the “elders,” identifying himself as “your fellow elder.”

In the whole paragraph, Peter encourages the elders about their function or service and their hope in Christ.

As we go back to verse 1, our focus shifts to the office of elder, what the term means, and what it implies for the growth of Christian men in general, but those who aspire to the office in particular.

Read 1 Pt 5.1-4

Proposition: The office of elder (pastor) calls for men of spiritual maturity.

I. The heritage of the term “elder”

A. The term is used in the NT for both elders of the Jews and elders of the churches: where did the term come from?

1. Widespread use in the Greco-Roman world

“The language of ‘elders’ (most often, though not exclusively, *presbuteros*) would be widely familiar.”¹

a. Egyptian associations used term for leaders

b. Greeks used the term for city leaders

1) Influential group in *gymnasium*, known as the *gerousia*

In Sparta, the minimum age for this group was sixty.

2) Gk town meeting was an *ekklesia*, a term borrowed by Christianity (we translate “church”)

3) Also used for those who were older and wiser members of other groups: the army, for instance

¹ Craig S. Keener, *1 Peter: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2021), 355.

2. The Jewish synagogue and elders

a. The term is much in use in the LXX (Septuagint, Greek OT) of leaders in Israel

- 1) Earliest uses refer to old age (Abraham and Sarah were *old* when Isaac was conceived)
- 2) First use as a reference to leaders is in the exodos:

Ex 17.5 Then the LORD said to Moses, "Pass before the people and take with you some of the elders of Israel; and take in your hand your staff with which you struck the Nile, and go.

- 3) First codified into official office under the advice of Moses' father-in-law

Ex 18.17-23 Moses' father-in-law said to him, "The thing that you are doing is not good.¹⁸ "You will surely wear out, both yourself and these people who are with you, for the task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone.¹⁹ "Now listen to me: ... select out of all the people able men who fear God, ... place *these* over them *as* leaders of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties and of tens.²² "Let them judge the people

- 4) Replicated in the much later synagogues and in the Sanhedrins of 1st century Israel

b. Given the synagogue model (which the early church modified in its worship), it is likely the term *elder* came into the church from the synagogues

B. The emphasis of the term

1. "The Septuagint and Josephus use the title also for rulers of Israel. **Age** contributed to this usage."² [emphasis added]

² Keener, 357.

2. In Israel, older members of a community typical local community leaders
3. Typical of the respect for elders everywhere in ancient world
4. Qualities that make for elder leadership
 - a. Experience
 - b. Maturity
 - c. Expertise (varies, but certainly “life-expertise”)

“one having authority by virtue of age and experience”³

“In some languages πρεσβύτερος^b is best rendered as ‘older leaders,’ but in other languages the more appropriate term would be the equivalent of ‘counselor,’ since it would be assumed that counselors would be older than the average person in a group as well as having authority to lead and direct activities.”⁴

The idea of mature leadership is common to all cultures.

II. The usage in the New Testament

- A. Often used “to refer to those who had leadership positions in the church”⁵
 1. Church or churches in Jerusalem had elders: Acts 11.30; 15.2, 4, 6, 22–23; 16.4; 21.18
 2. Paul and Barnabas appointed elders in churches of Galatia: Ac 14.23
 3. Paul gathered the elders of Ephesus for his “farewell message” to them: Ac 20.17
 4. The sick encouraged to call the elders to pray for them: Jas 5.14

³ Frederick C. Mish, ed., *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*, 11th ed. (Springfield, Mass.: Merriam-Webster, Inc., 2003).

⁴ Johannes E. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 542.

⁵ Thomas R. Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, The New American Commentary, v. 37 (Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman & Holman, 2003), 231.

5. In writing to Timothy, Paul gives instructions about elders: 1 Tim 5.17
6. And instructs Titus to appoint elders in Crete: Tit 1.5

B. The parallel terms in the NT

1. Bishop/overseer/pastor [shepherd]

Ac 20.17 ¶ From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called to him the **elders** of the church. ... Ac 20.28 “Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you **overseers**, to **shepherd** the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.

Tit 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, ... Tit 1.7 For the **overseer** must be above reproach as God’s steward, not self-willed, not quick-tempered, not addicted to wine, not pugnacious, not fond of sordid gain,

1 Pt 5.1-2 ¶ Therefore, I exhort the **elders** among you, as *your* fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed,² **shepherd** the flock of God among you, exercising **oversight** not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to *the will of God*; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness;

2. Paul refers to only two offices in the church:
 - a. Bishops/overseers and deacons (1 Tim 3)
 - b. Elders/overseers (Titus 1)
3. Current popular teaching in some circles: multiple elders in every church

“It is also likely that elders functioned as a plurality in the churches since the term is always plural, and Acts 14:23 says elders were appointed ‘for them in each church.’”⁶

⁶ Schreiner, 231.

- a. First, not strictly true: John calls himself “the elder” in 2 Jn 1, 3 Jn 1
- b. The term is used interchangeably with bishop/overseer which is used in the singular
- c. The activity of Paul & Barnabas can be taken to refer to singular leaders appointed in multiple churches (Ac 14.23)

It is a point not emphasized by the NT and seems to miss the point of NT instruction about leadership.

There is nothing wrong with multiple pastors (elders) in a church, but there is no NT *requirement* for it either.

III. The implications for Christian men

A. Spiritual desires encouraged

1. Christian men should aspire for spiritual growth

Heb 6.9-12 ¶ But, beloved, we are convinced of better things concerning you, and things that accompany salvation, though we are speaking in this way. ¹⁰ For God is not unjust so as to forget your work and the love which you have shown toward His name, in having ministered and in still ministering to the saints. ¹¹ And we desire that each one of you show the same diligence so as to realize the full assurance of hope until the end, ¹² so that you will not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.

2 Pt 3.17-18 You therefore, beloved, knowing this beforehand, be on your guard so that you are not carried away by the error of unprincipled men and fall from your own steadfastness, ¹⁸ but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To Him *be* the glory, both now and to the day of eternity. Amen.

- a. General statements to all, that they might grow in grace
- b. Aspire to imitate their elders

2. And in turn, Christian men are encouraged to aspire to eldership

¹ Tim 3.1 ¶ It is a trustworthy statement: if any man aspires to the office of overseer, it is a fine work he desires *to do*.

B. Final implications

1. You should apply yourself to grow in the grace described in the NT for spiritual maturity

Sobriety, wisdom, self-control, spiritual fruit, etc.

2. Our men should seek to be as qualified as possible for leadership in the church: it is a noble desire

“Some commentators have questioned the appropriateness of having such desire for a *church* office, but such doubts are caused by the corruption in church offices which came much later in the history of the church. There is absolutely nothing improper about such pure ambition on the part of a young man. Whether he ever attains to that office will be determined by numerous other factors, including the qualifications which Paul gives forthwith, which serve as a safeguard against those whose desires may not be in line with God’s call.”⁷

Conclusion:

Proposition: The office of elder (pastor) calls for men of spiritual maturity.

⁷ W. Stanley Outlaw, “Commentary on the Books of 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy & Titus,” in *1 Thessalonians through Philemon*, ed. Robert E. Picirilli, The Randall House Bible Commentary (Nashville, TN: Randall House, 1990), 215.