

The Church

Elders - Biblical Designation of Elders - Part 3

Introduction

In the reading of Colossians Paul reminded the saints that by Christ “were all things created”. One of those things was “government”, called “thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers” (Col. 1:16). God is the supreme Governmental authority and Moral Absolute of the Universe. Since there is government in heaven and even in the infernal ranks (for governmental position was never lost because of sin in the angelic ranks), and government in ancient Israel and the nations (for we read of the elders of Egypt (Gen. 50:7) and of Moab (Num. 22:7), then it would be strange to think that God did not place government in the local church.

It must also be understood that all who profess to be “elders” now are such, for when Paul was speaking to the elders from Ephesus he informed them that: “Of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them. Therefore watch, and remember” (Acts 20:30-31). Just as there are false evangelists (Gal. 1:8) and false teachers (2 Pet. 2:1), there are false elders, men who have come through the ranks or have been made elders by man, not by God. This often happens when one man acts alone and fails to observe that elders ought to always function corporately, never as individuals. This is especially so when considering who are eligible to assist in the work of overseeing the flock. Furthermore, they must never determine and accept those who will be “yes” men and reject those who have the qualification because they know they would not fit their political agenda.

The following is not meant to be a comprehensive detailing of the various words used but are a first-level consideration of the Biblical designations.

Among the “things”, it is always interesting to observe the names God gives things. When it came to naming the animals, God gave Adam the insight and understanding to name them (Gen. 2:19). However, in the first creation narrative God names five things.

- a) He called the light “day” and darkness “night” (Gen. 1:4)
- b) The firmament He called Heaven (Gen. 1:8)
- c) The dry land He called “earth” (Gen. 1:10)
- d) The gathering of waters He called “Seas” (Gen. 1:10).

His calling of them by certain descriptive terms was not just to fill in some time on an afternoon, they were descriptive of that which He had made. Therefore, when God is telling of those who He would give to care for His flock, He gives them specific and descriptive names. There are four trunk names for them in the New Testament. They are:

- a) Episkopos
- b) Presbuteros
- c) Poimen
- d) Hegeomai

The Descriptive Terms Used

1) Episkopos

- a) Episkopos is translated “bishop/s” (Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:2) and “overseer/s” (Acts 20:28). It is closely related to “episkope” which is translated “bishop” (1 Tim. 3:1) and “visitation” (Lk. 19:44; 1 Pet. 2:12).
- b) Episkopos comes from two words: “epi” which means “over” and “skopos” which means an observer or watcher, one who has the end in view.
 - i) Putting these truths together an elder is a man whom, in an ideal situation, the Lord has set over the saints, not to lord it over them (1 Pet. 5:3). They are:
 1. To be watchful for their spiritual enrichment by investigation for things they may hear concerning a saint who is wandering from the fellowship, and seeking to restore them before matters get worse.

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2. Visiting the saints on an ongoing basis and ever watchful, taking nothing for granted.

Let us never forget, it was the sheep that went astray and was lost, not the lamb (Lk. 15:4; 1 Pet. 2:25).

2) Presbuteros

- a) Presbuteros is used in sixty-seven New Testament verses and is translated “old men” (Acts 2:17); older women (1 Tim. 5:2); the twenty-four elders on the thrones in Heaven (Rev. 4:4). Depending on context it can refer to one's natural chronological age or spiritual maturity. The repeated mention of the twenty-four elders in Revelation indicates some avenues of truth for those who are spiritual administrators in the church. I say “spiritual” because in many cases they are the ministers of non-spiritual such as “when will we have the picnic?” The persons on the Thrones of Rev. 4:4 are presented as those who are spiritual and who have made righteous judgments and evaluations. They are not “yes” men but “overcomers”, which means they have faced decisions in life and stood for the truth of God in the face of adversity. They acknowledged the supremacy and authority of the Throne Sitter, and in preferment they fall down and cast their crowns before the throne (Rev. 4:10). In doing so they recognize the exclusive rights of God for all governmental administration.
 - i) They worship God as the Source and His exclusive right of loyalty and Supreme Rulership (Rev. 4:11; 11:16-17).
 - ii) They led the song of worship to the Lamb (Rev. 5:8-13)
 - iii) They acknowledge Him as Redeemer (Rev. 7:12)
 - iv) They are aware of the previous situation and future of people around the throne (Rev. 7:13-17)
 - v) As Judge (Rev. 19:4)
- b) Presbuterion is used four times in the New Testament (Lk. 22:66; Acts 22:5; 1 Tim. 4:14), and the context indicates those who were the spiritual leaders of either Israel or the church.

3) Poimaino

- a) This word is used in five avenues of thought:
 - i) Of “ruling” as when speaking of the Lord who is the Governor, who will “rule my people Israel” (Matt. 2:6); all nations (Rev. 12:5; 19:15); and how He will rule (Rev. 2:27).
 - ii) Of spiritually nourishing the saints, for instance when Paul spoke to the elders of Ephesus (Acts 20:28); or when the Lord spoke to Peter (Jn. 21:16), or when Peter wrote to the saints (1 Pet. 5:2)
 - iii) It is used of feeding animals (Lk. 17:7, translated “feeding cattle”)
 - iv) As an illustration (1 Cor. 9:7)
 - v) The character of evil men (Jude 1:12 who were “feeding themselves”)
- b) Poimaino comes from the root word “poimen” which is used in seventeen verses, and is always translated “shepherd” or “Shepherds”, “pastor”. It is never spoken of in the singular except regarding Christ (Jn. 10:2, 11, 12, 14, 16; Heb. 13:20; 1 Pet. 2:25)
- c) It is never used of an individual in the local assembly as the shepherd of an assembly. The context of Ephesians 4:11 is not the local but corporate church, and the verse cannot be used to support a local pastor.
- d) The word then indicates a shepherd who feeds the flock and stands in opposition to all that would negatively affect them.

4) Hegeomai

- a) Hegeomai is used in twenty-seven verses and is translated “governor” (Matt. 2:6); “chief” (Lk. 22:26); “esteem” (Phil. 2:3); and is used of elders (Acts 15:22).
- b) It also indicates to evaluate, as when translated “count” (1 Tim. 1:12). The word then means to govern; to be counted worthy of respect; to lead in influence and counsel by having a God given work of governmental responsibility when translated “rule” (Heb. 13:7, 17, 24).

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The question then arises, “Who oversees the elders, overseers, and bishops?” Ideally, when there are a number of elders in a church, they can act as overseers to each other. This depends on whether an error is being presented privately to other elders, or if it is being done openly to the saints. If an erroneous doctrine is being presented privately, it is the responsibility of the other elders to step in and stop the error before it affects the saints. If it is done publicly, then depending on the damage done, that elder must be at the least, publicly rebuked, and if very severe, then removed from the oversight. They must never band together as an “old boys club” and protect the erring one.

**May God grant us good understanding as He, by His Holy Spirit, deigns to guide us into all truth.
John 16:13**

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