

Words Used to Describe Role and Function of Elders in New Testament

Main Objectives:

1. To become familiar with the terms used in the New Testament to describe elders.
2. To be able to describe the functions of an elder and eldership.
3. To consider the selection process of men that represent these functions and how they can work together for a strong Hillcrest eldership.

The designation or office of Elder—Shepherd—Overseer—Steward are not four separate offices, but one; yet this one office can be identified by four separate ‘titles’. Why is this? And how can this biblical understanding guide the church at Hillcrest in selecting and appointing servant leaders to this God-ordained role?

*For this reason I left you in Crete, that you might set in order what remains, and appoint **elders** in every city as I directed you, ⁶namely, if any man be above reproach, the husband of one wife, having children who believe, not accused of dissipation or rebellion. ⁷For 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, ⁸but hospitable, loving what is good, sensible, just, devout, self-controlled, ⁹holding fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, that he may be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict.*

Titus 1:5-9

*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; ³nor yet as **lording** it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock.*

1 Peter 5:1-3

*And from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called to him the **elders** of the church... ²⁸Be 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.*

Acts 20:17, 28

The above verses highlight the nouns and verbs used to connote one in the eldership role. Looking at the grammar can explain why an **elder** can have four different titles is because **eldership** is always plural. In other words, there is never just one shepherd (outside of the Chief Shepherd—Jesus Christ) overseeing a congregation. Biblically speaking—it is always two or more. With that said, elders make up an eldership and the functions of an eldership are not simply one dimensional. Hence, different titles for the one office: Elder—Shepherd—Overseer—Steward.

Hillcrest has many elders but not all of them perform the same function. Each congregation uses discernment on how this role should be utilized for each church location. There is a lot of overlap within the four designated titles. Let's examine each title individually and then consider how the parts make a stronger, more complete whole— known as the eldership.

- ❖ *Since the eldership is comprised of a team, is it possible, then, that one is called to eldership more than just being an elder?*

Title	Equivalent Name	Implications	Scriptures
Elder	Presbyter	One that displays wisdom and maturity in the community of believers	Titus 1:5 James 5:14
Shepherd	Pastor	One who feeds and protects the flock	Ephesians 4:11 Acts 20:28
Overseer	Bishop	A supervisor that oversees the congregational needs	Philippians 1:1 1 Timothy 3:2
Steward	Manager	A trustee or manager serving in God's household	Titus 1:7 1 Corinthians 4:2

Elder / Presbyter

The very name **elder** implies the person is older in years; in other words—not a young man. This also is one who is not a new convert (1 Timothy 3:6) but one who is seasoned by faithfully living the Christian life growing in wisdom and experience. It carries the idea of wisdom, where age in most ancient cultures considered the “older men” to be wise and mature. The older men in biblical times (Old and New Testament) decided judicial cases, interpreted the Law, disciplined the rebellious and wayward, and gave the community direction. These same ideas are brought forth for the Christian elders (see Acts 15 as an example of elders working alongside the apostles). The term elder is the most commonly used title within the eldership in the New Testament epistles and encompasses all of the other functional titles which many times are used in the verb form (shepherd-oversight-steward). Elder is always a noun.

James, the wise Jerusalem leader and brother of Jesus, writes; *Who among you is wise and understanding? Let him show by his good behavior his deeds in the gentleness of wisdom* (James 3:13). This question and answer should guide the community of believers in selecting the elders of that community. Wisdom and understanding are important for an elder and how that is exercised is just as important. An elder inhabits wisdom in biblical matters, has an understanding of the times, and navigates well through transition and turmoil to serve his role effectively.

- ❖ *In today's 21st century environment, what wisdom and understanding is needed for church leaders that may not have been as important in the past?*

Shepherd / Pastor

The **shepherd** image is a commonly used biblical term to describe the office of an elder. The Latin word for shepherd is **pastor** (see Ephesians 4:11 NASB). Pastor is often used as a substitute [debatably incorrectly] in many denominations as simply a minister. The depiction of a shepherd was used to describe political and religious leaders in Old Testament times. Ezekiel 34 provides a most extensive use of this imagery in the context of both a judgment for the bad shepherds not properly caring for the flock of Israel (34:1-10), and a prophecy of the future Good Shepherd found in Christ (34:11ff). See also John 10:2-16 which highlights Jesus as this Good Shepherd and what a shepherd should be. Another usage of shepherd/flock imagery can be found in Psalm 23 where the work of the shepherd is seen as *He makes me lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside quiet waters...He guides me in the paths of righteousness.* A study from all of these passages sheds light projecting into the role of the functionality for New Testament shepherds of the church—of those who feed and protect and care for the flock.

To be noted, the usage of *shepherd* in the New Testament in regards to church leadership (excluding Ephesians 4:11), is used as a verb. In Christian leadership, function precedes titles (verbs precede nouns): 1 Thessalonians 5:12-14 uses verbs rather than nouns to describe leaders.

- ❖ *What were the main functions of shepherds that tended sheep and how do you think this best applies metaphorically for today's eldership?*

Overseer / Bishop

Another title used in eldership is **overseer** or **bishop**. Paul describes the church leaders as overseers in Acts 20:28. The Greek *episkopos* (epi=over; skopos=see) is most commonly translated "bishop", but could also be translated as "supervisor" (super=over; visor=see). This term in biblical times was used for many kinds of foremen, supervisors, inspectors, and managers. It could also refer to government officials having civic functions which included the oversight at sanctuaries, construction projects, and tutoring in an educational context. Overseer in the New Testament is used in Philippians 1:1 and 1 Timothy 3:2 in clear reference to eldership.

An overseer in first century Christianity would serve functions that included teaching and disciplining congregants, presiding over financial matters, assigning work for the congregation and examining new applicants for membership. Jesus taught that the oversight of God's people would be a new kind of leadership model. Jesus expected his disciples and the leaders of these disciples to be "counterculture"—a Christian kingdom model different from the world. He condemned those who wanted power (Matthew 23:5-10; Mark 10:42-45) and conveys in the context of leadership, *whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant.*

- ❖ *Every congregation needs leadership, but not a worldly form of leadership; How then can overseers be faithful to Jesus' teaching on servant-leadership?*

Steward / Manager

A lesser used term for one in eldership, but just as important, is the name **steward** (Titus 1:7). Every elder should be a good steward but not all stewards are elders. Elders have been *entrusted with God's work*. A definition of steward is a manager or trustee over someone else's goods or services in order to bring about an increase or gain. Stewards of the church are accountable to Jesus and understand that the household of believers belong to God. The Greek word for steward, *oikonomos* (where we derive the word economics) is used in biblical times as one who is a manager of the household. It refers to a person given a position of responsibility who handled accounts of their master's house and / or estate. Note Jesus' response about being ready for His return in Luke 12:42; *Who then is the faithful and sensible steward, whom his master will put in charge of his servants, to give them their rations at the proper time?* It is God who has *allotted to your charge* (1 Peter 5:3) this great service.

God's steward, is in fact a trustee of God's possessions (the Lord's church and everything in it) until Jesus comes back. That's why before a man is appointed in this leadership role, *He must be one who manages his own household well, ... (but if a man does not know how to manage his own household, how will he take care of the church of God?)* (1 Timothy 3:4-5). Jesus states, *Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much* (Luke 16:10). Bottom line— Stewards of the church should faithfully manage God's resources; which includes God's people and God's word. *Moreover, it is required of stewards that one be found trustworthy* (1 Corinthians 4:2).

- ❖ *What is the role of a modern day trustee (fiduciary)? In God's household, what does being "entrusted with God's work" entail?*

Leadership & Church

Just as there are four separate descriptors for the one servant-leadership position in eldership; there is also some correlation of the church's descriptors as well. For instance, elders are the wise men discerning the aspects in the community. Shepherds feed and take care of the flock. Overseers supervise the needs of the congregation, and stewards are responsible for the household of believers. With this in mind, the responsibility in a church lies not only with the leaders but with the whole body, in order for the body to function as God intended. As elders lean into a kingdom culture of Christ-like leadership, all members are also responsible to respect, honor, and submit to those whom the Holy Spirit has made overseers. As the Hebrew author writes, *Obey your leaders, and submit to them; for they keep watch over your souls, as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you.* (Hebrews 13:17).

- ❖ *In what ways can congregants and leaders at Hillcrest grow in the area of submission and leadership?*

Source Material:

The Church of Christ: A Biblical Ecclesiology for Today; Everett Ferguson

A 6-week study on Eldership by James Thompson; link below:

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5b8d5b123917ee05c8efd0fa/t/5bedd8daf950b71ae857de86/1542314202709/Six+Lessons+on+Elder+Selection.pdf>