

**Hierarchy in the Church?
Instruction from the Pastoral Epistles
Concerning Elders and Overseers¹**

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As in every age since the first century, there is today a variety of opinions regarding the proper organizational structure of the church. Various denominations have deacons, archdeacons, evangelists, apostles, prophets, pastors, senior pastors, elders, overseers, bishops, archbishops, and there is even a pope. To make problems more complicated, there is inconsistency among denominations, and even within each denomination, as to what duties church officers should perform as well as the relationship between the differing office-holders.

The goal of this article is not to present a detailed blueprint of how every church should be organized. Rather, this article will focus on the use of the terms “elder” and “overseer” (or “bishop”) in the Pastoral Epistles in order to determine the precise relationship between these terms.² Most denominations agree that the office of deacon is biblical and should therefore be maintained (although the precise function of the deacon will vary between denominations and many denominations do not have archdeacons). While the position of “evangelist” is important, it is not viewed as a “church” office per se since the tasks of an evangelist to minister outside the church is similar to the task of a missionary. Regarding the offices of apostle and prophet, Paul

¹This article has been adapted from the book, Benjamin L. Merkle, *The Elder and Overseer: One Office in the Early Church* (New York: Peter Lang, 2003), and was previously published in *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 7.3 (2003): 32-43.

²Although the term ἐπίσκοπος can be translated “overseer” or “bishop,” I prefer to use the term overseer since it does not carry some of the later connotations that the term bishop does.

clearly writes in Ephesians 2:20 that they were given to the church as a foundational ministry and therefore are no longer given today.³ But what about the other church offices? Does the biblical model include pastors, senior pastors, elders, overseers, bishops, archbishops and popes? Based on the evidence from the Pastoral Epistles, it will be shown that besides the office of deacon, there is only one other New Testament *church* office—that is, the office of pastor, elder or overseer.

Although the term “pastor” does not occur in the Pastoral Epistles, it is clear that it refers to the same office as the elder or overseer. There is only one text in the New Testament that uses this term to refer to an office in the church. Ephesians 4:11 states, “And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers.” In this text, “pastor” is coupled with “teacher,” which together form one office.⁴ In contrast to the noun “pastor” (ποιμήν), the verb “to pastor” or “to shepherd” (ποιμαίνω) is more common.⁵ What is particularly important to this study is that the verb form is often used in connection with the duties given to the elders or overseers. For example, in Acts 20 Paul calls for the “elders” (v. 17) and encourages them to “be on guard for themselves and for all the flock [ποίμνιον]” since they have been appointed as “overseers” and are called “to shepherd [ποιμαίνειν] the church of God” (v. 28). Likewise, Peter exhorts the “elders” (1 Peter 5:1) to “shepherd [ποιμάνετε] the flock [ποίμνιον] of God, serving as overseers” (1 Peter 5:3). Since the verb “to pastor/shepherd” is the task of the elder/overseer, it is easy to see why such a person could be called a

³So F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 304.

⁴Although the Grandville Sharp rule does not apply here since we are dealing with plural nouns, it still seems best to take this as a two-fold designation referring to one group.

⁵The following uses of ποιμαίνω are found in the context of shepherding people: Matt. 2:6; John 21:16; Acts 20:28; 1 Pet. 5:2; Jude 1:12; Rev. 2:27; 7:17; 12:5; 19:15.

“pastor/shepherd.” Not only are pastors or elders/overseers given the task of shepherding, but they are also those who teach the congregation (Eph. 4:11; 1 Tim. 3:2; 5:17). Therefore, we can be reasonably certain that the office of pastor is identical to that of the elder or overseer. This position that is strengthened by the fact that the term pastor is not mentioned in 1 Timothy and Titus, which are concerned about leadership in the church.

But today there is much debate as to whether the office of elder is really the same as the office of overseer or bishop. Many scholars of the eighteenth century assumed this debate to be closed. For example, in an excursus in his commentary on Philippians, J. B. Lightfoot expanded on why he believed “elder” and “overseer” are synonymous terms in the New Testament.⁶ He confidently states,

It is a fact now generally recognised by theologians of all shades of opinion, that in the language of the New Testament the same officer in the Church is called indifferently ‘bishop’ (ἐπίσκοπος) and ‘elder’ or ‘presbyter’ (πρεσβύτερος).⁷

In more recent times, however, the majority view has shifted. Many have challenged this former consensus and are offering alternative positions. Several reasons have caused the traditional view to be challenged.

1. In the Pastoral Epistles “overseer” is always in the singular whereas “the elders” is always in the plural (except in 1 Tim. 5:19). The use of the singular is especially noticeable against the plural “deacons” used in 1 Timothy 3:8.

⁶J. B. Lightfoot, *St. Paul's Epistle to the Philippians* (London: Macmillan, 1881), 95–99; also see 181–269 (Appendix: “The Christian Ministry”).

⁷*Ibid.*, 95. Similarly, Hatch writes, “The admissions of both mediaeval and modern writers of almost all schools of theological opinion have practically removed this from the list of disputed questions” (Edwin Hatch, *The Organization of the Early Christian Churches*, The 1880 Bampton Lectures [New York: Lenox Hill, 1881; reprint, 1972], 39 n. 31).

2. In both 1 Timothy 3:2 and Titus 1:7 “the overseer” (τὸν ἐπίσκοπον) contains the definite article, which perhaps indicates the elevation of one overseer above the elders.⁸

3. Teaching is the responsibility of all overseers (1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:9), but apparently only some of the elders have this responsibility (1 Tim. 5:17).

4. Where the overseer and deacons are mentioned the elders are not, and where the elders are mentioned the overseer and deacons are not (except in Titus 1:5-7). This usage shows that the terms are not really used interchangeably since they are not used in the same contexts.

5. One would not expect two distinct terms to refer to the same office.

6. The development of the monarchical bishop in the second century suggests an incipient form can already be found in the Pastoral Epistles. While few would argue that the overseer in the Pastorals is to be equated with the monarchical bishop, many do identify the beginning development of such a system.

7. Since the Pastoral Epistles are addressed to individuals and not churches, some argue that Timothy and Titus are intended to portray prototypes of the monarchical bishop.

Based on the above objections, many scholars today deny that the terms elder and overseer refer to the same office in the Pastoral Epistles. Those who continue to affirm that the two terms denote one office often cite Lightfoot in their defense, making only a cursory attempt to prove their position.⁹ The goal of this article, therefore, is to demonstrate that in the Pastoral Epistles the terms “elder” and “overseer” refer to the same office. There are three texts we will

⁸For example, Campenhausen states, “In the Pastoral Epistles the ‘bishop’ is always spoken of in the singular. The simplest explanation of this fact is that monarchical episcopacy is by now the prevailing system, and that the one bishop has already become the head of the presbyterate” (Hans von Campenhausen, *Ecclesiastical Authority and Spiritual Power in the Church of the First Three Centuries*, trans. J. A. Baker [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1969], 107).

⁹See, for example, Gerald F. Hawthorne, *Philippians*, WBC, vol. 43 (Waco, TX: Word, 1983), 10.

examine in detail since they mention the terms elder and/or overseer: Titus 1:5–9; 1 Timothy 3:1–7 and 1 Timothy 5:17–25. Since Titus represents an ecclesiastic structure less developed than that of 1 Timothy, we will discuss Paul’s letter to Titus first.

Titus 1:5–9

For this reason I left you in Crete, that you should set in order the things that are lacking, and appoint elders in every city as I commanded you—if a man is above reproach, the husband of one wife, having faithful children, not accused of dissipation or rebellion. For an overseer must be above reproach as God’s steward . . . (Titus 1:5–7)

Although there are many questions that could be asked of this text, the one central to this study is the relationship between the terms “elder” and “overseer.” From a *prima facie* reading of this text, it appears as if the author uses the terms to refer to the same office (“appoint elders . . . for an overseer”). Yet, many point out that such a reading is simplistic since elder occurs in the plural whereas overseer is in the singular. Thus, many believe that this text indicates a single overseer or bishop who possesses a higher rank or office than the board of elders or presbytery.¹⁰ Compelling reasons exist, however, for equating the offices of elder and overseer in Titus 1:5–7.

1. The connective “for” (γάρ) in verse 7 suggests that Paul is referring to the same office. If the overseer represents a separate office, then the use of “for” is obscure. The elders are to be blameless meeting certain qualifications *for* (γάρ) as overseers they are God’s stewards. Mounce rightly notes that the use of *for* “ties the discussion together and argues against the suggestion that the overseers are distinct from the elders.”¹¹

¹⁰For example, R. A. Campbell maintains that the shift from the plural “elders” to the singular “overseer” refers to the appointment of “monepiskopoi,” leaders over the churches at the city level (κατὰ πόλιν). Why then are those appointed first called “elders”? Campbell states that it is “either because that is the group from which they come, or because πρεσβυτέροι is a collective term of honour no less suitable for a number of leaders of town churches than of house churches. The writer then refers to the ἐπίσκοπος in the singular since it is the recognition of a single overseer with which he is concerned” (R. Alastair Campbell, *The Elders: Seniority within Earliest Christianity*, Studies of the New Testament and Its World [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994], 244.)

¹¹William D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, WBC, vol. 46 (Nashville: Nelson, 2000), 390.

2. Since the switch to the singular actually takes place in verse 6 with the use of the singular indefinite pronoun “anyone” (τις), we should not be surprised by the continuation of the singular in verse 7 with the use of overseer.

3. It is more natural to list the requirements in the singular since every elder/overseer must individually meet the qualifications. The singular form is therefore a generic singular, referring to anyone who would meet the qualifications listed.¹²

4. It is not uncommon for Paul to alternate between singular and plural generic nouns, particularly within the Pastoral Epistles. For example, in 1 Timothy 2:8 Paul addresses “the men” but then speaks of the singular “man” in verse 12. Again, in 1 Timothy 2:9 Paul exhorts the “women” to adorn themselves in modest apparel, but in verse 11 he says, “Let a *woman* learn in silence.” In 1 Timothy 2:15 this principle is again illustrated. Paul concludes his discussion on the role of women by stating that “*she* will be saved through childbearing if *they* continue in faith, love, and holiness, with self-control.” In the same sentence Paul switches from the singular to the plural. This same pattern is also found in 1 Timothy 5. In verse 1 Paul commands Timothy not to rebuke an older *man* but to exhort him as a *father* and the younger *men* as *brothers*. Furthermore, in verses 3 and 4 of the same chapter, Paul reminds the church to “honor *widows* who are really *widows*” and then goes on to say, “but if any *widow* has children or

¹²So Gordon Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus*, NIBC (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1984), 84; Donald Guthrie, *The Pastoral Epistles*, rev. ed., TNTC, vol. 14 (Leicester, England: InterVarsity; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 32–33; J. N. D. Kelly, *A Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles*, BNTC (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1963), 13, 231; George W. Knight, *The Pastoral Epistles*, NIGTC [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Carlisle, England: Paternoster, 1992], 31). Also see Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 176, 291; Thomas D. Lea and Hayne P. Griffin, *1, 2 Timothy, Titus*, NAC, vol. 34 (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 283; I. Howard Marshall, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles*, in collaboration with Philip H. Towner [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999], 160, 178; Wilhelm Michaelis, *Das Ältestenamt der christlichen Gemeinde im Lichte der Heiligen Schrift* (Bern: Haller, 1953), 52–53; Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 163, 390; Joachim Rohde, *Urchristliche und frühkatholische Ämter: Eine Untersuchung zur frühchristlichen Amtsentwicklung im Neuen Testament und bei den apostolischen Vätern*, TA 33 (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1976), 87; Philip H. Towner, *The Goal of Our Instruction: The Structure of Theology and Ethics in the Pastoral Epistles*, JSNTSup 34 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1989), 225.

grandchildren.” In verse 11 he switches back to the plural when he speaks of the “younger widows.” It should be noted that this passage concerning widows is particularly important because, like Titus 1, this passage also deals with qualifications for a particular position. Finally, 1 Timothy 5:17 states that “elders” who rule well are worthy of double honor. Yet, in verse 19 we are told that the church should not receive an accusation against “an elder.” Verse 20 then speaks of “*those* who are sinning,” which most agree refers to the elders. Based on this pattern found in the Pastoral Epistles, one should not be surprised to find the author first referring to the “elders” (plural) and then to the “overseer” (singular).

5. The author of the Pastoral Epistles may have been using a preformed piece of tradition similar to virtue lists found in the Hellenistic world.¹³ If the tradition contained the singular “overseer,” then it would be more natural to adjust the text to fit the tradition than vice-versa.¹⁴ The fact that the lists of Titus 1 and 1 Timothy 3 are so similar supports this conclusion. For example, the qualifications begin in a strikingly similar fashion:

For an overseer must be above reproach (Titus 1:7)
An overseer, then, must be above reproach (1 Tim 3:2)¹⁵

The same requirement is also at the head of each list (“the husband of one wife,” Titus 1:6; 1 Tim 3:2). Furthermore, the elements in the following lists are generally comparable.¹⁶ The use of

¹³See E. Earle Ellis, “Traditions in the Pastoral Epistles,” in *Early Jewish and Christian Exegesis*, ed. Craig Evans and William F. Stinespring [Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987], 237-53; idem, *The Making of the New Testament Documents*, BIS 39 [Leiden: Brill, 1999], 406–25. There appears to be a general consensus that the lists in 1 Tim 3 and Titus 1 are based on preformed traditions.

¹⁴Cf. the singular elder of 1 Tim. 5:1 and the singular widow of 1 Tim. 5:9.

¹⁵There are only two slight differences between these two phrases. The first difference involves the connecting particles. “For” (γάρ) is used in Titus whereas “then” (οὐν) is used in 1 Timothy—a difference that can be explained on the basis of context. The second variation involves the use of synonyms translated by the English word “above reproach.” Unlike the above English translation (NASB), however, the word order in Greek is identical.

¹⁶See Martin Dibelius and Hans Conzelmann, *The Pastoral Epistles*, trans. Philip Buttolph and Adela Yarbro, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972), 133; Knight, *Pastoral Epistles*, 156–57; Towner, *Goal of Our*

a preformed office code may also explain why the author of Titus uses the definite article (“the overseer”).¹⁷

If preformed traditions are being used, why are the lists of qualifications not identical? For example, why does the list in 1 Timothy include “not a new convert” (3:6) whereas Titus omits it? This omission may have been a necessary modification due to the early stage of development of the Cretan churches. Relatively new converts would then be needed in leadership of the younger churches.

6. It appears that the church in Crete was a relatively young church based on the following comparison of Titus 1 with 1 Timothy 3:¹⁸ (a) The omission of the qualification of not being a new convert. (b) The fact that no qualifications for deacons are given.¹⁹ (c) Titus is commanded to appoint elders but this instruction is missing in 1 Timothy since the Ephesian

Instruction, 225–26; Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 156–58; David C. Verner, *The Household of God: The Social World of the Pastoral Epistles*, SBLDS 71 (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1983), 103–06.

¹⁷Meier comments, “It may be, of course, that the singular in vs. 7 is also due to the fact that the author is here quoting a set list of requirements, a list in which *ton episkopon* is firmly embedded” (John P. Meier, “*Presbyteros* in the Pastoral Epistles,” *CBQ* 35 [1973]: 338). Mappes also notes, “The articular, singular construction of *τον ἐπίσκοπον* might be interpreted to mean a single overseer in a church, but because Paul has not changed subjects, the context requires that *τον ἐπίσκοπον* represents the group of *πρεσβύτεροι*” (David Mappes, “The New Testament Elder, Overseer, and Pastor,” *BSac* 154 [1997]: 166–67). Steinhauser agrees that the author probably used a literary source but elder and overseer are not interchangeable because “the author simply used a literary source concerning the overseer and applied it to the elders” (Kenneth B. Steinhauser, “Authority in the Primitive Church,” *PBR* 3 [1984]: 93). But why not simply eliminate the word “overseer” to avoid confusion?

¹⁸So Philip Carrington, *The Early Christian Church*, vol. 1, *The First Christian Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957), 269; Luke T. Johnson, *Letters to Paul's Delegates: 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996), 223; Kelly, *Pastoral Epistles*, 78; Lea-Griffin, *1, 2 Timothy, Titus*, 278 n. 11; Marshall, *Pastoral Epistles*, 146; Meier, “*Presbyteros* in the Pastoral Epistles,” 337; Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 385–86; Towner, *Goal of Our Instruction*, 233. Meier states that in relation to 1 Timothy, “One gets the impression when reading Tit[us] that a much more primitive state of ecclesiastical affairs is being described” (“*Presbyteros* in the Pastoral Epistles,” 337). Contra Merklein who argues that the church at Crete was more advanced than the Ephesian church (Helmut Merklein, *Das kirchliche Amt nach dem Epheserbrief*, SANT 33 [Munich: Kösel, 1973], 390).

¹⁹Knight agrees, “Tit[us] 1:5 suggests that the church in Crete had been established only a short time and was still virtually unorganized. In such a situation, only the initial rank of officers is prescribed, i.e., the bishops/presbyters, while 1 Timothy 3 refers to both bishops and deacons” (*Pastoral Epistles*, 175). Also see Marshall, *Pastoral Epistles*, 488.

church already had elders. Apparently, Paul was with Titus in Crete but had to leave before he could appoint elders (cf. Acts 14:23). (d) Since there is no discussion of the removal of a bad elder in Titus as there is in 1 Timothy 5:17–25, this again suggests that they did not yet have elders. (e) There is no order of widows mentioned in Titus (cf. 1 Tim 5:3–16). Consequently, if the churches in Crete were relatively young, how likely is it that these churches were dealing with the developed concept of a monarchical bishop?²⁰

7. Finally, there are similar cases where an author switches from elder to overseer in the New Testament, demonstrating that the words are used interchangeably. In Acts 20 Paul sends for the Ephesian elders to exhort them in their work (Acts 20:17). He charges them to take heed to themselves and to all the flock since the Holy Spirit has made them “overseers [ἐπίσκοπους], to shepherd the church of God” (Acts 20:28). First, Luke records that Paul calls them elders, but then has Paul referring to them as overseers (“he sent to Ephesus and called for the elders...the Holy Spirit has made you overseers”). Another example of the close connection between elder and overseer is found in 1 Peter 5:1–2, which states, “The elders who are among you I exhort . . . shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers.”

Based on the above evidence, it is therefore reasonable to maintain that the terms “elder” and “overseer” refer to the same office in Titus 1.²¹

²⁰So Guthrie, *Pastoral Epistles*, 36–37. Later he notes, “It is also surprising that he left the distinction between elders and bishops so ambiguous, if by the time of writing there was no possibility of the terms being used for the same office, as they are in the Pastorals” (ibid., 38).

²¹Beyer states, “The qualifications of presbyters here are like those of the bishops in 1 Tm. 3:2ff. In fact, there is an alteration of terms in Tt. 1:7, where we suddenly have ἐπίσκοπος instead of πρεσβύτερος. This is another proof that the two terms originally referred to the same thing (H. W. Beyer, “ἐπίσκοπος,” in *TDNT*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964], 2:617). Also see *1 Clem.* 42–44.

First Timothy 3:1–7; 5:17–25

As with the Titus 1 text, the focus of this section will not be to exegete the verses under discussion but to expand on those items which shed light on the nature of the relationship between elder and overseer. More specifically, it will be to demonstrate that the terms elder and overseer refer to the same office in this epistle. Similar to the arguments made with respect to Titus 1:5–7, it is often maintained that references to “the overseer” in 1 Timothy 3:1–2 and references to “the elders” in 1 Timothy 5:17 represent two distinct offices. There is, however, significant evidence that Paul uses the two terms to refer to the same office.

1. It is probable that the singular form “the overseer” (τὸν ἐπίσκοπον) in 1 Timothy 3:2 is a generic singular. This means that the author is not indicating that there is only one overseer in each church but that the singular form is used generically to indicate that overseers as a class are in view. As was true in the case of Titus 1:5–7, the singular use of “the overseer” could have been influenced by the singular use of “if anyone” (εἴ τις) in the preceding verse (1 Tim. 3:1).²² The context of 1 Timothy 2:8–3:16 also argues in favor of interpreting the singular form of “the overseer” as a generic singular since other generic singulars are used. Furthermore, the argument that “overseer” always appears in the singular in the Pastoral Epistles is a weak argument since it only occurs three times, and in precisely the same context (cf. 1 Tim. 3:1, 2; Titus 1:7).

2. If overseer and elder are two separate offices, it is strange that Paul never mentions the qualifications of elders in 1 Timothy, especially since the character of the one who is to fill the office of elder is so important. For example, in 1 Timothy 5:22, Paul cautions Timothy not to lay

²²Fee comments, “[the εἴ τις] clause in v. 1, which has led to the singular in this verse, is a nonlimiting, or generalizing, conditional sentence. It recurs in 1 Tim. 5:8 and 6:3, and in both cases—esp. 6:3—refers to a group of more than one” (Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus*, 84). Mounce likewise comments, “In 1 Timothy it appears that since there is only one office of overseer (with many fulfilling the role), Paul begins 3:1–7 with the generic singular...and to stay consistent continues with singular forms” (*Pastoral Epistles*, 163).

hands on (i.e., ordain) anyone to the position of an elder hastily since that position is to be filled only by qualified individuals (cf. 4:14; 2 Tim. 1:6). If elder is a distinct office from overseer, it would seem that qualifications would be clearly stated for such an important position.

3. Nowhere are the three offices (elder, overseer, and deacon) mentioned together, which suggests that a three-tiered ecclesiastical system is foreign to the Pastoral Epistles.²³ The letters of Ignatius, on the other hand, make a clear distinction between the monarchical bishop and the presbytery. That is, in Ignatius for the first time we see a three-tiered ecclesiastical system with a bishop, a presbytery, and deacons. For example, Ignatius exhorts his readers,

Be eager to do everything in godly harmony, the bishop presiding in the place of God and the presbyters in the place of the council of the apostles and the deacons, who are most dear to me, having been entrusted with the service of Jesus Christ. (*Magn.* 6:1)²⁴

For Ignatius, the overseer is clearly distinct from the council of elders and is the sole head of the city-church.

4. The fact that qualifications are given and not duties also argues against seeing this epistle in the context of a later, more developed system with a monarchical bishop. The only exception is that the overseer should be “apt to teach.” But as Mounce states, “An ability to teach and an exemplary character do not point to developments beyond the Pauline churches.”²⁵ The authority of the overseer is nowhere stressed as it is in later writings. Some would object stating that the authority of the overseer is found in the position represented by “Timothy” (or “Titus”).

²³It is also worth noting that the relationship between deacon and overseer is also not clearly delineated, except that the overseers seem to possess a greater authority than the deacons. This conclusion is based on the fact that overseers are mentioned first in 1 Timothy and Philippians 1:1. Yet, nowhere do we read that the deacons are to serve under the overseers as their personal helpers. Nor do we read that one must first serve as a deacon before he can serve as an overseer.

²⁴All quotations from Ignatius are from J. B. Lightfoot, J. R. Harmer, and Michael W. Holmes, eds., *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Text and English Translations of Their Writings*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992). Also see Ign. *Eph.* 2:2; 4:1; Ign. *Magn.* 2:1; 13:1; Ign. *Trall.* 2:2–3; 7:2; Ign. *Phld.* 4:1; 7:1; Ign. *Smyrn.* 8:1; 12:2; Ign. *Pol.* 6:1.

²⁵Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 154.

All the authority given to “Timothy” is to be seen as the authority given to the monarchical bishop, who is the real recipient of the letter. One argument for this position is that in Titus 1:9 the overseer is expected to be able “to refute” (ἐλέγχειν) those who contradict. Yet, in 1 Timothy 5:20 “Timothy” is told to “rebuke” (ἐλεγχέ) those who sin in the presence of all. Since the overseer has the task of rebuking, it is then concluded that the addressee of 1 Timothy is an overseer since he is told to rebuke those who sin.

The theory that Timothy and Titus actually represent the monarchical bishop is based on a number of questionable assumptions. First, one has to assume that Paul did not author the letters but that a later disciple writes under Paul’s name. Second, one has to assume that the author is not writing to Timothy and Titus but is simply using the guise of those names to address the monarchical bishop. Third, one has to assume that the authority given to “Timothy” and “Titus” is actually meant for the monarchical bishop. In the end nothing is as it appears but everything is reinterpreted within a speculative reconstruction—none of which can be proven. It is best to see Timothy and Titus as Paul’s apostolic delegates with temporary authority given to them by Paul in order to see that the churches under Paul’s authority remain faithful to the gospel of Christ.²⁶

Furthermore, in Ignatius, the authority given to the bishop as the sole leader of the church is above that given even to Timothy and Titus. In his letter to the Smyrnaeans, Ignatius writes,

You must all follow the bishop, as Jesus Christ followed the Father. . . . Let no one do anything that has to do with the church without the bishop. Only that Eucharist which is under the authority of the bishop (or whomever he himself designates) is to be considered valid. Wherever the bishop appears, there let the congregation be. . . . It is

²⁶Mounce rightly states, “Timothy and Titus are never pictured as the bishops of the Ephesian and Cretan churches (neither the title nor the function is ever applied to them). They are apostolic delegates, exercising Paul’s authority over the churches, standing outside the formal structure of the church” (ibid., 187). That Paul instructs Timothy and Titus to return to him also demonstrates that they do not possess a permanent ecclesiastical position but are apostolic delegates (2 Tim. 4:9, Titus 3:12).

not permissible either to baptize or to hold a love feast without the bishop. But whatever he approves is also pleasing to God, in order that everything you do may be trustworthy and valid. . . . It is good to acknowledge God and the bishop. The one who honors the bishop has been honored by God; the one who does anything without the bishop's knowledge serves the devil. (*Smyrn.* 8:1–9:1)

Elsewhere we read, “For all those who belong to God and Jesus Christ are with the bishop” (*Phil.* 3:2) and that the bishop is to be regarded “as the Lord himself” (*Eph.* 6:1).²⁷ Nowhere in the Pastorals is obedience to Timothy or Titus equated with obedience to God. The emphasis in the Pastorals is clearly on obedience to the true gospel as taught by Timothy and Titus, not to an office-bearer. After comparing the Pastoral Epistles with Ignatius, Mounce comments, “The similarities are so superficial, and the differences so extreme, that this becomes one of the strongest arguments that the PE are not from the second century and in fact reflect a much earlier stage of the church's institutional development.”²⁸

5. The fact that elders and overseers are said to have the same function in the church (i.e., ruling) also suggests that the two terms refer to the same office. First Timothy 3:4–5 states that an overseer must “rule” (προΐστημι) his own house before he is fit to take care of the church (cf. Rom. 12:8; 1 Thess. 5:12). Likewise, 1 Timothy 5:17 speaks of elders who “rule” (προΐστημι) well.²⁹ Although the latter verse is highly debated, nowhere does it suggest that some of the elders do not rule.

²⁷For the bishop's authority, also see Ign. *Eph.* 2:1–2; 4:1; 5:3; 6:1; Ign. *Magn.* 2:1; 3:1 6:1; Ign. *Trall.* 2:1–2; 3:1; 13:2; Ign. *Phld.* 3:2; Ign. *Pol.* 6:1.

²⁸Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 186. Johnson similarly comments, “The elements of church order found in 1 Timothy and Titus are far closer to that in the undisputed letters of Paul than to the ecclesiastical structure found in the letters of Ignatius of Antioch (*Letters to Paul's Delegates*, 16). Later he adds, “1 Timothy lacks entirely the elaborate theological legitimation found in Ignatius” (ibid., 174).

²⁹Quinn and Wacker state that “a *presbyter* is here defined in terms of his *proïstanai*, and this in turn was precisely the term that 1 Tim 3:4–5 used to illustrate the relationship of the *episkopos* to the church” (Jerome D. Quinn and William C. Wacker, *The First and Second Letters to Timothy*, ECC [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000], 459).

6. It is argued that since an overseer must be “able to teach” (1 Tim. 3:2; cf. Titus 1:9) and only some elders “work hard at preaching and teaching” (1 Tim. 5:17), this suggests that only those elders who taught were designated with the title “overseer.” This interpretation, however, fails to acknowledge that among those who hold the same office, there is likely to be some who are more gifted in particular areas, such as teaching.³⁰ Also, if 1 Timothy 3:2–7 and Titus 1:7–9 represent preformed traditional codes, “then it is conceivable that requirements related to function were meant to be typical, that is, generally related to the office, but not necessarily to be carried out by every office-holder, at least not in the sense of 1 Tim. 5:17.”³¹ As a rule every candidate for this office was to have some abilities in teaching.³²

Mounce states that the phrase “the elders who rule well” (1 Tim. 5:17) could be interpreted the following ways while still addressing only one office: (a) “While asserting that all elders are able to teach, Paul could have based the division on those currently teaching and those who were not. Perhaps . . . [some] overseers would have had to vary the amount of time spent specifically on teaching because of other responsibilities, and this admonition would address those actively teaching.”³³ (b) This phrase “could apply to gifted teachers who were currently leading in other ways (while still allowing for one-on-one teaching, both with the opponents and the other members of the church), and ‘laboring hard at preaching and teaching’ could apply to

³⁰Mappes comments, “While all elder-overseer-pastors must be able to teach (1 Tim. 3:2) and exhort and refute with sound doctrine (Titus 1:9), they may not all have the spiritual gifts of teaching and exhorting (Rom. 12:7)” (“New Testament Elder,” 174).

³¹Towner, *Goal of Our Instruction*, 226.

³²Dibelius-Conzelmann assert that διδακτικός (“skillful in teaching,” 1 Tim. 3:2) “does not prove that the bishop had already assumed, as his regular duty, the office of teaching . . . but only that some capability in this regard was desired” (*Pastoral Epistles*, 53).

³³Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 308. This is the position of Kelly, *Pastoral Epistles*, 124–25 and Quinn-Wacker, *First and Second Letters to Timothy*, 459. Quinn-Wacker write, “The point here is that some (and they are

those currently teaching the church as a whole.”³⁴ (c) “The division could be based on those who were able to teach and those who were especially gifted to teach, dividing the elders on the basis of ability and giftedness and assuming that the more gifted did more of the corporate instruction.”³⁵

Furthermore, there is also the possibility of translating the Greek word *μάλιστα* as “namely” or “that is” instead of “especially.”³⁶ The verse would then read, “The elders who rule well are to be considered worthy of double honor, that is, those who work hard at preaching and teaching.” In this case Paul is not making a distinction between those who rule well and those who in addition to ruling well also preach and teach. Rather, those who rule well are precisely those who teach and preach (i.e., Paul is stating that the elders rule well *by* their teaching and preaching). This interpretation seems to fit the author’s stress on the importance of teaching³⁷ and a threefold division of elders is hard to imagine.³⁸

relatively few, one would surmise, because of the doubling of the honorarium) have obviously devoted all their time to this service and have done it well” (ibid.).

³⁴Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 308.

³⁵Ibid. This is the position of Ernest F. Scott, *The Pastoral Epistles*, MNTC (New York: Harper, 1936), 64–65; C. K. Barrett, *The Pastoral Epistles in the English Bible* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1963), 79; Mappes, “New Testament Elder,” 174; and Knight, who writes, “Although all elders are to be able to teach (1 Tim 3:2) and thus to instruct the people of God and to communicate with those who oppose biblical teaching (Tit 1:9ff.), the 1 Timothy 5:17 passage recognizes that among the elders, all of whom are to be able to teach, there are those so gifted by God with the ability to teach the Word that they are called by God to give their life in such a calling or occupation and deserve therefore to be remunerated for such a calling and occupation” (George W. Knight, “Two Offices [Elders/Bishops and Deacons] and Two Orders of Elders [Preaching/Teaching Elders and Ruling Elders]: A New Testament Study,” *Presbyterian* 11 [1985]: 6).

³⁶See Skeat, who convincingly argues that *μάλιστα* is often best translated as “namely” (T. C. Skeat, “‘Especially the Parchments’: A Note on 2 Timothy IV. 13,” *JTS* 30 [1979]: 173–77). Those who follow this interpretation include Marshall, *Pastoral Epistles*, 612; and Towner, *1–2 Timothy & Titus*, 125.

³⁷So Jürgen Roloff, *Der erste Brief an Timotheus*, EKKNT 15 (Zürich: Benzigen; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1988), 307.

³⁸So Meier, “*Presbyteros* in the Pastoral Epistles,” 326.

Yet, even with this interpretation a distinction can be made between two types of elders. If “ruling well” is defined by “working hard at preaching and teaching,” then a distinction can still be made between those who rule well (i.e., preach and teach) and those who do not rule well (i.e., do not preach and teach). For example, Knight states that it is likely that Paul “is speaking of a subgroup of the ‘overseers’ that consists of those who are *especially* gifted by God to teach, as opposed to other overseers, who must all ‘be *able* to teach.’”³⁹ But it is also possible that Paul is speaking generally of all the elders and is not intending to distinguish a subgroup.⁴⁰ Regardless of how this difficult verse is interpreted, it in no way demands one to see two offices involved. At most, the text indicates a distinction of function within one particular office.

7. The reason two terms are given for the same office could be explained by the general use of the terms: elder is more a description of character whereas overseer is more a description of function.⁴¹ It appears that originally various congregations preferred one term over the other. The Jewish congregations apparently favored the term elder, whereas the Gentile congregations favored the term overseer. Over time these two terms came to be used in the same congregations and could be used interchangeably since they referred to the leaders of the congregation. It is likely that both terms remained due to the important connotations each term carried. The term elder conveyed the idea of a wise, mature leader who was honored and respected by those of the community. The term overseer spoke more to the work of the individual whose duty it was to

³⁹Knight, *Pastoral Epistles*, 233.

⁴⁰So Towner, *1–2 Timothy & Titus*, 125.

⁴¹Schaff states that “the terms PRESBYTER (or Elder) and BISHOP (or Overseer, Superintendent) denote in the New Testament one and the same office, with this difference...that the one signifies the dignity, the other the duty” (Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. 1, *Apostolic Christianity*, 3rd rev. ed. [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996; originally published in 1858], 491–92). Barrett states, “It is broadly speaking true that the one designation describes ministers from a sociological, the other from a theological angle” (C. K. Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts*, ICC [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998], 2:975). Even Campbell can write, “Πρεσβύτερος . . . connoted the *character* of those who thus served as overseers” (*Elders*, 259).

provide “oversight” to the congregation. The term conveyed the idea of protection and supervision over those under their care.

Conclusion

This article has sought to demonstrate that the terms elder and overseer represent the same office in the Pastoral Epistles. If this analysis is indeed accurate, then some conclusions can be made.

First, the church should be governed by only two types of officers: elders/overseers and deacons. Almost all scholars agree that a three-tiered ecclesiastical system (overseer, elder, and deacon) is a later development and therefore foreign to the New Testament documents. There is simply not enough evidence to maintain a distinction between the terms elder and overseer. Although it must be admitted that the New Testament does not present a universal church government since development differed from time and place, it is clear that by the time of the Pastoral Epistles were written there were only two church offices.

Second, the church should be led by a plurality of elders/overseers. In every case that the term “elders” is used in the New Testament it is found in the plural (except in 1 Tim. 5:19). This strongly suggests that the New Testament church was governed by a group of qualified leaders and not by one individual. The local church should not be structured in such a way that one leader has sole authority within the church. The model of Scripture is that a group of qualified leaders are needed which provides accountability, balance, and the sharing of responsibilities.

Finally, the elders/overseers should be viewed as equal in status. If our interpretation of 1 Timothy 5:17 is correct, then this text does not teach two different kinds of elders (known in some circles as teaching elders and ruling elders). Rather, what is in view is a distinction between those who did not have as much *time* as others and therefore only some were “working

hard” at preaching and teaching or between those who did not have as much *talent*, and therefore did little preaching and teaching since others were more gifted in that area. The distinction in 1 Timothy 5:17 is a functional, not a formal distinction.