

What Do You Call Your Elders?

by Robert Hatfield

The Bible says that “all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution” (2 Tim. 3:12), and elders are obviously included in that group of sufferers. There are individuals (some who claim to be Christians) who, when attacking elders, will call them by a host of disrespectful names, but the Bible puts elders in a different light. In fact, the New Testament uses three Greek words that translate into six English words to create a “word picture” of what it really means to be an elder of the Lord’s church, and how Christian brothers and sisters are to respond to these spiritual leaders.

The first of the three Greek words used in the New Testament is **presbuteros**, and is translated “elder” and “presbyter” (cf. 1 Tim. 4:14) in the English language. The word is used to refer to the maturity, age and experience of those who serve as elders, and can be found in passages such as Titus 1:5, 1 Timothy 5:17, Acts 14:23 and 1 Peter 5:1.

The second Greek word, **episcopos**, translates “bishop” and “overseer” in English. This word refers to the supervisory duties of the men. Passages such as Acts 20:28, Philippians 1:1, 1 Timothy 3:2 and Titus 1:7 unquestionably show the responsibility that elders have to rule over and superintend (under God’s guidance and authority) the flock.

The third Greek word is **poimen**. This word translates “shepherd” and “pastor” and refers to the responsibility that elders have to feed and care for God’s flock. Ephesians 4:11 refers to those who are “pastors and teachers.” Bro. Wayne Jackson points out that “the construction in the Greek text suggests that the ‘pastors’ and the ‘teachers’ represent the same men in this context, i.e., they are ‘pastors’ who ‘teach’” (*Before I Die: Paul’s Letters to Timothy and Titus*, pp 81-82). In fact, being “apt to teach” is a requirement for one who desires the office of an elder (1 Tim. 3:2). Peter used the verb form of *poimen* when he exhorted elders to “Feed (*poimaino*) the flock of God” (1 Pet. 5:1-2).

It is important to note the fact that all of these words are used *interchangeably* in the New Testament and, thus, refer to the same men. Additionally, they are always used in the plural form (in Greek, as well as that which is reflected in English), which solidifies the argument against any *one* man ruling over a congregation or group of congregations. It is *never* “the elder,” “the bishop” or “the pastor” in the New Testament.

How, then, should one refer to his or her elders? Is not the duty of godly elders to be commended and respected? Are not Christians called to “obey them which have the rule over” them (Heb. 13:17)? There is

no doubt about it: great respect is due to men of God who faithfully serve and oversee a congregation of the Lord’s people. One must keep in mind that elders are human, and that “all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23). However, godly elders are those who strive to live as close to the Will of God as is possible. They are experienced men (*presbuteros*) who oversee (*episcopos*) and tend to (*poimen*) the flock of God as they operate under the authority of He who is the “Shepherd and Bishop of your souls” (1 Pet. 2:25; cf. Heb. 13:20; John 10:11, 14).

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