

Introduction:

1. Last week we discussed the organization of the church.
 - a. All Christians are members of the body of Christ and of the local congregation.
 - b. Within the local congregation, each member plays a different role.
 - c. Some members fulfill the role of leaders (elders).
 - d. Some members fulfill the role of servants (deacons).
 2. This week, we will be looking specifically at the Bible descriptions of elders.
 3. Did you know that the Bible uses three words to describe elders?
 - a. Elders
 - b. Bishops
 - c. Shepherds
 4. Some believe that these referred to three different offices, but I would like you to notice the following:
 - a. Acts 20:17 – Paul calls the elders from Ephesus.
 - b. Acts 20:28 – Paul calls them “overseers” (this is the same Greek word as “bishop”).
 - c. Acts 20:28 – Paul tells them to “feed” (shepherd) the flock.
 - d. Titus 1:5 – Paul tells Titus to ordain elders in every city.
 - e. Titus 1:7 – Paul gives him the qualification for “bishops.”
 - f. I Peter 5:1 – Peter addresses the elders.
 - g. I Peter 5:2 – Peter tells them to exercise the office of bishops.
 - h. I Peter 5:2 – Peter tells them to “feed” (shepherd) the flock.
 5. The elders held the office of bishops and were commanded to shepherd.
 6. Therefore, they are three different descriptions of one office.
- I. Elders are older.
- a. The word “elder” (PRESBUTEROS) means one who is older.
 - i. This is not a term which exclusively means “a leader in the local congregation.”
 - ii. Instead, this is a general term used to describe men who have maturity and experience.
 - iii. By definition, this means an older man.
 - iv. One religious group takes their name from this Greek word (Presbyterian), naming themselves after their form of church government.
 - b. What makes one “older”?
 - i. There are some who will gladly appoint a man in his 30’s or early 40’s to be an elder.
 1. Is this an older man?
 2. The argument they use goes like this:
 - a. The lifespan back then was barely 45.
 - b. Therefore, a man would be considered “older” in his late 30’s.
 3. Is this truly the case?
 4. Let us let the Bible shine some common sense on the subject.
 - a. I Timothy 5:9 – let not a widow be taken into the number under threescore years old.
 - b. The church was not to support widows under 60.
 - c. I Timothy 5:11 – but the younger widows refuse.
 - d. Those under 60 were to be refused continual aid.
 - e. I Timothy 5:14 – I will that the younger women (those under 60) marry, bear children, etc...

4. A sound, spiritual diet will produce healthy Christians who are then prepared to do every good work (II Timothy 3:16-17).
- c. Elders also have the responsibility to protect the flock.
 - i. Shepherds carried a staff for two reasons.
 1. One was to help sheep who had fallen to stand back up.
 2. The other was to use as a weapon to keep predators away.
 - ii. Elders must protect the flock by making sure they do not become victims of false teachers.
 1. Some may wonder why we do not involve ourselves with some of the congregations in the area.
 2. This is because the elders are doing their job of protecting the flock from the influence of false teachers within the brotherhood.
 - iii. Elders must protect the flock by helping them up once they have fallen so they don't stay in that condition.
 1. It is the responsibility of the elders to try to lift up the Christians who have fallen astray.
 2. Having said that, it is the responsibility of every Christian to be a good soldier of Christ, winning back the hearts that have been lost.
 3. Helping the erring Christian to return to fellowship with God is not an exclusive job of the elders or the preacher; it is the responsibility of every Christian.
 - d. Elders are to guide the sheep in the way they should go.
 - i. Shepherds are ones the pastures where the sheep feed.
 1. See Psalm 23:1-2.
 2. If the congregation is in need of certain spiritual food (specific topics or lessons), it is the responsibility of the elders to make sure the congregation hears them.
 - a. This can be done by choosing the classroom material.
 - b. This can be done by asking the preacher to cover certain topics.
 - ii. If the sheep start heading in a dangerous direction, the shepherd is to guide them elsewhere.
 1. The elders are to be watchful and make sure the congregation is heading in the right direction.
 2. There are things that, in and of themselves, are not sinful, but if allowed and encouraged could lead the congregation down a slippery slope.
 3. We need to make sure we don't decry something sinful which isn't, but at the same time, we need not do something which may lead down that path towards sin.
 4. For example: Rubel Shelley wrote many books of very sound material back in the 1970s.
 - a. Would it be inherently wrong for us to buy those books and give them to the members?
 - b. If we were to do that, however, it might give the impression that his other books are sound.
 - c. Then people might pick up another book and be adversely influenced by it.
 - d. It is better not to start it in the first place than to risk a soul (I Corinthians 10).

- III. Elders are Overseers (Acts 20:28).
 - a. The word here is EPISKIPOS, meaning to oversee or superintend.
 - i. This word is sometimes translated overseer (Acts 20:28).
 - ii. Other times it is translated “bishop” (I Timothy 3:2).
 - iii. It indicates one who investigates something (literally the word means “to look intently upon), an examiner.
 - 1. EPI means “upon,” and “SKOPEO” means to examine, to look intently.
 - a. We get the word “scope” (as in microscope, telescope, etc..) from this word.
 - 2. Thayer’s says it means to scrutinize.
 - iv. It indicates being one who oversees a work, a manager or supervisor.
 - v. There is a religious group who is named after this Greek word (Episcopalian).
 - b. Uses of the word EPISKOPOS.
 - i. Jesus was called an EPISKOPOS (bishop) of our souls (I Peter 2:25).
 - 1. In the same verse, He is also called our Shepherd (POIMEN)
 - ii. In the Greek translation of the Old Testament:
 - 1. It was used of God (Job 20:29).
 - 2. It was primarily used in the sense of visitation for punishment, inquisition, or numbering (Vincent’s Word Studies).
 - iii. Elders are said to hold the office of a bishop (I Timothy 3:1).
 - 1. Therefore it is a God-ordained role in the local church.
 - 2. Each congregation, ideally, would have elders to oversee the local work.
 - c. Elders are to look intently upon the congregation.
 - i. This means the elders must get to know the members well.
 - 1. The elders cannot act (as many do) as though they are above the membership and don’t want to have anything to do with them.
 - ii. The elders must investigate new members (and current members) to make sure that they are sound in the faith.
 - 1. Liz moved to Columbia, TN, and the elders of the congregation there called us to investigate her before they could accept her as a member there.
 - 2. This is the reason why some people carried letters of commendation when they moved (I Corinthians 16:3, II Corinthians 3:1).
 - iii. The elders must examine the members to be sure they are fulfilling their role in the church.
 - iv. Some Christians get bent out of shape when the elders “pry” into their personal business (meaning their personal sins), yet that is what the word “bishop” demands!
 - v. Because of the demands of looking intently upon the congregation, knowing their troubles and struggles and needs, it is important that the congregation have enough elders.
 - 1. In a congregation of 150 people, do you really think three men could get to know everyone well enough that they could do their job as elders effectively?
 - 2. This becomes even more difficult since many elders have jobs in order to support their family.

3. In addition to making sure there is not a one-man ruler of the congregation, having multiple elders in each congregation is just good common sense.
- d. Elders are to manage the congregation.
 - i. This means the elders look at the congregation, see what skills each one has, and then puts each one to work in the way that best fits their abilities.
 - ii. Some congregations rotate teachers to keep them from getting burned-out, but also to make sure as many members as possible are involved in the work.
 - iii. The elders have a responsibility to maximize the output of the congregation.
 - iv. What is the job of an office manager?
 1. It is to make sure the employees are all doing their jobs and doing them correctly.
 2. The elder's responsibility is the same within the congregation.
 3. If someone is not attending services regularly, it is the elders' responsibility to find out why and then to try to correct the problem.
 4. If someone would be more effectively used in a certain aspect of the church's work, it is the role of the elder to recognize that and get them to doing it!
- e. Because of the absolute importance of this work and the time and effort it entails, God gave authority for elders to be financially supported by the church (I Timothy 5:17).
 - i. This is not a requirement (some congregations cannot afford to pay the elders enough to support their family).
 - ii. However, if a man is willing to devote his life to being a full-time overseer of the church, and the church has the means, he ought to be supported in this work.
 - iii. If we can pay the preacher (which we can – Matthew 10:10, I Timothy 5:18) to work full-time bringing us lessons and teaching, why do we not also see the need to have elders who are paid so they can work full-time helping us all get to heaven?
 - iv. Again, this is an individual choice.
 1. Some congregations may not have the means.
 2. The stipulation given by God is that the elder must first prove himself (the elders that rule well are worthy...).
 3. Some men do not have the need for support (have a good pension).
 4. It is not a sin to be a volunteer elder, fulfilling the role as best you can.

Conclusion:

1. I hope you have seen through this that the role of an elder is a difficult, often strenuous one.
2. Those who desire the office of a bishop desire a good WORK (I Timothy 3:1).
 - a. Make no mistake about it, there is work involved in being an elder!
3. God's requirements (based on these three words) are:
 - a. The elder must be older, mature.
 - b. The elder must protect and feed the sheep.
 - c. The elder must oversee the work of the local congregation, including its members.
4. The role of an elder can be summed up as follows:
 - a. To protect and feed the congregation, doing his best to make sure they all live in a way that they will get to heaven.
5. Elders deserve far more respect than they are often given.
6. So, to the elders, I say thank you.