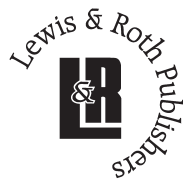


---

**The Elder and Overseer**

**One Office in the  
Early Church**

---



*The Elder and Overseer: One Office in the Early Church*

ISBN-10: 0936083778

ISBN-13: 9780936083773

Copyright © 2022 by Benjamin L. Merkle. All rights reserved.

Printed in the United States of America

First Printing 2022

To receive a free catalog of books published by Lewis and Roth Publishers, please call toll free 800-477-3239 or visit our website, [www.LewisandRoth.com](http://www.LewisandRoth.com).

If you are calling from outside the United States, please call 719-494-1800.

Lewis and Roth Publishers

307 Delaware Drive

Colorado Springs, Colorado 80909

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

---

Preface .....	ix
Abbreviations .....	xi
1. History of Research.....	1
2. Background of the Terms "Elder and "Overseer" .....	23
Elders in the Old Testament .....	23
The usage of the term "elders" in the Old Testament .....	23
The identity of elders in the Old Testament .....	24
The function of elders in the Old Testament .....	26
Elders in Early Judaism .....	30
Elders in the Septuagint .....	30
Elders in the literature of Qumran .....	35
Elders in Josephus .....	38
Elders in the Mishna .....	38
Elders in Greco-Roman sources .....	39
Elders in the papyri and inscriptions .....	39
Elders in Plutarch .....	42
Elders in the New Testament .....	43
The Origin of the Christian Elder .....	44
Christian elders adapted from Old Testament elders .....	45
Christian elders adapted from the Sanhedrin elders .....	46
Christian elders adapted from synagogue elders .....	47
Christian elders adapted from the culture .....	52
Christian elders are unique .....	55

Background of the term "Overseer" .....	56
Overseers in Early Judaism .....	56
Overseers in the Septuagint .....	56
Overseers in the literature of Qumran .....	57
Overseers in Greco-Roman Sources .....	59
Overseers in the New Testament .....	61
The Origin of the Christian Overseer .....	62
<b>3. "Office" in Paul's Letters to Churches .....</b>	<b>67</b>
History of the Office- <i>Charisma</i> Debate .....	67
Early German Pioneers .....	67
Richard Rothe .....	67
Ferdinand Christian Baur .....	67
Albrecht Ritschl .....	69
Edwin Hatch .....	69
Rudolf Sohm .....	72
Adolf van Harnack .....	74
Recent Scholars Affirming the "New" Consensus .....	77
Rudolf Bultmann .....	78
Hans von Campenhausen .....	80
Eduard Schweizer .....	81
Ernst Käsemann .....	82
Recent Scholars Rejecting the "New" Consensus .....	84
Herman Ridderbos .....	84
Herman Lombard .....	86
Ronald Fung .....	87
Conclusion .....	89
Organized Ministries in Paul's Letters to Churches .....	91
Galatians 6:6 .....	94
1 Thessalonians 5:12–13 .....	97
1 Corinthians 16:15–16.....	101
Romans 16:1–2 .....	104
Philippians 1:1 .....	107
Colossians 1:7; 4:12, 17.....	110

Ephesians 4:11 .....	112
Non-Pauline Texts .....	114
Conclusion .....	118
<b>4. Elder and Overseer in Acts and the Pastoral Epistles .....</b>	<b>121</b>
Introduction .....	121
Elders in Acts .....	121
The Authority of the Jerusalem Elders (Acts 11; 15; 21) .....	122
The Appointing of Elders (Acts 14:23) .....	126
The Activity of Elders (Acts 20:17–38) .....	129
Conclusion .....	135
Elder and Overseer in the Pastoral Epistles .....	135
The Setting and Context of the Pastoral Epistles .....	135
Titus 1:5–9 .....	142
1Timothy 3:1–7; 5:17–25 .....	148
General Conclusion .....	157
Summary .....	157
Implications for Today.....	160
 Bibliography .....	 163



## PREFACE

---

This work presents a revision of my doctoral dissertation completed under Professor Mark A. Seifrid at Southern Seminary in December 2002. I want to take this opportunity to express my gratitude to Dr. Seifrid for his supervision and his pursuit of excellence, which have increased the quality of this work. I also want to thank Robert H. Stein and Thomas R. Schreiner for their valuable comments and sustaining encouragement, I will always be grateful for having studied under such fine scholars and genuine men of God.

I also acknowledge my friends and colleagues who have read portions of this work and have provided valuable feedback. In particular, I wish to express gratitude to Robert L. Plummer, who has been not only a helpful editor but also a close friend.

The support and encouragement of my wife, Marian, has been unsurpassed. She has made the burden of this project light and even enjoyable. She has been an excellent wife to me and a faithful mother to our children

Most of all I give thanks to God, who has given me the grace and strength to complete this project. I count it a great privilege to have been able to invest so much time on such an important topic. It is my prayer that the results of this study are true to the Word of God and helpful to the Church of Jesus Christ. *Soli Deo Gloria.*

Benjamin Lee Merkle





## CHAPTER 1

---

# History of Research

### General Introduction

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.<sup>1</sup> 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).<sup>2</sup>

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 usually in the plural.<sup>3</sup> The use of the singular is especially noticeable against the plural “deacons” (διακόνους) used in 1 Timothy 3:8.
2. In both 1 Timothy 3:2 and Titus 1:7 “the overseer” (τὸν ἐπίσκοπον)

- 
1. J. B. Lightfoot, *St. Paul’s Epistle to the Philippians* (London: Macmillan, 1881), 95–99; also see 181–269 (Appendix: “The Christian Ministry”).
  2. *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).
  3. The only exception is 1 Tim 5:19: “Do not accept an accusation against an elder [κατὰ πρεσβυτέρου] except on the basis of two or three witnesses.” All translations of the Bible are the author’s, unless otherwise noted.

contains the definite article, which perhaps indicates the elevation of one overseer above the elders.

3. Teaching is the responsibility of all overseers (1 Tim 3:2; Titus 1:9), but 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.<sup>4</sup> 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.
8. A majority of scholars reject the authenticity of the Pastoral Epistles and therefore date them later in the history of the church (late first century or early second century). The later the date given to the Pastoral Epistles, the greater the possibility of ecclesiastical development.

Based on the above objections, many scholars today deny that the terms elder and overseer referred to the same office in the early church. 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.<sup>5</sup> The goal of this work, therefore, is to demonstrate clearly and convincingly that the terms “elder” (πρεσβύτερος) and “overseer” (ἐπίσκοπος) refer to the same office in the New Testament.

There are some limitations to this study. Not every passage in the New Testament with the terms elder or overseer receives the same exegetical treatment. More attention is given to texts that shed light on the relationship between those terms. Also, in examining the relationship between elder and

---

4. The only exception is Titus 1:5, 7.

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

overseer in the literature outside the New Testament, not every relevant passage will be treated. Instead, a picture of this relationship will be provided from an analysis of representative texts.

In order to examine this relationship, the history of the terms elder and overseer will first be investigated in the Jewish and Graeco-Roman literature, concentrating on primary sources. Those results will then be related to the New Testament data.

This work consists of four chapters. The remainder of this chapter examines the history of research concerning the relationship between the terms elder and overseer in the New Testament, particularly in the Pastoral Epistles.

Chapter 2 investigates the background of the terms “elder” and “overseer.” The usage of the term “elder” is surveyed in the context of the Old Testament, early Judaism (the Septuagint, the literature of Qumran, Josephus, and the Mishna), the Greco-Roman sources (the papyri, inscriptions, and Plutarch), and the New Testament. The origin of the Christian elder is also examined. Similarly, the background of the term “overseer” will be discussed in the context of early Judaism (the Septuagint and the literature of Qumran), the Greco-Roman sources, and the New Testament. Finally, the origin of the Christian overseer is discussed.

Chapter 3 first offers a survey of the history of the office-*charisma* debate. Paul’s view of office and *charisma* is then investigated by examining his letters to churches. The selected texts, which are discussed in their probable chronological order, demonstrate Paul’s affirmation of organized ministry in the churches with which he was associated.

Chapter 4 examines elder and overseer in Acts and the Pastoral Epistles. The study of Acts focuses on the authority, appointing, and activity of elders. Most importantly, this chapter covers the data in the Pastoral Epistles. By carefully examining Titus 1:5–9; 1 Timothy 3:1–7; and 1 Timothy 5:17–25, it is demonstrated that the terms elder and overseer are used to denote the same office in the Pastoral Epistles. This chapter then provides a conclusion to this study.

### **The Relationship between Elder and Overseer**

This overview will not be presented historically but categorically. Since the focus of research on the topic of elders and overseers is centered on the Pastoral Epistles, we will consider various views concerning the relationship

between these two terms as they arise specifically in the context of these epistles. Although there are more views than will be discussed, the following five views have been the most influential.<sup>6</sup>

### **Elder is Not an Office**

This view, championed by Joachim Jeremias, states that in the Pastoral Epistles *πρεσβύτερος* always means “older man” and never refers to an officeholder.<sup>7</sup> The overseers, however, would routinely be chosen from these hon-

- 
6. For example, other possible views are (1) the term *ἐπίσκοπος* is not an office but merely a functional term (F. J. A. Hort, *The Christian Ecclesia* [London: Macmillan, 1898], 190–91; Thomas M. Lindsay, *The Church and the Ministry in the Early Centuries* [London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1902], 165); (2) Frances M. Young suggests that the Pastoral Epistles represent a perceptible shift in the way Christians identified themselves socially—from understanding themselves as “the household of God” to “the people of God.” Therefore, there is an increasing tendency to pattern the church after Jewish forms of organization. The *ἐπίσκοπος* began to acquire the functions of the *ἀρχισυνάγωγος*, and the *διάκονοι* those of the synagogue attendant. The “seniors” were constituted into a governing council, with the authority to appoint and advise the *ἐπίσκοπος* (Frances Young, “On ΕΠΙΣΚΟΠΙΟΣ and ΠΡΕΣΒΥΤΕΡΟΣ,” *JTS* 45 [1994]: 142–48; idem, *The Theology of the Pastoral Letters*, New Testament Theology [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994], 97–111).
7. Those who hold this view include Rudolf Sohm, *Kirchenrecht*, vol. 1, SHDR 8 (Leipzig: Dunker & Humboldt, 1892), 93; Marvin R. Vincent, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistles to the Philippians and to Philemon*, ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1897), 47–49; Walter Lowrie, *The Church and Its Organization: The Primitive Age* (London: Longmans, Green, 1904), 391; Adolf von Harnack, *The Constitution and Law of the Church in the First Two Centuries*, trans. F. Pogson (London: Williams & Norgate; New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1910), 90–93; Joachim Jeremias, *Die Briefe an Timotheus und Titus*, NTD 9 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1954); idem, “ΠΡΕΣΒΥΤΕΡΙΟΝ außerchristlich bezeugt,” *ZNW* 48 (1957): 127–32; idem, “Zur Datierung der Pastoralbriefe,” in *Abba: Studien zur neutestamentlichen Theologie und Zeitgeschichte* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1966), 314–16; R. Alastair Campbell, *The Elders: Seniority within Earliest Christianity*, Studies of the New Testament and Its World (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), passim. Jeremias writes, “Tatsächlich nötigt keine einzige der vier Stellen, an denen *πρεσβύτερος* in den Pastoralbriefen vorkommt, dazu, in dem Wort etwas anderes als eine Altersbezeichnung zu sehen” (*Abba*, 316). This view was earlier held by Sohm, who states, “Die Ältesten jener früheren Zeit (bis zum Ende des ersten Jahrhunderts) kein Amt, sondern einen Stand bedeuten” (*Kirchenrecht*, 93). Following Sohm, Lowrie asserts, “Originally the presbyterate did not denote an office in any proper sense, but only a position of honor in the assembly” (*Church and Its Organi-*

ored older members of the church. According to Jeremias, the only two offices in the church are overseer and deacon. The elders are simply those who were respected as the older members of the community. Jeremias argues the following:<sup>8</sup>

1. The use of *πρεσβύτερος* in 1 Timothy 5:1 clearly refers to age and not office.<sup>9</sup>
2. The immediate context (1 Tim 5:3–16) speaks of the need to support widows, particularly referring to widows who are over the age of sixty. Therefore, the theme of age runs throughout the entire chapter.
3. If we translate *πρεσβύτεροι* as presbyters (i.e., office-holders) in 1 Timothy 5:17,<sup>10</sup> then we have two levels of payment among officers based on performance (those who rule versus those who rule well), which is extremely unlikely. If, however, the text refers to older men, then the meaning is that the older men who rule well *as overseers* should receive twice the stipend paid to other old men or widows.<sup>11</sup>
4. This view eliminates the problem in Titus 1:5–7 where the author commands Titus to appoint elders in every city but then goes on to speak of the overseer. Jeremias argues that *πρεσβύτεροι* and *ἐπίσκοπος* are not two terms for the same office. Rather, the meaning is that Titus is to appoint older men to the office of *ἐπίσκοπος* in every city.
5. It is therefore to be expected that *πρεσβύτερος* is omitted from the qualifications for office-holders in 1 Timothy 3 since the only offices are overseer and deacon (cf. Phil 1:1).
6. The Pastoral Epistles are thus in line with the rest of the Pauline

---

zation, 391).

8. See Jeremias, *Timotheus und Titus*; idem, “ΠΡΕΣΒΥΤΕΡΙΟΝ außerchristlich bezeugt,” 127–32; idem, “Zur Datierung der Pastoralbriefe,” 314–16.
9. “Do not rebuke an older man [*πρεσβύτερος*], but exhort him as a father, younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, younger women as sisters, with all purity” (1 Tim 5:1–2).
10. “Let the elders [*πρεσβύτεροι*] who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching” (1 Tim 5:17).
11. Barrett holds a view similar to that of Jeremias on 1 Tim 5:17. He states that the term “‘elders’ has not fully reached its technical meaning but still means fundamentally ‘older men’” (C. K. Barrett, *The Pastoral Epistles in the New English Bible* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1963], 78).

Epistles, which also lack the use of πρεσβύτερος as a designation for office.

Jeremias summarizes his position, "...daß das Wort presbyteroi nicht Amts, sondern Altersbezeichnung ist."<sup>12</sup>

More recently, R. A. Campbell has proposed a similar position to that of Jeremias. Campbell's basic thesis is that "*the elders are those who bear a title of honour, not of office, a title that is imprecise, collective and representative, and rooted in the ancient family or household.*"<sup>13</sup> As in the Old Testament, "elders" in the New Testament never refers to an elected or appointed position but is a title of respect based on social status, heredity, or character. Since the household provided the basic structure of the church, Campbell suggests that house churches came with a built-in leadership structure. The person who owned and ran the home would naturally be respected and viewed as the leader of the church. No title, however, would be needed since he was the only leader. As the church grew, argues Campbell, there would be a need for others to assume the responsibility of shepherding and teaching. He continues:

The householder may for this reason have been distinguished from others by the general title of 'overseer', with other able people as διάκονοι. But no one would think of calling the head of the household 'the elder', for the simple reason that, as we have seen, 'elder' normally occurs in the plural, and 'the elders' would thus be a collective title for the leaders of several leading households acting together. (129–30)

As the numbers expanded and the house churches began to multiply, the need for local organization increased, and as a result the leaders of the house churches began to act together in a representative capacity. At this point it would be natural to refer to the group of house church leaders as "the elders."

According to Campbell, "*The Pastoral Epistles are written, not to effect an amalgamation of overseers and elders, but to legitimate the authority of the new overseer*" (196). How does Campbell explain the shift from the plural "elders" to the singular "overseer" in Titus 1:5 and 7? He comments that these verses refer

to the appointment of 'monepiskopoi', leaders over the churches in the various cities, the words κατὰ πόλιν denoting the sphere or level of responsibility of the new

12. Jeremias, *Timotheus und Titus*, 35.

13. Campbell, *Elders*, 246.

overseers... Those to be appointed are first called πρεσβύτεροι, either because that is the group from which they come, or because □πρεσβύτεροι 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. (244)

First Timothy 3, then, is written to encourage elders who are functioning as overseers on the house level to step up and become overseers on the city level. It is these elders mentioned in 1 Timothy 5:17 who are to be compensated for their full-time work.

A. E. Harvey holds a view slightly different from both Jeremias and Campbell and does not fall into one particular category. He contends that “the use of the word □ πρεσβύτερος to denote the holder of an office is foreign to normal Greek usage.”<sup>14</sup> Therefore, he argues that it “seems necessary to assume that in the Greek-speaking world the word πρεσβύτερος meant, not an official of any kind, but simply an older man” (320). If this analysis is accurate then why did the early Christians choose this title for their ministers (i.e., office-holders)? Harvey suggests that the answer to this apparent dilemma is that the early Christians not only drew from the Septuagintal usage of πρεσβύτερος, but they called some of their leaders “elders” because they were *older men*. He comments,

The Christians named their leaders ‘elders’, not only because they were familiar with the term from the Greek Bible, but because in the early days authority did in fact rest in the hands of the older and senior members of the church... Elders were so called because they were originally the older and senior members of the congregation, and the respect to which they were entitled did not differ essentially from that shown to any ‘older man’. (328–29)

Unlike Jeremias and Campbell, Harvey is not claiming that the word πρεσβύτεροι means only “older men” but that it was the older men who were the office-holders. Harvey supports his position with the following points (326–28).

1. This view explains the use of πρεσβύτερος in 1 Timothy 5. There is no need to make a sharp distinction between the meaning of “older man” in verse 1 and “elders” (i.e., office-holders) in verse 17. “Suppose the ‘presbyters’ were in fact some of the older members of the

14. A. E. Harvey, “Elders,” *JTS* 25 (1974): 319. Harvey notes that the only exception to this usage is found in Egypt.

congregation: it would then be perfectly natural to mention them in the context of how one ought to behave towards the various age-groups within the church” (327). The same is true for 1 Peter 5:1–5. The author appeals, as a fellow elder, to the *πρεσβύτεροι* of the church, instructing them how to shepherd the church of Christ. It seems clear that these elders have some official capacity within the congregation. But then in verse 5 the author says, “Likewise [ὁμοίως], younger men, submit to the elders [*πρεσβύτεροι*].” If *πρεσβύτεροι* is also to be taken as an official title, then why is this exhortation addressed specifically to the younger men? Are not all to obey their leaders? Harvey argues that in this verse the term is used in its more general meaning of “older man.” What then is the connection between the two different uses of *πρεσβύτεροι*? The answer must be that “those who held responsibility were in fact older men, and that the respect they enjoyed was due as much to their years as to the dignity or official character of their office” (327).

2. In Acts 5:6 when Ananias was struck dead, “the young men” (*οἱ νεώτεροι*) carried him off. Harvey suggests that these younger men were possibly an official group similar to the *πρεσβύτεροι* first introduced in Acts 11. Perhaps, he posits, there were natural groupings in the church based on seniority and maturity (cf. 1 Cor 16:15).
3. If, in fact, older men were the leaders of the early church, this would explain why Paul had to encourage Timothy not to let others despise his youthfulness (1 Tim 4:14). According to Harvey, the term *πρεσβύτερος* took on “an official connotation, allowing a young man to become, without too much sense of incongruity, an ‘elder’” (328).
4. Irenaeus, in arguing for the continuity of the traditions of the church going back to the apostles, not only places much stress on the idea of succession but he also argues that he knew *πρεσβύτεροι* who had preserved the tradition, not through succession, but simply because they were old enough to have received it from the apostles themselves.

Harvey then applies his thesis to the relevant New Testament texts. In his interpretation of Titus 1:5–7, Harvey maintains that the text cannot mean that Titus is to appoint some men as elders but to appoint those who are already elders (i.e., elder members) to the position of overseer. Also, in Acts 14:23 where the text says that Barnabas and Paul “appointed [*χειροτονεῖν*] elders in every church,” the meaning is that they chose “from among the existing el-



ders of the churches those who are to bear special responsibility” (331). Harvey concludes:

In all these cases there need be no question of appointing people to be elders: elders exist already. The immediate task is to choose out some of them to hold particular responsibilities within the church. But once chosen, they do not cease to be elders, in the sense of senior members of the community. (331)

### Overseers are Elders with Special Functions

Another answer to the apparent difference between the terms elder and overseer is to see the overseers as elders who also perform special functions.<sup>15</sup>

- 
15. Those who hold this view include H. von Soden, *Die Briefe an die Kolosser, Epheser, Philemon; die Pastoralbriefe*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., rev. and enl., HKNT 3 (Freiburg: J. C. B. Mohr, 1893), 170; Carl von Weizsäcker, *The Apostolic Age of the Christian Church*, trans. James Millar (London: Williams & Norgate; New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1899), 2:326–31; Philip Carrington, *The Early Christian Church*, vol. 1, *The First Christian Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957), 268–72; Pierre Benoit, “Les Origines de l’épiscopat dans le Nouveau Testament,” in *Exégèse et Théologie* (Paris: Cerf, 1961), 2:235; J. N. D. Kelly, *A Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles*, BNTC (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1963), 230; G. Bornkamm, “πρέσβυς,” in *TDNT*, ed. Gerhard Friedrich, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 6:667–68; H. W. Beyer, “ἐπίσκοπος,” in *TDNT*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 2:617; Maurice Goguel, *The Primitive Church*, trans. H. C. Snape (New York: Macmillan, 1964), 134; Otto Pfeleiderer, *Primitive Christianity: Its Writings and Teachings in Their Historical Connections*, trans. W. Montgomery (Clifton, NJ: Reference Book Publishers, 1965), 3:396–99; Gottfried Holtz, *Die Pastoralbriefe*, THKNT 13 (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1965), 208; Norbert Brox, *Die Pastoralbriefe*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed., RNT 7.2 (Regensburg: Pustet, 1969), 150–51; Leonhard Goppelt, *Apostolic and Post-Apostolic Times*, trans. Robert A. Guelich (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1970), 189–90; Martin Dibelius and Hans Conzelmann, *The Pastoral Epistles*, trans. Philip Buttolph and Adela Yarbro, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972), 56; Karl Kertelge, *Gemeinde und Amt im Neuen Testament* (Munich: Kösel, 1972), 144–48, 156; John P. Meier, “Presbyteros in the Pastoral Epistles,” *CBQ* 35 (1973): 328; Jeffrey G. Sobosan, “The Role of the Presbyter: An Investigation into the *Adversus Haereses* of Saint Irenaeus,” *SJT* 27 (1974): 134–37; L. Floor, “Church Order in the Pastoral Epistles,” *Neot* 10 (1976): 85–88; Stephen G. Wilson, *Luke and the Pastoral Epistles* (London: SPCK, 1979), 55; Raymond E. Brown, “Episkope and Episkopos: The New Testament Evidence,” *TS* 41 (1980): 334–35; Gordon Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus*, NIBC (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1984), 174. Merklein’s position falls within this general category but is distinct from the rest (Helmut Merklein, *Das kirchliche Amt nach dem Epheserbrief*, SANT 33 [Munich: Kösel, 1973], esp. 387). He maintains that the term

Whereas Jeremias and Campbell deny that the term “elder” is an official title of an office-holder, those who hold this view acknowledge that the elders were office-holders, but were limited in their duties.<sup>16</sup> This position maintains that the overseers are a subset of specialized elders who have the added responsibilities of preaching and teaching. For example, Goppelt writes,

[Progress in the development of the office of overseer] becomes evident when 1 Tim. v.17 says in the same context that those elders who then ‘ruled well’ (in contrast to those who had no ruling function) were to be especially honoured, in particular those ‘who labour in preaching in teaching’. The role of ruling and teaching, however, according to 1 Tim. iii.2, 4f. and Tit. i.9, is the task of the bishop. Apparently, therefore, only some of the elders were active as bishops, and the bishops now emerge into prominence from the circle of elders.<sup>17</sup>

The singular use of overseer (1 Tim 3:2; Titus 1:7) is taken generically since there is more than one overseer per church. Therefore, the idea of a monarchical bishop in the Pastoral Epistles is ruled out.

This view is tentatively held by Dibelius and Conzelmann who maintain that

the ‘bishops’ were members of the presbytery, whether or not they were ‘elders’ in their own right. That is, they either came from the college of the ‘presbyters’...or, in case they did not already belong, they became members of the presbytery after their appointment as bishops.<sup>18</sup>

The presiding presbyters (προεστῶτες πρεσβύτεροι) mentioned in 1 Timothy 5:17 are then to be understood as overseeing elders (πρεσβύτεροι ἐπισκοποῦντες).<sup>19</sup> These would be “presbyters who, in addition to the patriarchal position which they hold, also exercise the administrative function of

---

πρεσβύτερος was not originally a title for an office-holder but was a title of honor connected with age. In the early stage of church development, those who became overseers were chosen from among the elders. Over time, however, the teaching and leading functions of the overseers became associated with the elders themselves so that eventually πρεσβύτερος was a purely ecclesiastical title of honor independent of age.

16. See Dibelius-Conzelmann, who state, “The evidence taken as a whole makes it impossible to see in the term ‘presbyter’ only a designation of age” (*Pastoral Epistles*, 78).
17. Goppelt, *Apostolic and Post-Apostolic Times*, 190.
18. Dibelius-Conzelmann, *Pastoral Epistles*, 56. They are open to the possibility that the texts dealing with the “bishop” (1 Tim 3:1–7 and Titus 1:7–9) are later interpolations, in which case the author is speaking about the monarchical bishop.
19. Bornkamm similarly declares, “Within the total structure of the congregation, then, the bishops are to be seen as πρεσβύτεροι προεστῶτες (or ἐπισκοποῦντες)” (“πρέβυς,” 6:668).

the ‘bishop.’”<sup>20</sup> The meaning of Titus 1:5–7 is that every presbyter must also be qualified to take over the office of overseer, since it was primarily those from the circle of presbyters who would actually become overseers.<sup>21</sup> The two terms eventually came to be used synonymously (e.g., Acts 20:17, 28; *I Clem.* 42:4; 44:1) but were not used as such from the beginning of the church.

Jeffery Sobosan maintains a similar position. He contends that the interchangeable use of the terms elder and overseer signify that the same person had two positions within his community. He notes, “The difference between the two titles is obvious: one expresses a dignity, the other a function.”<sup>22</sup> The two titles, then, can be used for the same person—an elder chosen for the office of overseer. The overseers formed a committee smaller than the presbyterial college and may have actually presided over it. According to 1 Timothy 5:17, there are some presbyters who do not rule and teach, but those who do rule and teach would most likely be the overseers (cf. 1 Tim 3:2; Titus 1:9).<sup>23</sup> Sobosan explains his schema:

In short, the role of the *episcopoi* in the community could be conceived as follows:

- 
20. Dibelius-Conzelmann, *Pastoral Epistles*, 56. Similarly Pfleiderer comments, “Probably we are to understand by presbyters the ‘elders’ who, in virtue of their age or their long association with the church, naturally occupied a position of respect and honour, while the ‘episcopoi’ were the actual overseers of the church, who were charged with the direction and oversight of the common affairs. In so far as these overseers belonged to the ‘notables’ they were also ‘presbyters’; but all presbyters were not necessarily ‘episcopoi.’ The bishops were not yet above the presbytery, but formed part of it, as those members of it who were especially charged with the outward affairs of the church” (*Primitive Christianity*, 3:397).
  21. Dibelius-Conzelmann also state that there is the possibility that only one of the presbyters became the bishop, which would explain the use of the singular “bishop” (*Pastoral Epistles*, 56).
  22. Sobosan, “Role of the Presbyter,” 134.
  23. Meier holds a similar view except that he completely equates elder and overseer in Titus since the church in Crete was younger and less developed (“*Presbyteros* in the Pastoral Epistles,” 337–38). The church in Ephesus, however, was more advanced and had begun to distinguish the elders from the overseers. Meier writes, “While the older church at Ephesus had already evolved to the point where a small group of teaching *presbyteroi* (the *episkopoi*) were coming to the fore and assuming a position of leadership within the presbyterium, in the primitive churches of Crete there had not been enough time for ‘functional specialization’ to evolve a special group within the larger group of presbyters” (*ibid.*, 338).

they preside over the liturgical assemblies, celebrate the Eucharist, teach, [and] administer the temporal affairs. They are assisted in these activities by the *deacons*, younger than they and their servants. The presbyters (*non-episcopoi*) on the other hand, although possessing in principle the power of filling these functions, do not exercise them in fact, or perhaps exercise them only secondarily without a specific mandate. We could also imagine the possibility of the presbyter exercising, in turns, the functions of the *episcopoi*.<sup>24</sup>

This view is similar to that held by Kelly and Fee who state that the terms elder and overseer are not completely interchangeable. That is, although all overseers were elders, not all elders were overseers. Overseers were selected from the ranks of the elders.<sup>25</sup>

### **The Overseer is Above (but Still Identified with) the Elders**

The major difference between the former view and this one is that the latter asserts that each church had only one overseer. The evidence for this position comes from the singular use of ἐπίσκοπος with the definite article (1 Tim 3:2; Titus 1:7). The overseer, however, is still identified with the council of elders (1 Tim 4:14), being selected from their ranks to preside over them and the church.<sup>26</sup>

24. Sobosan, "Role of the Presbyter," 137.

25. Kelly, *Pastoral Epistles*, 230; Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus*, 174. Most place Kelly and Fee in the category that affirms elder and overseer denoting the same office. Although they claim that the same office is represented by both terms, the terms are not completely interchangeable. For this reason I have placed them with this group.

26. Those who hold this view include F. C. Baur, *The Church History of the First Three Centuries*, ed. and trans. Allan Menzies (London: Williams & Norgate, 1879), 2:31; Walter Lock, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles*, ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1924), xx; A. M. Farrer, "The Apostolic Ministry in the New Testament," in *The Apostolic Ministry: Essays on the History and Doctrine of Episcopacy*, ed. Kenneth E. Kirk (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1946), 161; Barrett, *Pastoral Epistles*, 32; Pierre Grelot, "Das Kirchliche Amt im Dienst des Gottesvolkes," in *Vom Christus zur Kirche: Charisma und Amt im Urchristentum*, ed. Jean Gibley (Wien: Herder, 1966), 212; Joachim Gnilka, *Der Philipperbrief*, HTKNT 10.3 (Freiburg: Herder, 1968), 35; Ceslas Spicq, *Les Épitres Pastorales*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed., Ébib (Paris: Gabalda, 1969), 1:450–55; Walter Schmithals, *The Office of Apostle in the Early Church*, trans. John E. Steely (Nashville: Abingdon, 1969), 238; Ferdinand Hahn, *Der urchristliche Gottesdienst*, SBS 41 (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1970), 73–74; Hermann von Lips, *Glaube-Gemeinde-Amt: Zum Verständnis der Ordination in den Pastoralbriefen*, FRLANT 122 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1979), 106–16; Eduard Lohse,

For example, Ceslas Spicq states that the terms elder and overseer are similar but he maintains that it is wrong to equate them. In his commentary on the Pastoral Epistles, Spicq offers five reasons why πρεσβύτερος should be distinguished from ἐπίσκοπος.<sup>27</sup>

1. The different terminology implies two realities or two different functions.
2. The words are not related etymologically: the presbyters are the elders or the authorities, while the overseers are the supervisors or the superintendents.
3. Within the Pastorals ἐπίσκοπος is always in the singular and appears with the definite article; πρεσβύτερος is always in the plural.<sup>28</sup>
4. Even among the elders there is a distinction of function. Some govern or preside while others preach. The same is true with respect to the distinction between the presbyters and the overseers.
5. ἐπίσκοπος itself is a flexible term referring to a president or chief, such as a father who governs his house (1 Tim 3:4–5), a steward of God (Titus 1:7), God as ruler (Job 20:29), or Christ as ruler (1 Pet 2:25). It is not until the Pastorals that the office of overseer is clearly defined so that one may aspire to hold such an office. In addition, it is no longer the Holy Spirit who appoints overseers, it is now Timothy who rationally judges whether a candidate is qualified or not. Therefore, as the church structures evolved in the first century, so did the roles of the elders and overseers. The two words, however, are related: the overseer is an elder, but not all elders are overseers—

---

“Die Entstehung des Bishofsamtes in der frühen Christenheit,” *ZNW* 71 (1980): 67; idem, *The Formation of the New Testament*, trans. M. Eugene Boring (Nashville: Abingdon, 1981), 104; Jürgen Roloff, *Der erste Brief an Timotheus*, EKKNT 15 (Zürich: Benzigen; Neukirchen: Vluyn-Neukirchener, 1988), 169–81; Kevin Giles, *Patterns of Ministry among the First Christians* (Melbourne: Collins Dove, 1989), 85–89; Helmut Merkel, *Die Pastoralbriefe*, NTD 9.1 (Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1991), 90–93; Luke T. Johnson, *Letters to Paul’s Delegates: 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1996), 145–46.

27. Spicq, *Les Épitres Pastorales*, 450–55.

28. “Dans les Pastorales, ἐπίσκοπος est toujours au singulier et avec l’article défini; πρεσβύτερος toujours au pluriel” (ibid., 452). In light of the singular use of “elder” in 1 Tim 5:19, it is difficult to understand how Spicq can make such a statement without qualification.

the overseer being the leading elder (*primus inter pares*).<sup>29</sup> The overseer, therefore, occupies a higher position but is still identified with the council of elders.

Hermann von Lips also maintains that the overseer is the president of the elders, being the first among equals. He stresses that there was only one overseer per house church. He offers the following support for his view.<sup>30</sup>

1. According to 1 Timothy 5:17, only some of the elders are involved with the teaching, which, according to Titus 1:9, is an essential qualification of the overseer.
2. This interpretation does justice to the singular uses of overseer found in 1 Timothy. Lips insists that in 1 Timothy 3 the singular use of overseer must denote that only one person held that office. He supports this conclusion by the plural διακόνους found in 3:8. He argues that it is difficult to see τὸν ἐπίσκοπον as a generic singular since the plural form for deacons is used. He notes that a transition has been made from the earlier text of Philippians 1:1, which mentions overseers and deacons both in the plural.
3. Since rebuking is explicitly stated as a function of the overseer in Titus 1:9 (ἐλέγχειν), the one who rebukes the sinning elder in 1 Timothy 5:19 (ἐλέγχε) must be the single overseer.

Although it is wrong to speak of the single overseer as a monarchical bishop, the tendency for such an office certainly arose from the elevation of one leader among the elders as found in 1 Timothy. Lips summarizes his position:

Die Identifizierung des ἐπίσκοπος mit allen Presbytern oder einer Gruppe daraus wird dem Textbefund nicht gerecht. Im ἐπίσκοπος ist ein Amtsträger zu sehen, der zwar dem Personenkreis der Presbyter angehört, aber in gewissen Funktionen auch das Presbyterium zum Gegenüber hat. Den ἐπίσκοπος als Leiter des Presbyteriums zu sehen, ist angesichts dieses Tatbestandes das Naheliegendste.<sup>31</sup>

29. Hahn similarly states, “Außerdem tritt jetzt ein ἐπίσκοπος als *primus inter pares* an die Spitze des Presbyteriums, obwohl das Verhältnis zwischen ἐπίσκοπος und πρεσβύτεροι in den Pastoralbriefen noch nicht präzise festgelegt ist” (*Der urchristliche Gottesdienst*, 73–74).

30. Lips, *Glaube-Gemeinde-Amt*, 106–16. Giles follows Lips’ basic thesis (*Patterns of Ministry*, 85–89).

31. Lips, *Glaube-Gemeinde-Amt*, 116.

More recently, Jürgen Roloff has developed this view somewhat extensively in his commentary on 1 Timothy.<sup>32</sup> Roloff's main emphasis is that the author of the Pastoral Epistles has merged the Jewish model of elders with the Pauline model of overseers and deacons.<sup>33</sup> The presbyteral consitution adapted its elders from Judaism, which had elders in the local government and in the syngogue. What qualified an individual for the office of elder was his prestige in the public as well as his advanced age, which in antiquity was a sign of maturity and experience. It is evident from Luke's reliable reports in the book of Acts that the Jewish Christian communities borrowed this model early in the church's existence.

Paul, however, never mentions elders in his letters. This omission is certainly not a coincidence but reveals a fundamental truth. The elder system, which is based on experience and honor, stands in sharp contrast to Paul's emphasis on *charisma*, which is the basis of all service. Yet, there are certain acknowledged *charismata* that are given for the edification of the body of Christ that have definite structure (1 Cor 12:28–31). The office of elder, however, is not derived from the *charisma* because age is no *charisma*.

Although the term overseer appears only in Philippians 1:1 in Paul's letters, this reference should not be doubted as Pauline. Apparently, specific services have developed under the watch-care and approval of the apostle. At first, the function of the overseer did not involve teaching since that was the duty of the prophets and teachers. The function of the overseer probably involved more of what Paul mentions in 1 Corinthians 12:28 as "helps" and "administration."

Roloff maintains that each house church had its own overseer who was naturally the owner of the home. The multiplication of these house churches also led to the multiplication of overseers, which is why Philippians 1:1 can speak of them in the plural. These men were also those who would have presided over the Lord's Supper.

The author of the Pastoral Epistles is therefore attempting to merge the household model of the overseer with the Jewish model of elders. This is evidenced by the fact that the two offices never occur in the same passages in 1 Timothy. First Timothy 3 mentions overseers but not elders, and 1 Timothy

---

32. See his excursus, "Die gemeindeleitenden Ämter (Bishöfe, Älteste, Diakone)," in *Erste Timotheus*, 169–89.

33. Roloff states, "Die Past[oralbriefe] dokumentieren den Prozeß der Verschmelzung zweier unterschiedlicher Verfassungsformen" (*Erste Timotheus*, 170).

5 mentions elders but not overseers. Only in Titus 1 do we find the two in an awkward text where the author is seeking to move the church from the elder model to the overseer model. In 1 Timothy 5:17 the author also mentions certain elders and then describes them as functioning like overseers since they teach and preach. According to Roloff, the author is therefore favoring the overseer model over the elder model. The singular use of overseer is based on the view that the Church is the “household of God” (1 Tim 3:15). Just as the house churches had a single overseer, so now the author is urging his readers to view the city-church as the “household of God,” which is to be led by a single overseer.

### **The Overseer is Above (but Not Identified with) the Elders**

This position takes a more radical view and states that the overseer is not simply the head elder but is in a class elevated above the elders. It is claimed that the Pastoral Epistles present a single overseer who presides over the church and has authority that is unmatched by anyone else. Those who hold this view usually date the Pastorals in the second century.<sup>34</sup>

Ernst Käsemann, for example, claims that the monarchical bishop is already found in the Pastoral Epistles. According to Käsemann, administrative offices in the New Testament are a later development and cannot be found in

---

34. There is some variation within this view. Some affirm a monarchical bishop (Ernst Käsemann, “Ministry and Community in the New Testament,” trans. W. J. Montague, in *Essays on New Testament Themes*, SBT 41 [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1964], 87; 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; A. T. Hanson, *The Pastoral Epistles*, NCBC [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1982], 31–34). Others maintain that the overseer has not yet reached the point where he could rightly be called a monarchical bishop (Georg Günter Blum, *Tradition und Sukzession: Studien zum Normbegriff des Apostolischen von Paulus bis Irenäus*, AGTL 9 [Berlin: Lutherisches Verlagshaus, 1963], 55; Hans Werner Bartsch, *Die Anfänge urchristlicher Rechtsbildungen: Studien zu den Pastoralbriefen*, TF 34 [Hamburg: H. Reich, 1965], 106–08). Still others state that the concept of a monarchical bishop is the author’s ideal but not the actual state of affairs in the churches to which he was writing (Lorenz Oberlinner, *Die Pastoralbriefe*, vol. 3, *Kommentar zum Titusbrief*, HTKNT 11.2 [Freiburg: Herder, 1996], 90–93; Burton Scott Easton, *The Pastoral Epistles* [New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1947], 177). Also see Menoud for a similar view (Philippe-H. Menoud, *L’ église et les ministères selon le Nouveau Testament* [Neuchâtel: Delachaux & Niestlé, 1949], 51–52).



the authentic Pauline epistles. “For we may assert without hesitation,” writes Käsemann, “that the Pauline community had no presbytery during the Apostle’s lifetime.”<sup>35</sup> The presbytery and its closed system of government resulted from an intrusion of Judaism that soon displaced the Pauline model.<sup>36</sup> Consequently, when one elevates the office, and therefore an individual who holds the office, the immediate role of the Holy Spirit is downplayed if not altogether lost. He states, “An office which stands over against the rest of the community is now the real bearer of the Spirit; and the primitive Christian view, that every Christian receives the Spirit in his baptism, recedes into the background and indeed, for all practical purposes, disappears.”<sup>37</sup>

Käsemann argues that the transition from *charisma* to office can be seen when examining the Pastoral Epistles. In these pseudonymous epistles, he notes that the word *charisma* appears only twice, both in the context of ordination.<sup>38</sup> It is partly on this basis that he considers the Pastoral Epistles not Paul writing to Timothy, but an apostolic delegate writing to the monarchical bishop.<sup>39</sup> This hierarchical structure evolved from an intrusion of Judaism

---

35. Käsemann, “Ministry and Community,” 86. He continues by stating, “Otherwise the silence on the subject in every Pauline epistle is quite incomprehensible” (ibid.). Käsemann’s argument from silence is not as strong as it might appear. For example, if Paul did not mention the Lord’s Supper in 1 Corinthians, we would have no indication that that ordinance was being observed by the Pauline communities. Would not such an important ordinance be stressed in the Pauline letters especially in the light of the fact that the book of Acts places such a heavy emphasis on this celebration?

36. James Dunn affirms a similar position. He contends that “the Pastorals represent the fruit of a growing rapprochement between the more formal structures which Jewish Christianity took over from the synagogue and the more dynamic charismatic structure of the Pauline churches after Paul’s death” (James D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: An Inquiry into the Character of Earliest Christianity*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. [London: SCM; Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990], 115). He maintains that the Pastorals were written at a time when the assimilation or integration of these two patterns was well advanced, but not yet complete. Therefore, the Pastorals are much closer in church structure to Ignatius than to Paul. Dunn admits, however, that it is difficult to tell whether elder and overseer are used synonymously, or whether the overseer was an advanced leadership position within the eldership. Regardless, the Pastorals reveal a church government that is far from the Pauline model. Later Dunn writes that “it would be difficult to deny that the Pastorals are already some way along the trajectory of early catholicism” (ibid., 352).

37. Käsemann, “Ministry and Community,” 87.

38. 1 Tim 4:14 and 2 Tim 1:6.

39. Käsemann, “Ministry and Community,” 87.

that resulted in a distinction between clerics and laymen. The church was enveloped in an institutional ministry that involved legitimate succession, the presbyterate, and the diaconate.

How did this transition come about? Käsemann lists three steps of ecclesiastical development which were spurred on by the threat of Gnosticism. He writes, “The weight of the gnostic attack threatened to overwhelm the Christian community” (88). The first step was “to entrust teaching and administration to reliable hands and to create a settled ministry against which alien pretensions would beat in vain” (88). The second step was “to tie this ministry to a solemn ordination vow (and thus to rule out unsuitable elements) and to surround it with auxiliaries bound by similar obligations, thus guaranteeing the care of the whole community down to the most insignificant member” (88). Ordination replaced the early understanding that at baptism every believer received the gift of the Spirit. The Spirit was confined only to office-bearers. The final step was “to insert the ministry into a fabricated chain of tradition and to render its position impregnable by a doctrine of legitimate succession” (88). The doctrine of legitimate succession replaced the freedom of the *charismata* exercised in subordination to the Lord.<sup>40</sup> This change marked the transition to early Catholicism.<sup>41</sup>

Hans von Campenhausen holds a similar view. He maintains that the system of elders is Judeo-Christian in origin (based on the synagogue), whereas overseers and deacons originated among Gentile-Christian churches. The system of elders existed alongside of Pauline churches. “From the very first the ‘elders’, even where their rights are understood in purely patriarchal terms, possess ‘official’ authority,” writes Campenhausen.<sup>42</sup> In the later New Testament writings, the natural order (age) is combined with the legal order (office) in a way that is alien to Paul. “With the system of elders we move into the sphere of a fundamentally different way of thinking about the Church, which can only with difficulty be combined with the Pauline picture of the congregation, and certainly cannot be derived from it” (76).

Therefore, when the system of elders finally spread into the Pauline

---

40. At one point Käsemann acknowledges that this transformation of the church is not all bad: “Need and necessity were the godparents of this transformation and we shall therefore be guarded in our criticism of its rightness” (ibid., 88–89).

41. Käsemann, following Sohm, later posits, “The roots of the early Catholic theory may well be sought in the apocalyptic concept of the new Israel” (ibid., 91).

42. Campenhausen, *Ecclesiastical Authority*, 296.

churches, it represented “not merely a new phase but a new line of development, the first and decisive prerequisite for the elaboration of a narrowly ‘official’ and ‘ecclesiastical’ way of thinking” (77). Yet, the system of elders is not in essence “human” or “legalistic.” As long as it remains faithful to the Spirit of Christ, it is not unspiritual. The elders, admits Campenhausen, were a legitimate response to the threat of heresy in the church.

Over time, however, the power attached to the office continued to grow until it embraced exclusive authority. The elders, who were originally established simply as a matter of following the Jewish model and general necessity, came to be the guardians of the faith and protectors of tradition. The spiritual life of the congregation soon began to decline and lost its radical significance. He continues, “This trend toward an unbalanced ascendancy of office is the one uniform feature in the otherwise widely varying concepts of power and authority in I Clement, the Epistles of Ignatius, and the Pastoral Epistles from Asia Minor” (297). Campenhausen is forced to date the Pastoral Epistles in the second century (AD 100–150) because of their advanced organizational structure. Office in the Pastoral Epistles has drifted far from the Pauline model, embracing many Jewish and secular elements. In the Pastoral Epistles, the monarchical episcopacy is already the prevailing system, which is indicated by the references to the “bishop” always being in the singular (107). The Pastoral Epistles, therefore, “are dealing with admonitions and instructions which a cleric from Asia Minor, possibly himself a bishop, wrote for the benefit of his colleagues in order to teach them in Paul’s name the right conduct and form of their ministry” (109).

### **Elder and Overseer Denote the Same Office**

All of the above positions deny that the terms elder and overseer are equated in the Pastoral Epistles (or even the entire New Testament). Although each view has some strengths that need to be taken into account, it is the contention of this author that ultimately they all have difficulties that cannot be overcome. For example, to claim that elder is never a title of an office-holder in the Pastoral Epistles goes against the evidence. This can be demonstrated by the term’s official use in the Old Testament, early Judaism, and the Greco-Roman sources. Also, in the New Testament itself the term is clearly used for an office-holder (cf. Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5–7). It is also insufficient to claim that the ecclesiology in the Pastoral Epistles is so advanced that the overseer is an office above that of the elder. Much of the organizational

structure found in the Pastorals can be traced back to Paul's early letters.

The view that elder and overseer are used interchangeably in the Pastoral Epistles (and the New Testament) is best able to account for all the New Testament data.<sup>43</sup> This view goes back at least to Jerome who states, "Indeed with the ancients these names were synonymous, one alluding to the office, the other to the age of the clergy."<sup>44</sup> While most who hold this position see

- 
43. Those who hold this view include Lightfoot, *Philippians*, 95–99; Charles Gore, *The Church and the Ministry*, 4<sup>th</sup> rev. ed. (London: Longmans, Green, 1900), 368; Hatch, *Organization*, 38–39, 82; Ernest F. Scott, *The Pastoral Epistles*, MNTC (New York: Harper, 1936), xxviii; Wilhelm Michaelis, *Das Ältestenamt der christlichen Gemeinde im Lichte der Heiligen Schrift* (Bern: Haller, 1953), 52–53; Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, trans. Kendrick Grobel (London: SCM, 1955), 2:102; Heinrich Schlier, "Die Ordnung der Kirche nach den Pastoralbriefen," in *Die Zeit der Kirche*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Freiburg: Herder, 1958), 144; Eduard Schweizer, *Church Order in the New Testament*, trans. Frank Clark, SBT 32 (Naperville, IL: Alec R. Allenson, 1961), 85 [6h]; Myles M. Bourke, "Reflections on Church Order in the New Testament," *CBQ* 30 (1968): 506; Patrick Burke, "The Monarchical Episcopate at the End of the First Century," *JES* 7 (1970): 514; Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology*, trans. John R. de Witt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 457; 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), 86; Roland Schwarz, *Bürgerliches Christentum im Neuen Testament? Eine Studie zu Ethik, Amt und Recht in den Pastoralbriefen*, ÖBS 4 (Klosterneuburg: Österreichisches Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1983), 41–43; Georg Schöllgen, "Hausgemeinden, ΟΙΚΟΣ-Εκκλησιολογία und monarchischer Episkopat: Überlegungen zu einer neuen Forschungsrichtung," in *JAC*, vol. 31, ed. Ernst Dassmann, Klaus Thraede, and Josef Engemann (Münster: Aschendorff, 1988), 84–85; E. Earle Ellis, *Pauline Theology: Ministry and Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 103; D. A. Carson, Douglas J. Moo, and Leon Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 364; George Knight, *The Pastoral Epistles*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Carlisle, England: Paternoster, 1992), 175–77; Joseph Ysebaert, *Die Amtsterminologie im Neuen Testament und in der alten Kirche: Eine lexikographische Untersuchung* (Breda: Eureia, 1994), 69–73; David Mappes, "The New Testament Elder, Overseer, and Pastor," *BSac* 154 (1997): 164–69; William D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, WBC, vol. 46 (Nashville: Nelson, 2000), 161–63.
44. Jerome *Letter* 69.3, trans. W. H. Fremantle with the assistance of G. Lewis and W. G. Martley under the title *The Principle Works of St. Jerome*, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, vol. 6, 2<sup>nd</sup> series (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), 143. Lightfoot further notes, "But, though more full than other writers, [Jerome] is hardly more explicit. Of his predecessors the Ambrosian Hilary had discerned the same truth. Of his contemporaries and successors, Chrysostom, Pelagius, Theodore of Mopsuestia, Theodoret, all acknowledge it. Thus in every one of the extant commentaries on the epistles containing the crucial

elder and overseer as completely interchangeable, Gordon Fee maintains that it is possible that the term “elders” covers both overseers and deacons.<sup>45</sup> Although it is true that the terms were somewhat flexible, this view is not likely because the New Testament often uses elders and overseers interchangeably but never elders and deacons. Mounce rightly notes that “it would be confusing to join two distinct groups [i.e., overseers and deacons] under the same title without some contextual indication.”<sup>46</sup>

Although the view that the terms elder and overseer refer to the same office is held by a number of scholars, it is often assumed rather than proven. The goal of this study, then, is to show that this view best accounts for all the data. Before the New Testament data is dealt with, however, we will first provide important background information on the terms *πρεσβύτερος* and *ἐπίσκοπος*.

---

passages, whether Greek or Latin, before the close of the fifth century, this identity is affirmed” (*Philippians*, 99).

45. Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus*, 22, 78, 128. This view is also held by Douglas Powell, “Ordo Presbyterii,” *JTS* 26 (1975): 306

46. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 308.