



Course Name: **Shepherding (Terminology, Functions, Qualities)**

By Tommy South

Course description:

This course explores the terminology of a leader in the church (elders, overseers - bishops, shepherds - pastors), seven functions, and qualities associated with these terminologies and functions.

Course Objectives: By the end of this class students will have...

- A. Identified and defined the major terms describing a leader based on scripture.
- B. Listed and described the seven functions of a leader.
- C. Discussed the qualities associated with each of the terms and functions.

Outline of the class:

- A. During the first few minutes of the class divide the class into groups of three or four. Then ask each table to take 15-20 minutes to discuss the following.
 1. What is your current understanding of the role of an elder?
 2. Based on your understanding of the Bible, how would you describe the functions of an elder?
 3. List as many qualities as you can that describe an elder.
- B. Terminology
 1. There are three terms that are used interchangeably in the New Testament to refer to elders. The occurrence of this multiple terminology shows that these are not *titles* but are *functional descriptions*.
 - a. “Elders” – Greek *presbyteroi* – literally, “older men.” Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5.
 - b. “Overseers” / “Bishops” – Greek *episkopoi* – “those who watch out for / oversee.” Titus 1:7 uses this term along with “elders,” showing that the terms are interchangeable.
 - c. “Shepherds” / “Pastors” – Greek *poimen* – “shepherds.” 1 Peter 5:1-2 uses “elders” interchangeably with the verb *poimaino* (the verb form of *poimen*), which means to “tend” or “shepherd” the flock. Likewise, in Acts 20:17 & 28, the “elders” of the church in Ephesus are told to “shepherd” (ESV – “care for” – *poimaino*) the church of God, over which the Holy Spirit has made them “overseers” (*episkopoi*).

2. The evidence indicates that there was always a *plurality* of these leaders in each church - i.e., no church was to be dominated by one man.
 - a. Biblically, other than when discussing the qualities of the overseer/elder/shepherd, the terms are always used in the plural (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5; 1 Peter 5:1, etc.).
 - b. Historically, it is clear that each congregation had a plurality of elders/overseers/shepherds until at least the end of the First Century AD. “Single-bishop rule” is not in evidence until the early Second Century, and even then, does not appear to have been the norm.
- C. Functions implied by this terminology:
1. “Elders”
 - a. Not merely advanced in age, but experienced, mature, able to serve as examples to others.
 - b. In ancient times, this would have automatically implied “respected.”
 2. “Overseers”/ “Bishops”
 - a. Note: The term “bishop” is usually avoided in churches of Christ today because of its later misapplication to refer to officials ruling over multiple congregations, a use never found in Scripture.
 - b. *Episkopoi* is obviously a functional term: “those who oversee.” 1 Peter 5:1-4 and Acts 20:28 show they oversee the church generally and the needs of its members specifically.
 3. “Shepherds”/ “Pastors”
 - a. Because the term “pastor” has become synonymous with “preacher,” it is often not used to refer to elders, although that is its biblical usage. It means the same as “shepherd.”
 - b. John 10:1-18 shows what is implied by this term: knowledge of and by the “sheep,” defending them from those who would cause destruction (“wolves”), seeing to their needs, etc.
 4. The New Testament shows at least **7 *specific functions*** of elders/shepherds/overseers:
 - a. Shepherding – seeing to the needs of individuals and the church as a whole, including the following.
 - b. Teaching – 1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:9; Ephesians 4:11
 - c. Refuting error – Acts 20:28-29; Titus 1:9ff
 - d. Setting an example of Christian living – 1 Timothy 3/Titus 1 (implied); Hebrews 13:7; 1 Peter 5:3 (explicit)
 - e. Visiting and praying for the sick – James 5:13-15
 - f. Mediating disputes – Acts 15; 1 Corinthians 6:5-6
 - g. Overseeing/managing – 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13; 1 Timothy 5:17-19

D. Qualities

1. Lists of qualities needed by elders/overseers/shepherds are found in 1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9; and 1 Peter 5:1-4.
 - a. It is apparent that these lists are not intended to be exhaustive since they are not identical. Also, some very important qualities are not stated, but are assumed: e.g., loves God, attends worship, treats his family well, etc.
 - b. These qualities are not so much a checklist as a description of a certain kind of exemplary Christian. Still, they should not be regarded as “optional” in any sense.
2. “Above reproach” does not mean “perfect.” It means no obvious flaws that would disqualify. It does not suggest that one’s past mistakes necessarily disqualify one for service.
3. The recurrence of the word “must” shows that these are requirements and not options. In seeking qualified leaders, we are not looking for “9 out of 10,” or “the best available.” Rather, we are to appoint only those who are qualified. On the other hand, elders may possess these qualities to varying degrees.
4. It is not wrong to desire to be an “overseer” (1 Timothy 3:1). Actually, more men should strive to prepare themselves for this role. It is possible for someone to desire the role for the wrong reasons, but the statements in 1 Peter 5:1-3 should “weed out” those who are doing so.
5. The required qualities involve both personal characteristics and family leadership, as well as a good reputation in the community (1 Timothy 3:7). Putting someone in this role without regarding all of these areas is a recipe for disaster.
6. None of the qualities says anything about financial success, business experience, or community standing (other than a good reputation). All are concerned with the spiritual qualities of a spiritual leader.

Conclusion:

- A. This lesson was designed to highlight and create a greater awareness of the terms, functions, and qualities of biblical leadership.
- B. Take time this week to pray about each of these areas and how they relate to you and the church here. It is important to give much thought to this discussion as we move toward establishing leadership.
- C. Encourage others you know to be involved in this discussion and participate in preparing for the future of this congregation in the development of biblical leaders.