**Equipping Ministry of Ephesians 4:7-16**

**Ephesians 4:7-16**

The context of Ephesians 4:7-16 begins with the paramount truth of unity. Unity is a basic characteristic of the Godhead, the triune God of grace. What God creates always comes from unity and proceeds towards unity.

**Ephesians 4:4-6 (NKJV), “***There is* one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who *is* above all, and through all, and in you all.”

Ephesians tells us that it is God’s will that everything be summed up, “in Christ” (Eph. 1:9-10). It is the Father’s will that Christ would have supremacy and preeminence in all things (Col. 1:18). Jesus is the mystery of God’s will (Col. 2:2). Therefore, the primary focus of our lives ought to be to abide in him and be found in him, since Jesus through the Spirit is the unifying force behind all of creation. As we grow more in love and Christ-likeness we will always find more unity, harmony, and peace within our hearts. We aren’t called to unity for unity sake, but rather we have unity “in Christ.” As Paul says, “but speaking the truth in love, may all grow up in all things into him who is the head, Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love.” Therefore, if we are abiding in him we will have unity with one another. How can a body be divided against itself?

**Eph. 4:7, “**But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ’s gift.”

‘To each one’ was given a measure of Christ’s gift. Each of us are members of his body and has a specific role and function within it. If each member is not functioning properly then the body will not function as it was designed to.

**Eph 4:8-10,** “Therefore He says: *“When He ascended on high,* *He led captivity captive,* *and gave gifts to men.”* (Now this, *“He ascended”*—what does it mean but that He also firstdescended into the lower parts of the earth? 10 He who descended is also the One who ascended far above all the heavens, that He might fill all things.)

All of his gifts are love gifts for the edifying or building up of the body and are founded upon the fruit of the Spirit. As Dr. Sam Storms writes,

“Spiritual gifts are not God bestowing to his people something external to himself. They are not some tangible ‘stuff’ or substance separable from God. Spiritual gifts are nothing less than God himself in us, energizing our souls, imparting revelation to our minds, infusing power in our wills, and working his Sovereign and gracious purposes through us.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

Many today teach that we are to seek the Giver not the gifts but we should do both. In I Cor. 12-14 we are exhorted to pursue spiritual gifts, and especially the best ones. One of the ways that we seek the Lord is by seeking gifts. Jesus Christ manifested all the gifts of the Spirit as he walked planet earth. Likewise, we are not just seeking the gifts for the sake of seeking gifts, but we are to pursue the Lord Himself. Not one person has been given all the gifts. It is essential that we come together in order to exhibit the fullness of Christ, as one body with many members. Paul shared with the church at Corinth that it was his desire that they not be “lacking in any gift” (1 Cor 1:7).

When we grow in the gift of healing for instance, we grow in his love and compassion for people who suffer. When we grow in the gift of prophecy we begin to see with his eyes, hear with his ears, and feel with his heart. As we grow in the gift of miracles we come to abide in the power of the Almighty.

As he ascended far above the heavens at the right hand of the Father it was for the purpose, ‘that he might fill all things.’ The church is the primary vehicle through which God intends to bring His kingdom to the earth and to reconcile the world to Himself. How are we being used to fill our neighborhoods with him? Our jobs? Our cities? Our nations? We can only do this to the degree that we allow him to first fill us. We must not allow anything in our lives to steal away our attention from him. The ultimate goal for the building of the church as the temple of God is to be the dwelling place of God on the earth, a place/people where he fills with his Presence. As Gordon Fee writes,

“The local church is God’s temple in the community where it is placed; and it is so by the Presence of the Spirit alone, by whom God has now revisited his people.”

Again, we must abide in him that he might abide in us! The ultimate test of our success as a church is “are we becoming like him?” Is Jesus being formed in us? Jesus ascended so that he can fill all things. Our goal now must be that he ‘fills our lives’ that we would become a Christ-saturated, Christ-dominated, and Christ-exalting people!

**Ephesians 4:11-13**, “And He Himself gave some *to be* apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ…”

Now verses 11–12 make the point of every-member ministry explicit. After describing (in vv. 8–10) how Christ rose from the dead and ascended to heaven like a triumphant general with his wagons full of booty, ready to distribute it to his troops, Paul says, "And He [Christ] gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ."

This is different from verse 7. There the point was that every believer is gifted by Christ with varied grace. Here the point is that the church is gifted by Christ with people in varied equipping functions: "some as apostles, some as prophets, some as evangelists, some as pastors and teachers.” These gifts to the church—these people—are charged with equipping the saints, that is, the believers (All believers are saints in the New Testament).

In this text Jesus tells us that he gave his church a variety of ministries for the equipping of the church. I believe these ministries are called to work together as one unit, a team. As a team, it will be the most powerful and dynamic leadership on the earth. These ministries are called to equip the saints for the work of service or ministry for the ultimate purpose of the body of Christ growing into the Lord Jesus himself, knowing him and abiding in him. Ministry is simply the fruit of growing in Christlikeness. Therefore, the central message of all NT ministries will be Christ himself, not just a doctrine or issues of church government and organization.

The word for equipping usually means fixing something that's broken (as when nets are torn, [Matthew 4:21](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Matthew%25204.21)) or supplying something that is lacking as in [1 Thessalonians 3:10](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/1%2520Thessalonians%25203.10), “We desire to supply, or equip, what is lacking in your faith.” So the point of verses 11–12 is that Christ not only gives varied grace to each believer in the church, he also gives leaders to the church whose job is to repair what's broken and supply what's lacking in the believers. Mending what is broken and supplying what is lacking are meant to make the saints into servants, or ministers. Every saint—every Christian—is a minister.

Equipping involves both teaching and training, like a soldier in an army. When a person is enlisted in an army, he is taught about weapons and strategy in classrooms. Then they are taken into the field and trained to do what they have been taught. But they are not fully equipped until weapons are put in their hands and they are fully engaged in warfare. The greatest weapon is the truth of the Word of God.

**2 Timothy 3:16-17**, “All Scripture *is* given by inspiration of God, and *is* profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, 17 that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.” The inspired text of all Scripture is given so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped. Not just equipped but thoroughly equipped, or literally, super-equipped!

Truth from the Word of God spoken under the anointing is one of our most powerful weapons. We want to build up the body of Christ so that it is a most glorious fortress for truth and righteousness. Jesus prayed, “Father sanctify (transform) them by your truth, your Word is truth.” As Paul says in Ephesians 5:25-27, “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish.” It is through the washing of water by the Word that she is cleansed, transformed, and made a ready bride for the marriage supper of the Lamb.

Jesus said he gave each of these ‘people gifts’ UNTIL we reach the fullness of Christ. There is not a single church on the earth that has arrived, so we still need all five of these gifts functioning and equipping the body of Christ today. Jesus is the apostle, the sent One from heaven, just as he was the prophet declaring the Word of the Lord, the evangelist seeking and saving the lost, the good shepherd feeding and tending the sheep, and the teacher, the rabbi instructing and imparting a love for truth. When we grow in ministry we are growing into that aspect of him. With the coming and administration of the gifts of the person of the Spirit, we, as the body of Christ, are to continue to do and to teach what Jesus began to do and to teach (Acts 1:21). So let’s look briefly at each of these roles or functions for the equipping of the body of Christ.

**Apostle:**

We are told in Hebrews 3:1, “Therefore holy brethren, partakers of a heavenly calling, consider Jesus, the apostle and High Priest of our confession.”

The word apostle literally means ‘sent one.’ An apostle is sent and commissioned first and foremost from heaven. Apostles are master builders of the ‘house of the Lord, the temple.’ As Rick Joyner says, “There is something to beholding the glory and majesty of who He is that imparts an understanding, a focus, and a resolve that is essential for true apostolic anointing. They will build something the Lord will want to inhabit.” Proverbs 24:3-4 says, “Through wisdom a house is built, and by understanding it is established; by knowledge the rooms are filled with all precious and pleasant riches.” It is wisdom that actually builds the house.

True apostles will come with the ‘Spirit of wisdom.’ And since the foundation of the church is built upon Jesus, the primary apostolic burden will be to see Christ ***formed*** in his people. As Galatians says, “My children, with whom I am again in labor until Christ is formed in you…” The true apostolic anointing desires that all men see Christ, draw near to him, and be conformed to his likeness. The apostolic anointing is a composite of all the other gifts. Just as Paul, Peter, and John were all great teachers, pastors, all prophesied and each did the work of an evangelist, so they present, or re-present Christ to the body of Christ. Just as with the other equipping gifts they are called to work as a team as it says in Acts 15:6, “Now the apostles and elders came together to consider the matter.”

Apostles are commissioned and set apart for the Lord for the preaching of the Gospel just as Paul says in Romans 1:1, “Paul, a bondservant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, separated to the gospel of God.” True apostolic anointing is similar to a loving father and is reproductive, producing mature sons and daughters. “For though you might have ten thousand instructors (teachers) in Christ, yet you do not have many fathers…” (I Cor. 4:15).

If we study the characteristics of the apostolic gift it makes it easier to identify the function of that gift in different people today. The cannon of scripture is complete, but the work of building His Church and expanding His kingdom is not.  Isaiah 9:7 says “of the increase of His government there will be no end.” God’s government establishes order and justice where ever it goes. That is a foundational pioneering work and requires the function of an apostolic gift. This equipping leadership gift lays foundation always making sure that Jesus Christ is the Chief Cornerstone.

In Hebrew culture prophet, evangelist and teacher were common religious terms.  Pastor or shepherd was a familiar agricultural term.  However, the word apostle was not from the Hebrew culture. The word apostle was first a Greek/Phoenician seafaring term that meant leader of a convoy of ships and later it came to refer to the commander of an invasion force.  As time went on the Romans began to use it to refer to former generals who then became their ambassadors.  The Jewish culture eventually began to use it speaking of an envoy who went about collecting tribute. Finally, Jesus used it speaking of the first 12 disciples.  In summary the history of the word meant:

* The leader of a convoy of ships
* The commander of an invasion force
* An ambassador general sent to represent a government to another nation

An anointing for mobilizing, and developing strategies like an admiral or a general is one of the major characteristics of this gift. Admirals or generals have to think beyond one ship or one unit. They think about the bigger picture which would include many ships and many units and how they need to work together in order to achieve an overall common objective.

The apostolic gift works with a much broader longer range perspective because of the assignment God gives them. They tend to work with many local congregations and are responsible to help them function together as a team to expand the kingdom and build the church.

One of the signs of an apostle is that they operate in power, not just word. According to 2 Corinthians 12:12, “Truly the signs of an apostle were accomplished among you with all perseverance, in signs and wonders and mighty deeds.” As in the early church, signs and wonders will accompany the apostolic ministry of the preaching of the gospel. Acts 5:12 (NKJV), “And through the hands of the apostles many signs and wonders were done among the people. And they were all with one accord in Solomon’s Porch.” And Acts 4:33 (NKJV), “And with great power the apostles gave witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And great grace was upon them all.”

Apostles are called to address doctrinal error, and heresy in the body of Christ. One of the reasons why there is so much confusion and disputes about doctrine today is because of a lack of true apostolic authority, which does not come from a title, but an anointing that human wisdom cannot refute. It is imperative that we bring together the prophets with the teachers in order to birth the true apostolic ministry. As the prophets and teachers come together in fasting and prayer, ministering to the Lord, God will raise up the Paul’s and Barnabas’ sent out as ‘apostles’, sent ones’ (Acts 13:1-3). And it is imperative that those who claim to be apostles be tested and confirmed as such within the body of Christ. Jesus commended the church at Ephesus for exposing the false apostles (Rev. 2).

In summary, Apostles function as

* Fathers and Mothers reproducing many spiritual sons and daughters
* Builders, not on another’s foundation, but building the church to be a place where the Lord is pleased to dwell, Eph. 3:19-20
* Generals/Leaders with strategy to see the Kingdom of God advancing and increasing on the earth!

**Prophet:**

The primary role of the prophet is not only to hear the voice of God for the body of Christ, but to equip all of God’s people to hear God’s voice. The Spirit of prophecy is the testimony of Jesus (Rev. 19:3). The Lord speaks not only to convey a message but also to reveal his heart in the matter. Paul says that we prophesy in part which makes it imperative that we learn to put all the parts together to get the complete picture of what God is saying to his people. God says that in the last days, “I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh and your sons and daughters shall prophesy.” All can prophesy but that doesn’t make all prophets.

Prophecy is a human report of a divine revelation. It is the speaking forth in merely human words something the Holy Spirit has sovereignly and spontaneously revealed to a believer. Prophecy, therefore, is not based on a hunch, a supposition, an inference, an educated guess, or even on sanctified wisdom. Prophecy is not based on personal insight, intuition, or illumination. This is what distinguishes prophecy from teaching. Teaching/Preaching is always based on a text of Scripture. Prophecy is always based on a spontaneous revelation. This spontaneous revelation will never contradict Scripture and must be tested by Scripture.

A prophet should not only hear the voice of the Lord, but also be equipping the whole body of Christ to know God’s voice. Acts 13:1 confirms that in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers present. Agabus is a biblical example of a prophet who prophesied what would happen to the apostle Paul in Acts 21:10-11, and yet even with the prophetic revelation knowing what would happen, Paul still decided to go to Rome. The prophetic revelation was both forth telling and foretelling but not necessarily directive.

Paul exhorts the church at Corinth to pursue love, and desire spiritual gifts but especially that you may prophesy (I Cor 14:1 and 14:1). Paul tells us “that he who prophesies speaks edification and exhortation and comfort to man, for the edification of the church, and that he who prophesies is greater than he who speaks with tongues.” I Cor 14 tells us to let two or three ‘prophets’ speak, and let the others judge. And verse 31 says, “For you can all prophesy one by one, that all may learn and all may be encouraged. And the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets.” Prophecy was an important gift in the body of Christ at Corinth. Again, those who are commissioned to be prophets in the body of Christ are to equip the body of Christ to learn to hear God’s voice.

**Evangelist:**

In the New Testament we have over 20 people referred to as apostles, only a few who are referred to as prophets, and only one who is specifically called an evangelist – Phillip. (Acts 21:8) The apostle Timothy was commanded to the do the work of an evangelist. The word evangelist means, a messenger of good news. An evangelist is one who preaches the gospel and trains and equips the body of Christ to be ‘witnesses’ to the death, burial and resurrection of Christ. An evangelist must impart a love for the un-churched and a passion for reaching the lost. People are coming to Christ rapidly in every place around the world except the US and Europe. Studies have shown that 95 percent of those who come to salvation do so through a friend or a family member. Therefore, since evangelism is so relational, our lifestyle radically affects our gospel witness. If we properly equip the members of the body of Christ to do the work of evangelism, every Christian home would be an open door and a lighthouse for salvation. In our churches today, many assume that those attending are all born again Christians, but that is not necessarily the case. Many have never been told how to be born again, or been led through a salvation prayer. Jesus was called a ‘friend of sinners.’ Our churches must be places where the un-churched and sinners are welcome.

**Pastor:**

The word pastor is ‘poimen’ which means to shepherd, to tend and feed the flock. True shepherds must equip the body of Christ to care and feed one another. This is the only time in the NT that this word is used. We do not have one example of someone being called a pastor in the NT except of course the Good Shepherd the Lord Jesus! The role or function of shepherding is fulfilled by the elders/overseers. The overseers (elders – plural) in Acts 20 are commanded to shepherd the flock of God, **Acts 20:28-30**.

It is obvious in the NT that this was to be a team effort. Nevertheless, that does not imply that they are all equal in authority or leadership. Typically in the NT there is one person who leads the team, such as Peter and James did in Jerusalem. Even so, there is always a team of elders with them in each case. A good shepherd is one who so loves the sheep and is willing to lay his life down for them, as in the example of the Lord Jesus, our Chief Overseer. Jesus exhorted Peter to feed the sheep and to tend the sheep in Matthew 24:45, “Who then is a faithful and wise servant, whom his master made rule over his household, to give them **food** in due season?” Elder/overseer are set over the body of Christ to rule the household of God and to feed them their food at the proper time. Tending speaks of protecting them from predators, watching for parasites, giving them clean water to drink, examining their pastures and leading them to places of rest. A person with the equipping gift of pastor is often an elder in local church, but will also raise up, train and equip other shepherds and elders in the body of Christ! However a pastor equipping gift is not necessarily an overseeing elder.

One of the most basic requirements for a healthy flock is to cross breed them with other flocks. If shepherds fail to cross breed, the sheep will become increasingly weaker with each succeeding generation. Churches must have fellowship and interchange with other believers and churches that are different than theirs.

**Teacher:**

The heart and soul of the teaching ministry is a love for the truth. Teachers are instructors, who are compelled to search the Scriptures, the foundation of all truth. Teachers will tend to be more practical, giving us the interpretation of Scripture, as well as how to apply and live that truth in our daily lives. Teachers are called to impart the knowledge of God and his ways as revealed in the Word of God by the Spirit. Sensitivity to the Holy Spirit is essential in the teaching ministry since he is the Spirit of Truth. And he comes to reveal Jesus who is the Way and the *Truth* and the Life. They are to impart knowledge as well as equipping the saints to gain a love for the truth. They are to propel people to go deep into the word of God, digging their own wells, which is essential to true faith. As **I John 2:27** says,

“But the anointing which you have received from him abides in you, and you do not need that anyone *teach* you; but as the same anointing teaches you concerning all things, and is true, and is not a lie, and just as it has taught you, you will abide in Him.”

Jesus is the chief Rabbi, and spent much of his ministry time teaching and instructing others about the kingdom of God. Matthew 4:23,

“And Jesus went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing all kinds of sickness and all kinds of diseases among the people.”

When Jesus taught, he taught ‘as one having authority.’ His teaching was backed up with power and acts of kindness. He lived what he taught. Those who are called to teach are judged at a stricter level as James says, “My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment.” One of the primary issues in the early church was false teachers. It is important for true teachers in the body of Christ to defend the gospel Word of Truth with sound doctrine, so that the enemy of souls, the father of lies will have no place.

Teachers are to equip the body of Christ to teach others. Teaching is a central imperative of the Great commission, making disciples and teaching them to obey everything that Jesus had commanded them (Matthew 28:18-20).

**Conclusion:**

Not only are these equipping ministries called to impart the apostolic, prophetic, evangelism, shepherding, and teaching to the body of Christ, but also to reproduce themselves. Basic to the nature of equipping is training and raising up others who can do what we have been doing. As Paul commands Timothy in 2 Timothy 2:2 (ESV), “and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.” We reproduce who we are.

It is important to understand that even though one may be called to be an apostle, pastor, or teacher, he/she may not yet have been commissioned into that role. There is a difference between being called and being commissioned to that ministry, just as Paul was called to be an apostle many years before he was commissioned to it. If you have to ask whether you have been commissioned, then you haven’t been. When the commission comes there will be an increased anointing that comes with it, like an endorsement from the Lord Himself.

**FiveFold versus Elders and Deacons**

We can see from the scripture:

1. It is possible to be a deacon and hold a fivefoldministry. Philip is called both a [deacon](https://www.stepbible.org/?q=version=ESV%7Creference=Acts.6.5&options=HNVUG) and an [evangelist](https://www.stepbible.org/?q=version=ESV%7Creference=Acts.21.8&options=HNVUG).
2. It is possible to be an elder and hold a fivefold ministry. Peter is called both an [apostle](https://www.stepbible.org/?q=version=ESV%7Creference=Gal.2.8&options=HNVUG) and an [elder](https://www.stepbible.org/?q=version=ESV%7Creference=1Pet.5.1&options=HNVUG).
3. Nowhere in the New Testament does it say that all fivefold leaders are elders or all elders should be fivefold leaders. The qualification of eldership is character and not a fivefold ministry gift.

Nowhere in the New Testament are five fold ministers expected to be elders in a local church. Philip, as above, is an example here.

**Elders Govern the Local Church (Presbuterous, Episkopoi)**

First and foremost Jesus is the primary leader and overseer of the Church! The Scriptures are clear that Jesus Christ is the Head who rules the church ([Ephesians 1:9](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Ephesians%25201.9), [1:22-23](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Ephesians%25201.22-23), [4:15](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Ephesians%25204.15), [5:23](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Ephesians%25205.23)).

Jesus is the Apostle who plants the church ([Hebrews 3:1](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Hebrews%25203.1)). Jesus is the Leader who builds the church ([Matthew 16:18](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Matthew%252016.18)). Jesus is the Senior Pastor who Shepherds the church ([1 Peter 5:4](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/1%2520Peter%25205.4)). And it is ultimately Jesus who closes churches down when they have become faithless or fruitless ([Revelation 2:5](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Revelation%25202.5)). Therefore, it is absolutely vital that a church, especially its leadership, love Jesus, obey Jesus, imitate Jesus, serve Jesus, and follow Jesus at all times and in all ways, according to the teaching of His Word ([Colossians 3:16](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Colossians%25203.16)).

God also calls character qualified elders/shepherds who join with Jesus in overseeing the church, feeding, tending, guarding the gospel and exercising church discipline when necessary.

* I Timothy 5:17, "Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching"
* Acts 20:28, "Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood."
* Titus 1:5, "This is why I left Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you....for an overseer, as God's steward" Also see Acts 14:23, " And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting, they committed them to the Lord in whom they believed"
* 1 Peter 5:2, "Shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; nor for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock....likewise, you are younger, be subject to the elders. Clothe yourselves with all humility toward one another, for God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble"
* Hebrews 13:17, "Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch (shepherding) over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you."
* 1 Thessalonians 5:12, “We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and have charge of you in the Lord and admonish you”

The consistent NT witness is that each church was under the oversight of a plurality of elders. 1 Timothy 3:1 writes, "if anyone aspires to the office of overseer.” Accordingly, elders are called to lay down their lives in love, serving the church and the church is called to honor and submit to it’s elders. According to the New Testament, elders are responsible for the primary oversight of a church. The function and role of an elder involves governing the church ([1 Tim 5:17](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/1%2520Tim%25205.17); [Titus 1:7](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Titus%25201.7); [1 Peter 5:1–2](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/1%2520Pet%25205.1%25E2%2580%25932)), teaching and preaching the Word ([1 Timothy 3:2](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/1%2520Tim%25203.2); [2 Timothy 4:2](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/2%2520Tim%25204.2); [Titus 1:9](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Titus%25201.9)), protecting the church from false teachers ([Acts 20:17](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Acts%252020.17), [28–31](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Acts%252020.28%25E2%2580%259331)), caring and tending the flock as shepherds, exhorting and admonishing the saints in sound doctrine ([1 Timothy 4:13](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/1%2520Tim%25204.13); [2 Timothy 3:13–17](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/2%2520Tim%25203.13%25E2%2580%259317); [Titus 1:9](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Titus%25201.9)), visiting the sick and prayer ([James 5:14](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/James%25205.14); [Acts 6:4](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Acts%25206.4)). In biblical terminology, elders oversee, shepherd, and care for the local church.

Some have thought that the Bible speaks of a category of church leaders above elders, called "overseers." However, the biblical evidence indicates that "overseer" is simply another term for elder as well. Paul refers to the elders at Ephesus as "overseers" in his farewell sermon of [Acts 20:17-35](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Acts%252020.17-35). Likewise, "overseer" in [Titus 1:7](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Titus%25201.7) seems to be a synonym for the term "elder" used in verse 5. Most scholars now acknowledge this, as J.B. Lightfoot pointed out already in the 19th century: "It is a fact now generally recognized by theologians of all shades of opinion, that the language of the New Testament the same officer in the Church is called indifferently 'bishop [overseer]' (episkopos) and 'elder' or 'presbyter' (presbyteros)" (Biblical Eldership, Strauch, 180).

**Deacons Serve the Church**

***Diakonos***

The word diakonos means “one who serves in ministry” or more generally, "servant." The word appears 29 times in the New Testament. Of those 29 times, it is translated (by the NASB) as "deacon" three times, as "minister" seven times, and as "servant" 19 times. Consequently, the best deﬁnition of the duties of a diakonos is one who ministers to the church through their service. Considering how Paul uses the term in Phil 1:1 and in 1Tim 3, it's fair to say that he viewed diakonos as playing a leadership role in the church, albeit a lessor role compared to epsikopos or presbuteros. For example, Paul expected that the determination of who may serve as diakonos would fall to the other leaders in the church (1Tim 3:10), clearly suggesting that diakonos answer to the other two positions.

Nevertheless, diakonos are part of the leadership within a church, and they express their leadership primarily through acts of service for the beneﬁt of the entire congregation (including other leaders). The best example of the appointment of diakonos within the church is found in Acts 6 where Stephen and six other men are appointed to positions of service by the primary leaders in that church. Notice that several of these men eventually became evangelists themselves (e.g., Stephen, Philip), demonstrating that those who begin ministry in positions of service as diakonos are not precluded from eventually taking other roles in leadership. To summarize then, deacons are focused on service, while elders are primarily pastoral leaders over a congregation.

* Elders Govern the Local Church
* Deacons Serve the Local Church
* Fivefold Leaders Equip the Church to do the work of the ministry

1. Dr. Sam Storms, “The Beginners Guide to Spiritual Gifts” pg 12 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)