

Church Leaders in the New Testament

Bishops: The Greek word *episkopos* means simply “overseer” and could be used in the secular world to refer to many types of administrators or supervisors. In 1 Peter 2:25, it is used of Christ. See also Acts 20:28; Philippians 1:1; 1 Timothy 3:1–6; Titus 1:7–9.

Deacons: The Greek word *diakonos* means “one who serves” and is often translated “minister” or “servant” in English Bibles. It is used widely in the New Testament and is not always intended to designate a formal office. It is applied to Phoebe (Rom. 16:1), Apollos (1 Cor. 3:5), Tychicus (Eph. 6:21), Epaphras (Col. 1:7), and Paul himself (1 Cor. 3:5; 2 Cor. 3:6; Eph. 3:7). In the book of Acts, the seven men appointed to “wait on tables” (Acts 6:2–5) are usually regarded as deacons. See also Philippians 1:1; 1 Timothy 3:8–13.

Elders: The Greek word *presbyteros* can refer to one who is advanced in age or experience. We read of elders in Israel throughout the Old Testament (e.g., Exod. 3:16; 1 Sam. 8:4), and Jewish elders are frequently mentioned in the New Testament Gospels (e.g., Matt. 21:23; Luke 7:3). In the book of Acts, elders are appointed in many Christian churches (Acts 11:30; 14:23; 15:2–6, 22–23; 16:4; 20:17; 21:18), and in the book of Revelation,

elders have a privileged position in heaven (Rev. 4:4, 10; 5:5–8, 11, 14; 7:11–13; 11:16; 14:3; 19:4). Elders are never mentioned in any of the undisputed letters of Paul, but see 1 Timothy 4:14; 5:17–19; Titus 1:5–6; James 5:14; 1 Peter 5:1–5.

Widows: We hear of widows who have been enrolled for special service in the church only in 1 Timothy 5:3–16. Paul, however, does encourage all widows to devote themselves to “the affairs of the Lord” rather than remarrying in 1 Corinthians 7:8, 34, 39–40. The church’s commitment to caring for widows is apparent in Acts 6:1; 9:39; James 1:27. See also Luke 2:37.

Others: Paul refers to other varieties of church leadership in Romans 12:8; 1 Corinthians 12:28; Galatians 6:6; 1 Thessalonians 5:12.

Other early Christian writings testify to the development of these offices. Both *1 Clement* (ca. 96) and the *Didache* (ca. 100) mention “bishops” and “deacons” as separate positions, giving the impression of a two-tiered hierarchy. By the time of Ignatius (ca. 110), a three-part structure had developed, according to which “bishops,” “deacons,” and “elders” represented three distinct offices. Ignatius also refers to “the virgins who are called widows” (Ignatius, *To the Smyrnaeans* 13:1). Is this a later development of the tradition: never-married women taking vows of lifelong celibacy?