

1. **ELDER:** a term primarily describing the demographic of older men (sometimes older women) who held a position of respect and honour. Not a "technical" office or role.
2. **OVERSEER:** a term describing (usually elders) who'd been appointed to a "teaching-pastor/shepherd" role by which they led the church, and protected it against false doctrines.
3. **DEACON:** there is very little in the New Testament that describes the shape of a deacon's role. The pastor/shepherd language is not used of a deacon. However they were to hold to the deep truths of the Christian faith, and it is clear they provided Overseers with support in church leadership.

The three terms above are distinct from one another, though they do seem to overlap at points. The "pastor/shepherd" language seems to be used only of Overseers. The language of "leaders" and "widows" at points seem to overlap with the terms "elders" and "Deacons".

1. **ELDERS:**

Unlike the terms of "Overseer" or "Deacon", the term *elder* does not designate a set or specific role or function. Rather, *elder* is a comparative term meaning "old/senior" (see Acts 2:17). They were often those who held a respected position among their community on account of their seniority (1 Timothy 5:1). There was also a parallel term for an *elder* who was an "older woman" (1 Timothy 5:2).

While *elders* were to be accorded respect as community figures, they did not necessarily hold a leadership "office" or "appointment". They were rather accorded honour as guardians of tradition (Matt 15:2). They were "leading community figures" who led alongside those who did hold a specific office such as chief priests (Matt 16:21) scribes (Matt 27:41) and rulers (Acts 4:8).

***overlap with Deacons? (segment 3a.)**

If Titus 2:1-5 is not simply referring to male/female *elders* as an age demographic, it is quite possible Paul has in mind both male/female *elders* who fulfilled a *Deacon-like* leadership role in the church community. (see Deacons below for further details)

***overlap with Overseers? (segment 2a.)**

Paul usually directed that "Overseers" be appointed from among the broader social category of elders. However Paul does not present elders and overseers as identical categories. (see Overseers below for further details)

2. OVERSEERS:

In 1 Timothy 3:1-7 an Overseer is a specific leadership role to which someone may be appointed. Overseers were often appointed from among a broader demographic segment of the church community called elders (see 1. above). This explains why the terms elders and Overseers so often seem to overlap one another. (*segment 2a.*)

- In Titus 1:5-9 Paul instructs Titus to appoint some elders specifically to the teaching office of Overseer

- In Acts 20 Paul meets with those elders (Acts 20:17) who specifically performed the role of Overseers (Acts 20:28) in the Ephesians churches; these overseers/shepherds were **elder** men who protected the church "flock" from false teachers. (Acts 20:17-37)

- Overseers were required to be *able teachers* (1 Tim. 3:2), something not required of all elders or Deacons. (See 1 Tim 5:17)

- 1 Timothy 5:17-25 is focused upon those elders who were especially set apart to perform the preaching-teaching task (likely the Overseers of 1 Tim 3:2)

- 1 Peter 5:1-2 identifies elders as those who "watch/oversee" God's flock. The term "shepherd" (or pastor) is a leadership term particularly linked with Overseers (Acts 20:28) - those who lead and protect the flock as "pastor-teachers" (see Eph 4:11)

While Overseers seem to have typically been drawn from among the elders, it seems Timothy himself fulfilled the role of an Overseer, while not being identified as **an elder** but as a younger man (1 Timothy 4:11-14).

3. DEACONS:

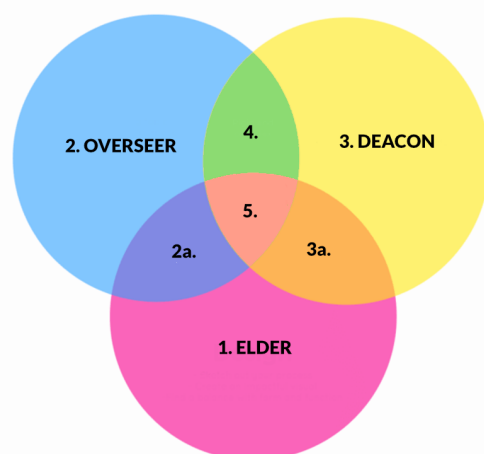
Deacons, as with Overseers, were those appointed to an office or ministry role (1 Timothy 3:8-13). Women as well as men were appointed as Deacons (1 Timothy 3:11, Romans 16:2). While they are not described as "pastor-teachers", there were required to be tested as to whether they held to the deep truths of the faith (1 Tim 3:9).

**overlap segment 3a.*

If Titus 2:1-5 is not referring to male/female elders as primarily just an age demographic, it is possible that Paul is describing here both male/female **elders** who fulfilled a deacon-like leadership role in the church community.

James 5:13-16 may also be a use of elders that overlaps with the ministry of Deacons (or maybe Overseers) on account of the specific ministry of prayer and absolution (assurance of forgiveness) to those who were sick due to unrepentant sin.

It seems likely that 1 Timothy 5:9-12 describes widows (female elders - over 60yrs) who had vowed to give themselves in deacon-like service to the church for their remaining years, and so were financially supported by the church. This would include some women's Diaconal teaching responsibilities (Titus 2:3-5).



4. OVERSEERS & DEACONS as OFFICIAL ORDERS/ROLES of ministry:

***overlap segment 4.**

In Philippians 1:1 Paul seems to give recognition to "Overseers & Deacons" as two distinct official ministry offices that are distinguished from the rest of the church community. It seems significant that Paul **does not** refer to himself as an "Apostle" in the letter, but rather as a servant; Jesus himself "took on the nature of a servant" in Phil 2:7. Perhaps Paul wrote Philippians to urge those appointed to the authoritative roles of Overseers & Deacons to view themselves as servants/slaves also.

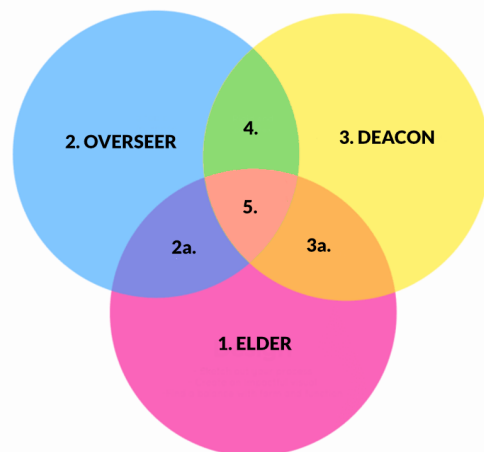
5. LEADERS (in GENERAL)?

Hebrews 13:17 speaks of "Leaders" without direct reference to any of the above terms of Overseers, Deacons, or elders. Should we see this Hebrews passage as a reference to all church leaders in general?

It could be that Hebrews 13:17 is speaking of any church leader in general, without highlighting the distinctions that Paul makes between elders, Overseers, and Deacons in his pastoral epistles. While Deacons are not said to teach in the way Overseers do, Titus 2:3 certainly speaks of **elder** women as teaching younger women in a manner that would also be deserving of obedience. In Heb. 13:17 "leaders" may be a catch-all term.

***overlap segment 2a**

However it is also possible that leader in Hebrews 13:17 equates to the Overseer. Although the term "overseer" is not used in Hebrews 13:17, another term for "watching over" is used. The fact that the leaders in Heb.13 need to "give an account" for their teaching also perhaps implies that they are to be thought of specifically as elder/Overseer teachers (see James 3:1. See also 1 Cor 3:10-15).



NOTE: The **teaching** role of Overseers was not intended to be the only "speaking-ministry" practiced in gathered church communities. Overseers such as Timothy (1 Timothy 4:11-14) were responsible for reading the scriptures, preaching, and teaching in order to....

i) to safeguard the truth of Christ, AND

ii) provide pure doctrinal truth for members of the community, out of which they might speak the truth of Christ in love (Eph 4:15) through prayer, prophecy, exhortation, encouragement, song, and evangelism, in service of Christ's body.