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A table of contents for the *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_ajet-02.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_ajet-02.php)

## LEADERSHIP OF THE CHURCH

*Norman H. Helfers*

*Church leadership is one of the most pressing issues confronting the Christian community. When Jesus observed his own disciples struggling for positions of prominence, he observed, "the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them...Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant" (Mt 20:25f). Church government as found in the New Testament reflects this basic principle: service, not lordship, ministry, not hierarchy. Norman Helfers presents a biblical study of the church government found in the New Testament, centring on elders and deacons, not a hierarchy of bishops and archbishops. If the contemporary church would seek to conform to the pattern of the New Testament church government, we would witness a transformed church, rich in service and ministry, rather than characterised by positions and power.*

As so goes the church's leadership, so goes the church. Just as in any other organisation, the church depends on its leadership. It is often appalling to see a church that is operating contrary to the Scriptures in its leadership. To see elders functioning as deacons, or deacons as elders, or as none of the above, makes one wonder whether or not that church has studied the Scriptures relating to this crucial matter. Or whether the church has left it to chance, or just let it evolve as various needs came about.

Obviously, there are some churches that are operating "politically," that is, not trying to offend anyone who may attend church services by functioning with a "community" type of approach

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in their operation. One thing should be obvious from the Scriptures, and that is that Jesus said, "I will build my Church." He did not leave it to chance. If He has brought about His Church, do you not think that He has given us His plan for the government or the "organisation" of the church as well?

As the student of the Bible approaches this subject, one will soon notice that there are only two offices in the church mentioned in the Bible: elders and deacons.

Generally speaking, the elders are the "spiritual leaders" of the church, while the deacons the "physical, or material leaders" of the church. All matters in the church relating to spiritual needs are dealt with by the elders and all matters dealing with the physical are dealt with by the deacons. If this Scriptural "policy" is followed carefully the church will reap God's blessings in its operation.

### INTRODUCTION

The church, like every other dimension of God's Kingdom manifested upon earth, depends upon its leadership. The strength, health, productivity, and fruitfulness of a church directly reflect the quality of its leadership.

Under the plan which God has ordained for the church, leadership is a position of humble, loving service. Those who would lead God's people must exemplify purity, sacrifice, diligence, and devotion. And with the tremendous responsibility inherent in leading the flock of God comes potential for either great blessing or great judgement. Good leaders are doubly blessed; poor leaders are doubly chastened, for "from everyone who has been given much shall much be required" (Lk 12:48).<sup>1</sup> James 3:1 says, "Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we shall incur a stricter judgement."

Biblically, the focal point of all church leadership is the elder. It is the elders who are charged with teaching, feeding, and protecting the church, and it is the elders who are accountable to God on behalf of the church. Yet many church elders do not understand either the gravity or the potential of their role.

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<sup>1</sup> All Scripture references are from the New American Standard Version.

Being uncertain of their function or their relationship to the Body, the Church, they are greatly hindered in their ability to minister effectively. With that in mind let us explore the key points fundamental to a proper understanding of the ministry of spiritual leadership for the church elder. Then we will take a look at what the Scriptures have to say about the office of the deacon and his leadership role in the local church.

### **THE MEANING OF THE TERM, “ELDER”**

#### **Old Testament Jewish Origin.**

The word, “elder”, is of Old Testament Jewish origin. The primary Hebrew word for elder, *zaqen*, was used, for example, in Numbers 11:16 and Deuteronomy 7:1, of the seventy tribal leaders who assisted Moses (Harris 1980:1,249). There it refers to a special category of men who were set apart for leadership – much like a senate – in Israel. Deuteronomy 1:9-18 indicates that these men were charged with the responsibility of judging the people. Moses communicated through them to the people (Ex 19:7; Dt 31:9). They led the Passover (Ex 12:21) and perhaps other elements of worship.

Later, the elders of Israel were specifically involved in the leadership of cities and local communities (1 Sa 11:3; 16:4; 30:26) (Wood 1970:192). Still, their function was decision making – applying wisdom to the lives of the people in resolving conflicts, giving direction, and generally overseeing the details of an orderly society.

The Old Testament refers to them as “elders of Israel” (1 Sa 4:3); “elders of the land” (1 Ki 20:7); “elders of Judah” (2 Ki 23:1); “elders ... of each city” (Ezr 10:14); and “elders of the congregation” (Jdg 21:16). They served in the capacity of local magistrates, judges, and as governors over the tribes (Dt 16:18; 19:12; 31:28) (Wood 1970:192).

Another Hebrew word for elder is *sab*, used only five times in the Old Testament, all in the book of Ezra (Harris 1980:II,615). There it refers to the group of Jewish leaders in charge of rebuilding the temple after the exile.

### **Greek Usage**

The Greek word for “elder” is *presbuteros*. *Presbuteros* is used about seventy times in the New Testament. The meaning of *presbuteros* in the New Testament is like *zaqen* in the Old Testament which means “aged,” or “bearded,” and like *sab*, which means “gray-headed.” As in our English word, “elder,” *presbuteros* has reference to mature age (Arndt 1979:699). For example, in Acts 2:17, Peter quotes Joel 2:28: “And your *old men* shall dream dreams.” The Hebrew word used for “old men” in Joel is *zaqen*, and the Greek word used in Acts is *presbuteros*. Used in that sense, elder does not constitute an official title; it simply means “an older man.”

In 1 Timothy 5:2, the feminine form of *presbuteros* is used to refer to older women. There, older women are contrasted with younger ones. In that contrast, the term again signifies only mature age, not an office in the church.

1 Peter 5:5 contains a similar usage. In such a context, *presbuteros* is generally understood to mean only “an older person,” not necessarily an officeholder of any kind. That is the primary meaning of the term in general.

In the time of Christ *presbuteros* was a familiar term. It is used twenty-eight times in the New Testament to refer to a group of ex-officio spiritual leaders of Israel (cf. Mt 27:3,41; Lk 22:52; Ac 4:8). In each of those instances and every similar usage, *presbuteros* refers to recognised spiritual leaders in Israel who aren’t defined as priests of any kind. These seem to be the Sanhedrin, the highest ruling body in Judaism in Jesus’ time.

Matthew 15:2 and Mark 7:3,5 use the phrase “tradition of the elders.” There *presbuteros* refers to an ancestry of spiritual fathers who passed down principles that governed religious practice. These were the teachers who determined Jewish tradition. In this sense, elder is equivalent to rabbi and may or may not signify official status.

There are twelve occurrences of *presbuteros* in the book of Revelation. All of them refer to the twenty-four elders who appear to be unique representatives of the redeemed people of God from all ages.

## THE TERM “ELDER” USED IN REFERENCE TO THE CHURCH

### **Jewish Origins.**

The New Testament church was initially Jewish, so it would be natural that the concept of elder rule was adopted for use in the early church. Elder was the only commonly used Jewish term for leadership that was free from any connotation of either the monarchy or the priesthood. That is significant, because in the church, each believer is a co-regent with Christ, so there could be no earthly king. And unlike national Israel, the church has no specially designated earthly priesthood, for all believers are priests. So of all the Jewish concepts of leadership, the elder best transfers to the kind of leadership ordained for the church.

The elders of Israel were mature men, heads of families (Ex 12:21); able men of strong moral character, fearing God, men of truth and integrity (Ex 18:20,21); men full of the Holy Spirit (Nu 11:16-17); capable men of wisdom, discernment, and experience – impartial and courageous men who would intercede, teach, and judge righteously and fairly (Dt 1:13-17). All of those characteristics were involved in the Jewish understanding of the term *presbuteros*. The use of that term to describe church leaders emphasises the maturity of their spiritual experience, as shown in the strength and consistency of their moral character.

### **Use in the Book of Acts.**

*Presbuteros* is used nearly twenty times in Acts and the Epistles in reference to a unique group of leaders in the church (Stott 1990:317). From the very earliest beginnings of the church it was clear that a group of mature spiritual leaders was identified to have responsibility for the church. The church at Antioch, for example, where believers were first called “Christians,” sent Barnabas and Saul to the elders at Jerusalem with a gift to be distributed to the needy brethren in Judea (Ac 11:29-30). That demonstrated both that elders existed in the church at that very early date, and that the believers at Antioch recognised their authority.

Since the church at Antioch grew out of the ministry at Jerusalem, elders probably existed there as well. In fact, it is likely that Paul

himself functioned as an elder at Antioch, before he stepped out in the role of an apostle. He is listed in Acts 13:1 as one of that church's teachers.

Elders played a dominant role in the Council of Jerusalem, as recorded in Acts 15. Obviously, they were very influential in the foundational life of the early church.

As Paul and Barnabas began to preach in new areas, and as the church began to extend itself, the process of identifying church leaders became more clearly defined. And throughout the New Testament, as the church developed, leaders were called elders.

As early in the biblical narrative as Acts 14, we see that one of the key steps in establishing a new church was to identify and appoint elders for church leadership. "And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed" (Ac 14:23).

Nearly every church we know of in the New Testament is specifically said to have had elders. For example, Acts 20:17 says, "And from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called to him the elders of the church." It is significant that the church at Ephesus had elders, because all the churches of Asia Minor – such as those listed in Revelation 1:11 – were extensions of the ministry at Ephesus. We can assume that those churches also identified their leadership by the same terms that were set as the pattern in Ephesus – a plurality of elders.

Peter wrote to the scattered believers in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, "I exhort the elders among you ...shepherd the flock of God" (1 Pe 5:1,2). Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, and Bithynia were not cities, but rather territories. Thus, Peter was writing to a number of churches scattered all over Asia. All of them had elders.

#### **THE ELDER RELATED TO THE BISHOP AND THE PASTOR**

**Bishop the *episkopos*, Pastor the *poimen*.**

Bishops and pastors are not distinct from elders. The terms are simply different ways of identifying the same people. The Greek

word for bishop is *episkopos*, from which the Episcopalian Church gets its name. The Greek word for pastor is *poimen* ( Arndt 1979:684).

The textual evidence indicates that all three terms refer to the same office. The qualifications for a bishop, listed in 1 Timothy 3:1-7, and those for an elder, in Titus 1:6-9, are unmistakably parallel. In fact, in Titus, Paul uses both terms to refer to the same man (1:5,7).

All three terms are brought together in 1 Peter 5:1-2. Peter instructs the elders to be good bishops as they pastor: "Therefore, I exhort the elders (*presbuteros*) among you, as your fellow-elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed, shepherd (*poimaino*) the flock of God among you, exercising oversight (*episkopeo*) not under compulsion, but voluntary, according to the will of God."

Acts 20 also uses all three terms interchangeably. In verse 17, Paul assembles all the elders (*presbuteros*) of the church to give them his farewell message. In verse 28, he says, "Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers (*episkopos*), to shepherd (*poimaino*) the church of God."

In general usage, I prefer the term elder, because it seems to be free of many of the connotations and nuances of meanings that have been imposed on both bishop and pastor by our culture.

*Episkopos*, the word for bishop, means "overseer," or "guardian" (Arndt 1979: 299). The New Testament uses *episkopos* five times. In 1 Peter 2:25, Jesus Christ is called the *episkopos* of our souls. That is, He is the One who has the clearest overview of us, who understands us best, and He is the Shepherd and Guardian of our souls. The other four uses of *episkopos* have reference to leaders in the church.

*Episkopos* is the secular Greek culture's equivalent to the historic Hebrew idea of elders. Bishops were those appointed by the emperors to lead chaptured or newly founded city-states. The bishop was responsible to the emperor, but oversight was delegated to him. He functioned as a commissioner, regulating the affairs of the new colony or acquisition.

Thus *episkopos* suggested two ideas to the first-century Greek mind: responsibility to a superior power, and an introduction to a



new order of things. Gentile converts would immediately understand those concepts in the term.

It is interesting to trace the biblical uses of *episkopos*. It appears in the book of Acts only once, near the end (Ac 20:28). Of course, at that time, there were relatively few Gentiles in the church, and so the term was not commonly used. But apparently as Gentiles were saved and the church began to lose its Jewish orientations, the Greek culture's word *episkopos* was used more frequently to describe those who functioned as elders (1 Ti 3:1).

The New Testament bishop, or overseer, is in a unique leadership role in the church, specifically responsible for teaching (1 Ti 3:2), feeding, protecting, and generally nurturing the flock (Ac 20:28). Biblically, there is no difference in the role of an elder and that of a bishop, the two terms refer to the same group of leaders. *Episkopos* emphasises the function; *presbuteros*, the character.

*Poimen*, the word for pastor, or shepherd, is used a number of times in the New Testament, but Ephesians 4:11 is the only place in the King James Version where it is translated "pastor." Every other time it appears in the Greek texts, it is translated "shepherd" in the English version.

Two of the three times it appears in the Epistles, *poimen* refers to Christ. Hebrews 13:20,21 is a benediction. 1 Peter 2:25 says, "for you were continually straying like sheep, but now you have returned to the Shepherd [*poimen*] and Guardian [*episkopos*] of your souls."

In Ephesians 4:11, pastor (*poimen*) is used with the word teacher. The Greek construction there indicates that the two terms go together – we might hyphenate them in English (pastor-teacher). The emphasis is on the pastor's ministry of teaching.

*Poimen*, then, emphasises the pastoral role of caring and feeding, although the concept of leadership is also inherent in the picture of a shepherd. The focus of the term *poimen* is on the man's attitude. To be qualified as a pastor, a man must have a shepherd's caring heart.

So the term elder emphasises who the man is. *Bishop* speaks of what he does. And *pastor* deals with how he feeds (MacArthur 1995b:11). All three terms are used of the same church leaders, and all three identify those who feed and lead the church, but each has a unique emphasis.

## THE ROLE OF AN ELDER

### The Office of Elder

As the apostolic era came to a close, the office of elder emerged as the highest level of local church leadership. Thus it carried a great amount of responsibility. The elders were charged with the care and feeding, as well as the spiritual guidance of the entire church. There was no higher court of appeal and no greater resource to know the mind and heart of God with regard to issues in the church.

1 Timothy 3:1 says, "It is a trustworthy statement: if any man aspires to the office of overseer [*episkopos*], it is a fine work he desires to do." In verse 5, Paul says that the work of an *episkopos* is to "take care of the church of God." The clear implication is that a bishop's primary responsibility is that of being caretaker of the church.

### Ruling the Body

That involves a number of more specific duties. Perhaps the most obvious is the function of overseeing the affairs of the local church. 1 Timothy 5:17 says, "Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor." The Greek word translated "rule" in that verse is *proistemi*, used to speak of the elders' responsibility four times in 1 Timothy (3:4,5,12; 5:17), once in 1 Thessalonians 5:12 (where it is translated, "have charge over"), and once in Romans 12:8, where ruling is listed as a spiritual gift. *Proistemi* literally means "to stand first," and it speaks of the duty of general oversight common to all elders.

As those who rule in the church, elders are not subject to any higher earthly authority outside the local assembly. Their authority over the church is not by force or dictatorial power, but by precept and example (Heb 13:7).

Nor are the elders to operate by majority rule or vote. If all the elders are guided by the same Spirit and all have the mind of Christ, there should be unanimity in the decisions they make (1 Co 1:10, Eph 4:3, Php 1:27; 2:2). If there is division, all the elders should study, pray and seek the will of God together until consensus is achieved. Unity and harmony in the church begin with this principle.

### **Teaching the Body**

With the elders lies the responsibility to preach and teach (1 Ti 5:17). They are to determine doctrinal issues for the church and have the responsibility of proclaiming the truth to the congregation. 1 Timothy 3:2-7, listing the spiritual qualifications of the overseer, gives only one qualification that relates to a specific function: he must be “able to teach.” All the other qualifications are personal character qualities.

Titus 1:7-9 also emphasises the significance of the elder’s responsibility as a teacher. Already in the church, the threat of false teachers was so great that a key qualification for leadership was an understanding of sound doctrine and the ability to teach it.

### **Exhorting the Body**

“Exhort” in Titus 1:9 is the Greek word, *parakaleo*, which literally means “to call near” (Aland ed. 1966:132). From its use in the New Testament, we see that the ministry of exhortation has several elements. It involves persuasion (Ac 2:14, 14:22; Tit 1:9), pleading (2 Co 8:17), comfort (1 Th 2:11), encouragement (1 Th 4:1), and patient reiterating of important doctrine (2 Ti 4:2).

### **Prayer with and for the Body**

The elders are a resource for those who seek partnership in prayer. James wrote, “Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord” (Ja 5:14).

### **Shepherding the Body**

Acts 20:28 says that another function of an elder is shepherding. Involved in the concept of shepherding are the twin responsibilities of *feeding* and *protecting* the flock. Verses 29-30 re-emphasise the fact that the protecting ministry of the overseer is essential to counter the threat of false teachers.

The elder acts as a caring and loving shepherd over the flock, but never in Scripture is it spoken of as “his flock,” or “your flock.” It is the “flock of God” (1 Pe 5:2), and he is merely a steward – a caretaker for the possession of God.

**The Core of the Body**

Elders, as the spiritual overseers of the flock, are to determine church policy (Ac 15:22); oversee (Ac 20:28); ordain others (1 Ti 4:14); rule, teach, and preach (1 Ti 5:17); exhort and refute (Tit 1:9); and act as shepherds, setting an example for all (1 Pe 5:1-3). Those responsibilities put elders at the core of the work of the New Testament church.

**Selection of Deacons for the Body**

Understandably, elders cannot afford to allow themselves to be consumed with business details, public relations, minor financial matters, and other particulars of the day-to-day operation of the church. They are to devote themselves first of all to prayer and to the ministry of the Word, and select deacons to handle the lesser matters, or physical matters of the church (cf. Ac 6:1-4).

**THE QUALIFICATIONS**

The key passages are 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1: 5-9.14. These two passages give us the qualifications of an elder. The single, overarching qualification of which the rest are supportive is that he is *to be above reproach*. That is, he must be a leader who cannot be accused of anything sinful. All the other qualifications, except perhaps teaching and management skills, only amplify that idea.

**Above Reproach**

An elder must be above reproach in his marital life, his social life, his family life, his business life, and his spiritual life.

“*The husband of one wife*” (literally, “a one-woman man”) does not mean simply that he is married to one woman – that would not be a spiritual qualification (MacArthur 1995a:104). Rather, it means an elder is to be a man who is utterly single-minded in his devotion to his wife. If he is not married, he is not to be the type who is flirtatious.

“*Temperate*” seems to imply the idea of a balanced, moderate life. “*Prudent*” is another word for “wise.” “*Respectable*” means that he has dignity and the respect of his peers.

“*Hospitable*” means that he loves strangers – not necessarily that he has a lot of dinner parties, but rather that he is not cliquish. “*Able to teach*” is *didaktikos*, or “skilled in teaching.” Other characteristics are that he be “*not addicted to wine*”; not “*pugnacious*” (not one who picks fights or is physically abusive); “*gentle*”; “*uncontentious*”, and “*free from the love of money*.”

All those must be proven, demonstrated qualities and abilities, and the first place he must manifest them is in his home. He must manage his own household well, and keep his children under control with dignity. “Household” in verse 5 probably refers to an extended household, including servants, lands, possessions, and many in-laws and other relatives. All those were elements of a household in the first century, and a great deal of leadership skills and spiritual character were required to manage them well. If a man could not manage his household, how could he be charged with managing the church?

The qualifications of an elder, then, go far beyond good moral characteristics. An elder must be demonstrably skilled as a teacher and manager. If anything in his life signifies a weakness in those areas, he is disqualified. If he is in debt, if his children are rebellious, if anything in his handling of business affairs is not above reproach, he cannot be an elder.

Understandably, he cannot be a new convert, for it takes time for him to mature, as well as time to examine his life and evaluate his qualifications.

To wrap all that up, he must have an impeccable reputation with those outside the church. His business and social activities in the community must also be above reproach.

### **Women as Elders**

No provision is made for women to serve as elders. 1 Timothy 2:11-12 says, “Let a woman quietly receive instruction with entire submissiveness. But I do not allow a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man, but to remain quiet.” Women are to be under the authority of elders, excluded from teaching men or holding positions of authority over them.

The reasons women must submit to the leadership of men are not cultural, nor do they reflect a Pauline prejudice, as some claim.

Rather, the reason is rooted in the order of creation: "For it was Adam who was first created, and then Eve" (v. 13). The Fall of Man confirmed the order: "And it was not Adam who was deceived, but the woman being quite deceived, fell into transgression" (v.14)

The balance of influence comes through the woman's responsibility of bearing and nurturing children (v.15).

## **ELDERS ORDAINED**

### **Uniquely Set Apart.**

The New Testament clearly indicates that elders were uniquely set apart or appointed to their office. The term normally used for the appointing of elders in the New Testament is *kathistemi*, which means "to ordain" (Arndt 1979:390). The concept of ordination implies official recognition by the leadership of the church and a public announcement setting men aside for special ministry.

### **The Laying on of Hands**

In 1 Timothy 4:14, Paul says to Timothy, "Do not neglect the spiritual gift within you, which was bestowed upon you through prophetic utterance with the laying on of hands by the presbytery."

### **Period of Testing**

A man should be considered for ordination only after he has proved himself suitable for a ministry of leadership through a period during which he is tested, possibly when he serves as a deacon. Then he may be tempered with time.

### **A Godly Desire**

Those who would be elders must desire to serve in this capacity (1Ti 3:1). The starting point in identifying a potential elder is the desire in the heart of the individual (cf 1 Pe 5:2). In other words we are not to go out and recruit men to become leaders in the church. One who is qualified to be an elder will be eager to give his life totally to the teaching of the Word of God and the leading of the flock of God, without any thought of gain at all.

### **ELDERS SUPPORTED BY THE CHURCH**

#### **Elders Support**

Some were supported, some were not, depending on the situation. Note the following: 1 Timothy 5:17,18; 1 Corinthians 9:1, 3-9. But the “tent making” role is also an option. If an elder chooses to gain income in another way, that is within the latitude of Scripture. Elders may choose to support themselves by working outside the church, as did Paul, for a number of reasons. They may not wish to put the burden of their support on the church. They may feel their testimony has a greater impact if they do not seek support. In a church with a plurality of elders, it is likely that some will support themselves, and others will be supported by the church. This is determined by the group. Either way, it does not affect the man’s status as an elder. There would be a lot less stress on the finances and the pastors of our churches if they followed these principles.

### **THE PASTORATE, A TEAM EFFORT**

Clearly, all the biblical data indicates that the pastorate is a team effort. It is significant that every place in the New Testament where the term *prebuteros* is used, it is plural, except where the apostles John and Peter speak of themselves individually. The norm in the New Testament church was a plurality of elders. There is no reference in all the New Testament to a one-pastor congregation. It is significant that Paul addresses his epistle to the Philippians, “to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, including the overseers [pl. *episkopots*] and deacons” (1:1).

### **ELDER GOVERNMENT AND THE ROLE OF A SPECIAL LEADER**

A plurality does not eliminate the unique role of a special leader from among those elders. Within the framework of elders’ ministries there will be great diversity as each exercises his unique gifts. Some will demonstrate special giftedness in the areas of administration or service; others will evidence stronger gifts of teaching, exhortation,

or other abilities. Some will be highly visible; others will function in the background. All are within the plan of God for the church.

### THE ELDER'S RELATION TO THE CONGREGATION

Nothing in Scripture indicates that anyone at a lower level of leadership, such as deacon, should be involved in decision making as it relates to church polity or doctrine.

The word "appreciate" in 1 Thessalonians 5:12,13, implies a close relationship involving appreciation, respect, love and cooperation.

An accusation of sin against an elder is not to be received lightly. Nor is it to be overlooked. As often seen in our churches the moving of a sinning elder (pastor) to another church is totally unbiblical, and will only lead to the spreading of that sin to other parts of the body of Christ in another location. Such a practice cannot be blessed of God.

### UNDERSTANDING THE OFFICE OF DEACON

Having discussed such spiritual qualifications for elders in 1 Timothy 3:1-7, Paul then turns to those of deacons in 3:8-13. The standards for deacons is in no way inferior to that required of elders. Elders who lead and deacons who serve perform different functions, but the spiritual qualifications required for both are essentially identical. There is no drop-off in spiritual quality or maturity from overseers to deacons. The only difference is that overseers are "able to teach" (3:2).

#### The Meaning of the Term

*Diakonos* (deacon) and the related terms *diakoneo* (to serve), and *diakonia* (service) appear approximately 100 times in the New Testament (Arndt 1979:184). Only in 1 Timothy 3 and in Philippians 1:1 are they translated "deacon" or "deacons." The rest of the time they are translated by various English words. Only in those two passages is the deacon elevated to official status. The rest of the time the terms are used in a general, nonspecific sense.

The original meaning of this word group had to do with performing menial tasks such as waiting on tables (MacArthur



1995a:124). That definition gradually broadened until it came to include any kind of service in the church. The word group's versatility can be seen in its divergent usage in the New Testament. *Diakonos*, *diakoneo*, and *diakonia* are variously translated "administration," "cared for," "minister," "servant," "serve," "service," "preparations," "relief," "support," and "deacon," among others (MacArthur 1995a:124). The root idea of serving food comes across in John 2:5, where *diakonos* is used of the waiters at the wedding. *Diakoneo* is used in the same sense in Luke 4:39, where Peter's mother-in-law served a meal. Luke 10:40; 17:8; and John 12:2 also use this word group to refer to serving food.

### **Various Ministries**

*Diakonos* is used to refer to soldiers and policemen who enforce justice (Ro 13:4). In John 12:26, Jesus equated following Him with serving Him. Anything done in obedience to Him is spiritual service. In the general sense of the term, all Christians are deacons, for all are to be actively serving Christ and his church.

That is Paul's point in 1 Corinthians 12:5, where he writes that "there are varieties of ministries" (*diakonia*). Every Christian is to be involved in some form of spiritual service. Leaders, through both teaching and modeling, are to equip believers to perform that service (Eph 4:12).

But *diakonos*, *diakonia*, and *diakoneo* are also used in a second, more specific sense (MacArthur 1995a:125). The list of spiritual gifts in Romans 12:6-8 includes a gift for service. Those with that gift are specially equipped for service, though they may not hold the office of deacon. Stephanas and his family were so gifted. Paul wrote of them, "they have devoted themselves for ministry (*diakonia*) to the saints" (1 Co16:15).

### **The Office**

The third use of this word group refers to the officially recognised responsibility of deacons. Everyone is deacon in the general sense, some are specially gifted by the Holy Spirit for service, but still others hold the office of deacon. They model spiritual service for everyone else. They work alongside the elders, implementing their preaching, teaching, and oversight in the practical life of the church.

The only discussion of the office of deacon is in 1 Timothy 3:8-13, though there is a possible reference to it in Philippians 1:1. Some hold that Paul was officially identified as a deacon. While Paul was a servant in the general sense of the word, he held the office of apostle (Ro 11:13; cf. 2 Co 10-12). Others have argued, based on 1 Timothy 4:6, that Timothy was a deacon. In 2 Timothy 4:5, however, Paul seems to identify Timothy as an Evangelist. Others have proposed Tychicus (cf. Eph 6:21), but Paul's use of *diakonos* (Eph 3:7) and *diakonia* (Eph 4:12) in a general, nonrestrictive sense makes doubtful the use of *diakonos* in Ephesians 6:21 as a strict reference to the office. There is likewise no reason to assume that the use of *diakonos* in reference to Epaphras (Col 1:7) is limited to the specific office.

#### **Looking at Acts 6**

Many hold that the seven men chosen to oversee the distribution of food in Acts 6 were the first official deacons. The text, however, nowhere calls them deacons. In fact, the only use of *diakonia* in Acts 6 is in reference to the apostles (v.4), and to the serving of food (v.1). That again emphasises its general usage. These men were chosen for a specific task. They did not hold the office of deacon, though their function of serving certainly foreshadowed that of the later deacons.

### **QUALIFICATIONS FOR DEACONS AND DEACONESSES**

In 1 Timothy 3:8 we are introduced to the personal character of the deacon, verse 9 to his spiritual life, verse 10a to his service, verse 10b and 12a to his moral purity, and 12b to his home life.

Whether verse 11 refers to the women as deacons' wives or a separate order of female deacons has been much disputed. The following points show that women in general, not necessarily deacon's wives are in view.

First, the use of the word, "Likewise" (cf. 1 Ti 2:9, 3:8 and Tit 2:3,6), argues strongly for seeing a third and distinct group here in addition to elders and deacons.

Second, there is the use of the possessive pronoun. No possessive pronoun or definite article connects these women with deacons.

Third, there are no qualifications for elders' wives. Paul gave no qualifications for elders' wives. Why would he do so for deacons' wives?

Fourth, is the usage in Greek language. Paul did not use the word "deaconesses" because there was no such word in the Greek language; the masculine form of *diakonos* was used of both men and women (cf. Ro 16:1).

Note the deaconess must be dignified, not malicious gossips, but temperate, faithful in all things.

### **THE REWARDS OF FAITHFUL SERVICE**

Two rewards await those men and women who have served well as deacons. First, they obtain for themselves a high standing (*bathmos*), literally referring to an elevated standing. Here it is used metaphorically to speak of those who are a step above everyone else. Secondly, they will gain great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus. Successful service breeds confidence and assurance among the people served.

It is surprising to find this office lacking "officially" in most of our local churches, although one may find individuals functioning in the capacity. The recognition of this office may help bring more churches into proper biblical perspective.

### **CONCLUSION**

The local churches in Africa could benefit greatly both spiritually and physically if they were to bring these church offices into proper biblical perspective. God does not just leave things to chance in the local church, nor does He leave them to man's whims. As in every aspect of His programme He has laid out for us His plan. We just need to study the Scriptures and implement those instructions in our churches.

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