

Church Officers

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THE contemporary trend is away from the New Testament pattern of church order and that is why, as evangelicals we must re-examine biblical teaching on the subject.

The nature of office

A basic truth is that a church, properly instituted, is an assembly of Christians (Acts 2:47; Rom 1:6; 1 Cor 1:2), some of whom are called to special office (Acts 6: 2-4; 14:23; Phil 1:1). The officers differ from ordinary members in the following ways: they have been given gifts to qualify them for special service (Rom 12:6-8; 1 Pet 4:10,11); they have been recognized by the church and formally set apart to specific church functions (Acts 6:6; 13:3); they are invested with authority, to be exercised for the benefit of all (1 Tim 3:5, 12 – an authority similar in some respects to that manifested in the home); they have care of the whole church and are responsible for all its members (Acts 20:28; Phil 2:26); and they give themselves completely to their particular ministries (Col 4:17; 2 Tim 4:5).

Only two kinds of officers

Some find specific predictions about this in the book of Isaiah. The Holy Spirit speaks through the prophet with reference to Gospel times, and says: “I will also make thy officers (lit, overseers) peace, and thine exactors righteousness.” (Isa 60:17). There could be a hint here of the two kinds of officers which were to appear in the Christian church: one to keep spiritual watch and the other to take responsibility for material and financial affairs.

In another place, although Isaiah uses Old Testament terms familiar to him, he nevertheless seems to suggest the same two kinds of office-bearers: “I will also take of them for priests, and for Levites, saith the Lord.” (66:21). Priests, as we know,

performed the duties of ordering divine worship and generally attending to the spiritual needs of the people (1 Sam 2:28; 2 Chron 15:3). The Levites’ task was to “assist” the priests. They looked after the outer part of the sanctuary and acted as musicians, scribes and stewards (Num 3; 1 Chron 23:4, 5 – “officers” means “writers”).

Although this is an example of “New Testament thought cast in Old Testament language”, it does appear to point to a twofold distribution of official services, such as we have now in Elders and Deacons.

The New Testament confirms that there should be only these two classes of office. In the making of this arrangement, the Lord has manifested His great wisdom and understanding, for He has adequately provided for the needs He knew each church would have. The needs would be “spiritual” and “material” and so there are two kinds of service (1 Pet 4:11 – the verb translated “minister” means “serve” and from it we derive our word “deacon”).

As Isaac Watts once said, “The church of Christ on earth is composed of spirits dwelling in flesh, and as the bishops or overseers (i.e. elders) chiefly exercise care towards the soul or spiritual part, so the chief care of the deacons seems to relate to the body, and things belonging to it.”

Why do we believe that these are the only church officers to be appointed? Firstly, under the apostolic organization of the early Christian churches these two officers only were ordained (Acts 6: 1-6; 14:23); secondly, when in the epistles directions are given respecting the qualifications and duties of church-officers, the officers specified are just two in number (1 Tim 3); and thirdly, on the one occasion when Paul, in an inscription, mentions both the members

and officers of a church, he makes it clear that there were but these two orders of officers (Phil 1:1).

The witness of early church history

There is compelling evidence to show that in the earliest times this scriptural pattern was carefully followed:

“Preaching through Countries and Cities, they (the apostles), appointed the first fruits (of their labours), having first proved them by the Spirit, to be bishops and deacons of those who should afterwards believe.” (Clement of Rome, writing to the Corinthians in AD 95).

“It is needful to abstain from all these things (i.e. the sins mentioned), being subject to the presbyters (or elders) and deacons, as unto God and Christ.” (Polycarp, disciple of John and minister at Smyrna, in a letter to the Philippians, dated AD 117).

“Appoint for yourselves, therefore, bishops and deacons worthy of the Lord, men who are meek, and not lovers of money, and true and approved.” (“The Didache”, a handbook of instruction, possibly written about AD 125).

Elders

The New Testament makes reference to “elders” or “bishops”, but it is certain that they are used to denote the holders of the same office. See: Acts 20:17, 28; Titus 1:5, 7; 1 Pet 5:1, 2 – “overseers” is the word elsewhere rendered “bishops”).

Let it first of all be established, and as a fundamental principle, that the essential character of this office lies in government. The term “elder” conveys that idea. It simply means “ruler”. Confirmation of this will be found in the following considerations:

(1) “Elder” was a title borrowed from the Jews, among whom it described those with authority to govern. In earliest times the elders seem to have been the heads of the principal families, responsible

for the ordering of affairs within the family circle (Exod 3:16, 18; 4:29).

(2) Under Moses, they had committed to their care the supervision of the whole nation and the law made provision for recognized elders to act as judges in every city (Deut 25:5-10; Josh 20:4; Ruth 4:2,9).

(3) With the institution of the synagogue, a further stage of development was reached. The elders in the locality became the elders of the synagogue. Each synagogue had a bench of them to manage its affairs and conduct its discipline. These were the “rulers” (Mk 5:22; Acts 13:15). Therefore, although of extensive use among the Jews, the title was always expressive of authority and government. As Dr. James Thornwell says: “the word elder denotes a ruler and nothing more.”

The term “bishop” had been common among the Greeks. “In Athenian language”, remarks Dr. J.B. Lightfoot, “it was used to designate commissioners appointed to regulate a new colony or acquisition.” It occurs quite often in the Greek version of the Old Testament, known as the Septuagint (280-150 BC); and, as this had a wide circulation among Greek-speaking Jews before Christ came, it is likely that the term was chosen for church officers on account of its usage there. In that version it is used to describe “officers” (explained as “captains”), “overseers” and “rulers” (Num 31:14; 2 Kings 11:19; 2 Chron 34:12). All are words denoting power of government.

Other titles and descriptions of these office-bearers support the point we are making. They are said to preside over Christian assemblies in harmony with Christ’s purpose, “them which ... are over you in the Lord” (1 Thess 5:12); and it is acknowledged that they have responsibility as spiritual rulers: “them that have the rule over you” (Heb 13:17; cf. 1 Tim 5:17).

The real function of eldership, then, concerns

general control and superintendence and elders who “rule” fulfil all the duties of their office.

Principal duties

(i) After prayer and consultation, they should bring to the church-meeting proposals aimed at setting forward the Lord’s work. Shepherds should always be ahead of the flock, giving a good, strong lead in the right direction: “Take heed therefore unto yourselves and to all the flock over which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers.” (Acts 20:28; cf. Num 27:16, 17).

(ii) Whatever the pressure from those desiring to introduce novelties, they are to make sure that Christ’s truths and ordinances are preserved in all their purity: “Holding fast the faithful word as he hath been taught, that he may be able by sound doctrine both to exhort and to convince the gainsayers.” (Tit 1:9; cf. 2 Tim 1:13).

(iii) One of their chief responsibilities is to look after the spiritual lives of the members. They are to be guardians of the church’s health. By regularly visiting homes and offering hospitality (Acts 20:17-21; 1 Tim 3:2) they will soon become aware of the problems, the anxieties, the sorrows, and the doubts which exist in the hearts of the Lord’s people. As men “apt to teach”, their task is faithfully to apply God’s word, to the correction, guidance and encouragement of individual souls: “They watch for your souls as they that must give account.” (Heb 13:17; cf. Isa 50:4).

(iv) Since Christ wills that His people should be inwardly and visibly at one with each other in love and fellowship, the elders should take all necessary action to prevent discord and division. Experience shows that dissension is an evil. If it does not ruin and destroy the church, it can easily disfigure it. Disrupters of the church’s peace should therefore come under their firm rebuke, while those weakened and troubled by the offenders should receive their loving pastoral attention: “We beseech

you, brethren, to know them which labour among you, and are over you in the Lord, and admonish you; and to esteem them very highly in love for their work’s sake. And be at peace among yourselves” (1 Thess 5:12; cf. Eph 4:11-16).

(v) The church will never be perfectly pure on earth, but it is the responsibility of the elders to keep it as pure as possible. They must therefore take special care over the matter of admissions to membership, faithfully examining all the applicants and only bringing to the church the names of those who meet the biblical requirements. They must also see that the necessary means are taken to remove from the membership those who persist in serious error, whether in doctrine or in life: “Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock ... For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them. Therefore watch ...” (Acts 20:28-31).

(vi) When need arises, they are to guide the members in the choice of church officers. The power to ordain lies with them: “Neglect not the gift that is in thee by prophecy, with the laying on of the hands of the presbytery.” (1 Tim 4:14).

(vii) Their work as rulers is to bring the whole church into its proper condition but let them not think for one moment that this can be achieved by the mere exercise of authority. The church, if it is to be holy and godly, must have set before it a pattern worthy of imitation. Let the eldership show to the church unity, love, zeal, faithfulness and true spirituality. It is quite deplorable when an elder acts badly. It dishonours Christ and seriously injures His church. “Elders must take heed to their ways”, says Stephen Ford, “and see that they walk circumspectly (or exactly) (Eph 5:15); for if they do not, believe it, they will do more hurt than good in the church.” (“A Gospel Church”, 1675). “The elders which are

among you I exhort ... Feed the flock of God ... being ensamples to the flock.” (1 Pet 5:1-3; cf. 1 Tim 4:12).

Deacons

The main thought in the word ‘Deacon’ (Greek: diaconos) is service rendered to others, and if, as some think, it is derived from ‘diako’ which means ‘to run to serve’, it represents servants active in their work for others. The influence and usefulness of Deacons’ work have not always been adequately recognized and our churches have been the poorer in consequence. Theirs is, I believe, a vital service and one which is essential not only to right organization but also to healthy church life.

Roots Deep in Hebrew history

During the Babylonian Captivity (606-536 BC) devout Jews, unable to worship at the temple, gathered before Ezekiel to hear the Word of God (Ezek 9:1; 11:15, 16; 14:1; 20:1; 33:31). When the Jews returned to their land, they continued to meet like this (Ezra 8:15; Neh 8:2; 9:1). ‘Synagogue’ was the name given to these meetings, as well as to the place where these meetings were held. It was the synagogue, as subsequently organized, which became the model for all Christian churches. From the synagogue came the simple and unadorned place of meeting, with its dominant pulpit (Lk 7:5; Neh 8:4); an order of service which emphasized the reading and exposition of Scripture (Lk 4:20; 6:6; Acts 15:21); and government by Elders (Mk 5:22; Lk 13:14). Also from the synagogue came the order of Deacons.

“No synagogue would be without two officers ... The other indispensable official was ‘the attendant’ (chazzan).” (Professor R W Moss in Hastings’ Dictionary of Christ and the Gospels) The ‘attendant’ is mentioned in Luke 4:20 (Note: ‘minister’ is used here in the sense of ‘attendant’, as in Acts 13:5). According to Jewish writers, he had general charge of the synagogue building together with all its sacred utensils. His duties included opening the doors, lighting the lamps and generally preparing the place

for worship. When the people were assembled, he would give the signal for the commencement of the service, convey the Holy Scriptures from the ark to the desk, and then see to it that everything was done properly. Dr. Alfred Plummer is surely right when he says: “The chazzan of the synagogue became the deacon ... of the Christian church.”

The First Deacons

Although the actual title of ‘Deacon’ does not occur in Acts 6, ‘ministration’ (diaconia) in verse 1 is the word from which ‘Deacon’ is derived, and “to serve tables” (diaconein) in verse 2 is the verb with which the noun ‘Deacon’ is connected.

These men are indeed referred to as ‘the Seven’ but there is good reason for it. The Apostolic office originally embraced the functions belonging to Elders and Deacons (1 Pet 5:1; 2 Jn 1; 3 Jn 1; 2 Cor 6:4; 11:23; Col 1:25 – ‘minister’ is the word elsewhere translated ‘Deacon’). At first the Apostles fulfilled both functions (Acts 4:33-37) but the time came when the responsibilities of Eldership, both teaching and prayer, became so great that they found it necessary to delegate their “deaconing” responsibilities to others (Acts 6:2-4). The situation then was that ‘the Twelve’ were the recognized Elders of the Jerusalem church. The officers working with them became known, quite understandably, as ‘the Seven’ – (Acts 21:8). Later, when ordinary Elders were appointed (Acts 11:30), officers like those in Acts 6 would be given the more common name of ‘Deacon’.

Dr Lorimer helpfully observes:

“Though the original institution rose out of a particular emergency – a murmuring as to the provision made for the Hellenist as distinguished from the Hebrew widows at Jerusalem, yet it is plain, though this case had not occurred, there would have been others which would soon have rendered such an appointment indispensable. The progress of Christianity would have demanded it. It was more accordant, however, with the free and unsystematic

character of the early Christian church, to create the office when it was plainly needed, than to set out with an original formal platform comprehending it.”

Deacons' Work

(i) As “servants”, they must study to know the Lord’s will and devote themselves to the service of the church. This is described in terms of serving tables (Acts 6:2), suggesting it has to do with meeting practical needs.

(ii) They are to ensure that proper care is taken of the poor and needy. Showing genuine concern for their comfort and relief, they should also seek to supply their needs from the church treasury.

(iii) If need be, they should visit those in need, ministering to them in their own homes (Matt. 25:44; James 1:27).

(iv) It is a part of their service to free the minister and ruling elders from unnecessary burdens of responsibility, so that they can attend to their teaching and ruling work (Acts 6:3).

(v) It falls to them to encourage the church in

its giving, that the minister may receive adequate financial support (1 Cor. 9:14; Gal. 6:6). They must also make proper arrangements for supplying the needs of missionaries (Phil 1:1; 4:10-19).

(vi) If tensions or strifes arise in the church, they should do what they can to deal with the problems, seeking peace for the Lord’s people (Acts 6:1, 3; Heb. 12:14).

(vii) Under God, their task is to make sure that everything is done decently and in order (1 Cor. 14:40; Col. 2:5).

Our prayer must be that the Lord, in His mercy, will preserve, protect and prosper true gospel churches in this land, and throughout the world; and that these churches will increasingly be conformed to the pattern of His Word and know more and more of the presence and power of His Holy Spirit.