

the Administration of the Church

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INTRODUCTION

The church originated at Jerusalem (Acts 2). From the beginning, it met both as a larger group at the temple, and as smaller groups in houses, where they broke bread together (Acts 2:46). There was no dividing distinction between the larger group and the smaller groups. Each was considered to be the church, the body of Christ.

As we consider the administration of the church, we must always keep in mind that it is Christ's church, purchased with His precious blood. Christ is the chief administrator of the church. All human administration is necessarily and completely subject to His Word.

"He is also head of the body, the church" (Colossians 1:18).

"The church is subject to Christ..." (Ephesians 5:24).

THE APOSTOLIC LEADERSHIP OF THE CHURCH

When the Lord was on earth He appointed twelve men to be with Him, and to send them out to preach, etc (Mark 3:14). They were called the twelve Apostles. Their appointment by the Lord gave them official authority. Their association with Him in His ministry on earth gave them special insight into His doctrines, attitudes, and purposes. After His resurrection, the Lord Jesus breathed the Holy Spirit into them in a special way (John 20:22), and opened their minds to understand the Scriptures (Luke 24:45). The Lord also reconfirmed their apostolic office for the church age after His resurrection:

Matthew 28:16-20:

- V. 16: The eleven apostles met with Jesus in Galilee.
- V. 18: Jesus said He had unlimited authority.
- V. 19: He told them to make disciples everywhere.
- V. 20: They were to teach these disciples what He had commanded them.

Just before the church was formed, the apostles appointed Matthias to take the place of Judas Iscariot as the twelfth apostle (Acts 1:15-26). He was to "Become a witness with us of His resurrection"; and "Occupy this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside".

When the Lord saved Paul, He appointed him to be the special apostle to the Gentiles. (Acts 9:15,16; 22:14,15,21; 26:15-18) Paul defends his apostleship in I Corinthians 9:1,2, and to some extent in the last three chapters of II Corinthians. James, Cephas, and John recognized him as genuine, giving him the right hand of fellowship to go to the Gentiles. (Galatians 2:9) Peter confirms his acceptance of the Apostle Paul's writings in II Peter 3:15,16.

The word "Apostle" simply means "Messenger," or "Sent one." The Lord Himself was called an apostle in Hebrews 3:1. The same Greek word is used for Christians other than the official apostles in II Corinthians 8:23 and Philippians 2:25. Generally, the word refers to Paul or one of the Twelve in the Bible.

The apostles were gifts to the whole church (Ephesians 4:11). They were God's exhibits to angels and men (I Corinthians 4:9). They had official authority to lay down the foundational doctrines and order of the church (I Corinthians 3:10 & Ephesians 2:19,20). They had authority to determine doctrinal issues (Galatians 2:5), procedural issues (I Corinthians 11:21-34), disciplinary issues (I Corinthians 5:3-5), and even personal issues (Philemon 8). They were not always perfect, even in religious matters (Galatians 2:11-14). Peter includes their

New Testament writings with the rest of the Bible (I Peter 3:15,16). When they wrote their portions of the Bible, they were inspired by the Holy Spirit of God. (II Timothy 3:16). If we don't accept their writings as the infallibly inspired Word of God, we have little authoritative to base our faith or practice on.

There are no apostles today. Their work was foundational (Ephesians 2:20 & I Corinthians 3:10), for establishing the church. When the apostles replaced Judas, they said that the new apostle should be someone who had accompanied the Lord Jesus during His ministry on earth.(Acts 1:21,22). The Apostle Paul uses the fact that he had seen the Lord Jesus Christ as part of the defense of his apostleship (I Corinthians 9:1). He says that the Lord appeared to him as one "Untimely born" after He had appeared to the rest of the apostles (I Corinthians 15:7,8). (This may have been when he was caught up to the third heaven in II Corinthians 12:2-4). Others claimed apostleship and were found to be false Revelation 2:2). If we accept and follow their Scriptural writings, the administration of the apostles extends to the church today. If we reject the injunctions of these personal delegates of Christ, we are rejecting Christ Himself as head of the church.

At first, then, the spiritual and even the physical administration of the church rested almost entirely on the Apostles:

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| Acts 2:14-40 | Peter preaches the first gospel meeting. |
| Acts 3 | Peter and John perform a miracle, and Peter preaches another gospel message. |
| Acts 4:34, 35 | The Apostles administer funds for the church. |
| Acts 5:1-11 | Peter administers strict and holy discipline on hypocrites in the church.
(People want original gifts. How would we fare if we had original discipline today?) |
| Acts 5:12-15 | The Apostles perform miracles and signs at the porch of the Temple, proving that this movement was indeed of God. |
| Acts 5:42: | The Apostles (V 29) teach and preach daily in the Temple, and from house to house. |

As the church in Jerusalem grew larger (5,000 men by Acts 4:4), administrative demands began to interfere with the spiritual work of the apostles (Acts 6:1-6). When it became evident that they could not keep up with everything, they instructed the congregation(s) to select seven godly men to handle the daily administration of the church's assistance to its needy widows.

THE APPEARANCE OF ELDERS

Like the physical oversight, the spiritual oversight of the church eventually had to pass on from the apostles to others. As the church grew, the apostles more and more began to share its spiritual leadership with other mature godly Christians called elders. This Scriptural concept of a shared leadership of God's people by qualified older individuals who merit the respect of the rest is continued from Judaism (Numbers 11:16). Judas Iscariot, the false apostle, was said to have an overseer's position though he killed himself after he betrayed Christ before the church was formed (Acts 1:20 quoting Psalms 109:8).

The Hebrew word for "Elder" meant "Beard," and indicated an older person; so younger men do not qualify. In Acts 20:17 the Apostle Paul called the "Elders" of Ephesus to see him. He called these same people "Overseers" in Verse 28. This establishes that "Elders" and "Overseers" or "Bishops" are the same thing. (The King James Bible translators used "Bishop," instead of "Overseer," for the Greek word,"*Episkopos*" in an unfortunate attempt to relate the term to the hierarchy of the Church of England). Titus 1:7 also calls the elders mentioned in Titus 1:5 overseers.

Since the word, "Elder," is a comparative term implying "More maturity," there is a sense in which certain godly Christians might be considered elders in situations where they are the most mature Christians available, while it would be inappropriate for them to assume such roles when considerably more mature leadership is available.

Elders are first mentioned in the church context when the Gentile church at Antioch sent relief to their brethren in Judea who were suffering from famine (Acts 11:30). These funds were sent "to the elders" in Judea. Eldership seems to have been more of a functional than a formal office.

In Acts 14:21-23 the Apostle Paul and Barnabas appointed elders in "every church" in Lystra, Iconium, and Psidian Antioch. This was on the return trip from Derby, fairly soon after they had established these churches. In Titus 1:5 The Apostle Paul delegated Titus to appoint elders in "every city" in Crete. This was part of finishing the work that remained after the Apostle's entourage had established churches there.

The Apostle Paul delineated the qualifications for eldership to the young men who worked with him. According to I Timothy 3:1-7, an elder had to be:

Above reproach (Nothing justly criticized in his life).

The husband of only one wife (Eliminates divorcees).

Temperate (Not radical in viewpoints, etc.).

Prudent (Wise).

Hospitable (Approachable to the congregation).

Able to teach

(Scriptural knowledge and the ability to communicate).

Not addicted to wine (Not an alcoholic).

Not pugnacious (Not characterized by a fighting attitude).

Gentle (Handles others with kindness).

Not contentious (Able to get along well with others).

Free from the love of money (Not materialistic).

Able to manage his own household and children well

(If he can't manage his own affairs, he's not likely to be able to manage the Lord's affairs in the church).

Not a new convert (who would be more susceptible to pride).

Titus 1:7-9 adds even more qualifications for eldership:

Not self-willed (Not always insisting on one's own way).

Not quick-tempered (Self-controlled).

Loving what is good (Godly at heart).

Just (Able to judge matters fairly).

Devout (Earnestly seeking spiritual things).

Holding fast the faithful word

(Able and willing to exhort with sound doctrine, and to refute those who contradict it).

Men of good reputation in the world

(Known to the community as "Good" people)

Earnest consideration of the Scriptural qualifications for eldership is humbling. Obviously, truly qualified elders are difficult if not impossible to find. It is self-evident that they cannot be manufactured simply by the appointment of men. Designating grossly unqualified men as elders can only be counter-productive to the spiritual welfare of the church. Those who legitimately function as elders should be aware enough of how far short of these requirements they fall to refrain from asserting themselves too authoritatively, except when absolutely necessary.

The Bible does not specifically instruct the church to appoint elders. Although the implications for designating elders are strong, they are not so strong but what most Christian congregation that appoint elders do not appoint deacons, and vice-versa. We can certainly recognize those reasonably qualified to function as elders by the Scriptural requirements for eldership, but we never read of elders being chosen by the congregation or appointed by the already existing elders. Where we do read of elders being appointed, it was either by the apostles themselves or their specifically delegated co-workers under their supervision. To say the least, a certain amount of extra-scriptural ingenuity must be exercised to contrive a method for appointing elders today.

Both cases where we read of elders being appointed involved churches composed entirely of new converts to Christianity. No one had been a Christian long enough to be considered spiritually mature. Neither were the congregations mature enough to recognize those qualified to be their leaders. And the Word of God itself was not yet complete or available enough to provide the church with instructions on how it was to function. Thus, special apostolic wisdom may have been needed to designate appropriately developing leadership for the time. It may be significant that the exclusion of novices was not mentioned to Titus, who was **appointing** elders from new converts in new churches by apostolic authority, but was specified to Timothy, who was simply **recognizing** elders as they developed in a more established church (At Ephesus).

The churches where we read of the appointment of elders seem to have been functioning without elders before their appointment. There is no compelling Scriptural evidence that the appointment of elders bestowed any official "Church" status on them. Many places that feel that churches are can't function without appointing specific local elders scarcely give a thought to appointing deacons.

We do not read of the appointment of elders in mature, established assemblies anywhere in the Scriptures. Where the Apostles (Jerusalem) or other mature Christians (Antioch) were already present to guide the church, elders seem to have been recognized as such without "official" status when their developing qualifications became apparent. The same Apostle who appointed elders in the early gentile churches later urged the brethren in Thessalonica, where many previously God-fearing Gentiles and a few Jews (Acts 17:4) only needed to hear the gospel to accept it, to "**Appreciate** (know or recognize) those who diligently labor among you, and **have charge** (lead or stand before) you in the Lord, and give you instruction" (I Thessalonians 5:12). If elders had been officially designated in Thessalonica, there would hardly have been any need to exhort the church to know who their leaders were. Everyone would have already known exactly who they were.

In Matthew 23:8-10 the Lord Himself specifically admonished:

"But do not be called Rabbi ("My Master" or "My Teacher"); for One is your Teacher, and you are all brothers. And do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He Who is in heaven. And do not be called leaders; for One is your Leader, that is, Christ."

This seems reason enough not to insist too strongly on the official appointment of official church leaders, or at least to hesitate to accept such official appointments.

In I Peter 5:1 Peter calls himself a "Fellow elder" (with the elders among the Christians scattered throughout Asia, etc.). It seems highly unlikely that the Holy Spirit would have led any local assembly to officially degrade Peter's apostleship to some kind of lesser appointed position of "Eldership." He was obviously considered an elder, not by appointment, but simply because he functioned as a shepherd of the flock of God--apparently the entire flock rather than just one congregation. Christians, then, might do well to shy away from the official appointment of elders now that the Scriptures are freely available to instruct all believers. It may be more Scriptural simply look to those who reasonably exhibit the Biblical qualifications of eldership for guidance from the Word of God than to invent unauthorized ways to designate elders whose artificial authority could be quite disastrous. True Scripturally qualified elders are readily recognizable as God's chosen leaders without man's appointment. They can function quite well without any dubious official appointment that can be so easily abused.

The Scriptures do not tell us how many elders an assembly should have. It is evident that eldership was meant to be a shared responsibility. The Bible never speaks of **the** elder of any church. God alone knows how many are needed anywhere, and He alone can provide them. (If the Word of God is heeded, there will tend to be too few, not too many). Since eldership depends on having certain qualifications, the church is bound to recognize all the elders God has given it to the extent that they Scripturally qualify. "If any man be above reproach...etc." (Titus 1:6).

The Apostle Peter likens the functions of elders to those of shepherds. As such, they correspond to the Pastor/Teachers of Ephesians 4:11 (I Peter 5:1-4):

V. 2: They are to lead the flock of God as He wills

(They are not to use eldership for personal gain).

V. 3: They are not to flaunt their authority over those allotted to their care

(They are to lead more by example, than by force).

V. 4: Although we are to esteem them highly (I Thessalonians

5:12,13), they should be willing to await the appearance of the Lord for their crown of glory.

As shepherds, the elders are to lead the church in a Scriptural path. Their function is to show the church from the Scriptures how it is to act, but they are never seen acting for or independent of the church in the Bible. In Acts 15, the elders at Antioch did not presume to issue any authoritative decree on how the church there stood on the conflict between Law and Grace, but referred the question to the Apostles and more mature elders in Jerusalem. The Jerusalem elders met with the apostles in Acts 15 to determine what church doctrine should be on the issue. But the whole church was involved in the communication of that apostolic injunction back to the gentiles (Acts 15:22). Church discipline was carried out by the whole church, not just the elders (I Corinthians 5:4). The whole church had to clear itself of the sin within it by putting out the wicked person (II Corinthians 7:11).

The fact that the whole church, not just the elders, is responsible for what it does is supported by the fact that there is not a single Book of the Bible addressed to the elders. (Philippians includes the elders.) This fact negates any supposition that the elders have authoritative interpretational rights in the Word of God for the church. It is the church itself, "The Household of God", (not the elders) that is the "Pillar and support of the truth" (I Timothy 3:15).

Elders are said to rule, and those who rule well are to be especially honored (I Timothy 5:17). Younger men are to be subject to them (I Peter 5:5), as we all are to all our Christian leaders (I Corinthians 16:16), and to each other (Ephesians 5:21). But if Christ is really the head of the Church, the function of the elders is not to direct it, but to teach it what Christ directs through His Word. Their authority is derived from the Word of God, and is valid insofar as they lead according to it. They are responsible to insist on Scriptural behavior for the church, and to apply their mature spiritual judgement with gentle firmness in prayerful dependence on the Holy Spirit. But elders do not have authority to act beyond or contrary to the Scriptures. It is self evident that the authority of the Word of God supersedes the authority of the elders. Where conflict between the elders and the Word of God arises, they are no longer in subjection to Christ as head of the church. In such cases, "We ought to obey God rather than men" (Acts 5: 29).

Although the Word of God teaches respect for elders, they are not given a special place in worship. They are not given a special title of address, special uniform, special seat, or any other special distinction in the Word of God. The Lord Jesus criticized the religious leaders of His day for using their positions to glorify themselves.(Luke 20:46, etc.). He was among His disciples as one who served (Luke 22:27). In Luke 22:26, He admonished those who desired special recognition to "Let Him who is greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as the servant." **This is the true spirit of eldership!**

The scope of eldership is not precisely defined in Scripture. When the Gentiles sent relief funds to Judea, they gave them "to the elders" (Acts 11:29,30). Judea was a large area with many churches. It is unclear whether these were elders of the whole Judean church (composed of many assemblies), or the elders of various assemblies meeting separately. If the Pastor/Teachers of Ephesians 4:11-12 are synonymous with "Elders," elders may be universal gifts to the whole church as are the apostles, prophets, and evangelists mentioned there. Such a broadened scope of eldership would be consistent with the appointment of elders in "Every city" of Titus 1:5, but would be more difficult to reconcile with their appointment in "Every church" in Acts 14:23, although the Scriptures refer to the church in areas such as Judea that must have had several congregations. The Scriptural references to the Overseers or elders of specific churches are the churches at cities, like Ephesus, that could have had several congregations in them.

Those embracing the broader scope of eldership have often established unscriptural central church governments. Those favoring a strictly local scope have tended to set up independent local churches with little appreciation of the unity and interdependence of the whole body of Christ. Those who do not recognize any administrative eldership generally tend either to unscriptural dictatorial systems, or just as unscriptural democratic systems where the whole church votes equally on various issues regardless of varying spiritual capabilities. Perhaps a better appreciation of the oneness of the whole body of Christ would lead to an approach where elders in a locality were more widely recognized to whatever extent they were known and trusted. This would be consistent with the "Eldership" of Peter (I Peter 5:1) and possibly John (II & III John 1), and the involvement of Jerusalem's elders in Antioch's conflict (Acts 15:2). And if that eldership led by moral excellence in teaching, influence, and example rather than by dictatorial authority, the congregations' Scriptural responsibility for its own actions would be preserved. This would be more vague and difficult to implement, but would probably be more consistent with all the Scriptures on the subject.

THE DILEMMA OF DEACONS

The Greek word, 'Diakonos,' means, "Servant." According to Vine, it views the servant more in relationship to his work than to his master. The word is used about thirty times in the new testament, where it is usually translated as "Minister" or "Servant." It is generally transliterated to "Deacon" in the four times where it is used in an official capacity. Deacons are only mentioned once in the greeting to the book of Philippians and three more times in I Timothy 3, where the qualifications for them are delineated.

The qualifications for Deacons listed in I Timothy 3:8-13 are stringent. Deacons are to be:

Men of dignity (Respectable).

Not double-tongued (Straightforward in how they talk).

Not addicted to much wine (Not alcoholics).

Not fond of sordid gain (Honest in business).

Holding the mystery of faith with a clear conscience (Not hypocrites whose deeds don't match their doctrines).

Tested and proven beyond reproach.

Husbands of one wife (Not a divorcee?).

Their wives also had to be godly woman.

(There is disagreement whether V 11 refers to women deacons (See also Romans 16:1), or the wives of deacons. Since deaconship generally would involve authority over men, it seems that I Timothy 2:12 rules out women as deacons.)

Good managers of their children and households.

Deacons who serve well obtain a high standing and confidence in faith (V. 13).

It has long been suggested that the seven men that were chosen by the congregation(s?) in Jerusalem to administer church aid to the widows (Acts 6:1-6) were the first official deacons, but the word for "Deacon" is not used of them in the Scriptures. The fact that the qualifications for deacons are listed immediately after the qualifications for elders, and are essentially the same for both groups, suggests that elders and deacons share similar offices with similar functions. Perhaps deacons would be better identified as younger men who might be gifted teachers or preachers, but lack the maturity that would enable them to guide the church authoritatively.

It is interesting that Titus was not instructed to appoint deacons in the recently established churches of Crete, nor were the qualifications for deacons even mentioned in Paul's epistle addressed to him. On the other hand, they were included in Timothy's instructions on church behavior, and he was told:

If you instruct the brethren in these things, you will be a good minister (Diakonos) of Jesus Christ, nourished in the words of faith and of the good doctrine which you have carefully followed. 1 Timothy 4:6

WHAT ABOUT PASTORS?

The word, "Pastor," comes from, "*Poimen*," the Greek word for, "Shepherd." Ephesians 4:11 is the only place in the New Testament where it is used in reference to church leadership:

And He 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...

The verb form, "*Poimano*"--"To shepherd," links the word to the Apostle(s) in John 21:16 and to the elders in Acts 20:28 and I Peter 5:2.

And from Miletus he (Paul) sent to Ephesus and called to him the elders of the church. And when they had come, he said to them...Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God...

(Acts 20:17-18 & 28)

Therefore I exhort the elders among you...Shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight...

There are no references to any individual as the pastor of a specific church anywhere in the Bible. Neither is there any Scriptural precedent for ordaining a presiding elder to assume primary responsibility as the "Pastor" of any church. Although the qualifications for deacons and elders are carefully specified in the Scriptures, there are not so much as guidelines for designating "Pastors." The obvious conclusion is that the whole concept of any kind of clergymen is an ecclesiastical tradition inconsistent with the Scriptures on the administration of the church. The duties generally delegated to them are actually the administrative responsibilities of the elders (I Peter 5:1-4) and the functional responsibilities of the entire congregation (I Corinthians 14).

SO, WHO PRESIDES?

The fourteenth chapter of I Corinthians describes a church meeting with an open format:

When you assemble, each one has a psalm, has a teaching, has a revelation, has a tongue, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification.

The miraculous gifts, such as tongues and definitive communications directly from the Lord, simply do not prevail among believers today. They seem to have been given to the early church primarily to authenticate Christianity. Their scarcity in no way invalidates these instructions for church meetings--which are presented as the Lord's command (I Corinthians 14:37-38). This meeting, where the men in the church are free to propose songs and address the congregation, is presented as the principal way for the church to meet. It cannot legitimately be abandoned in favor of whatever other types of meetings the church might see fit to hold, no matter how valid.

Appropriate participation in this meeting of the church today includes psalms (Proposing hymns to be sung

together), teaching (Expounding on the Word of God), and revelations (Expressing whatever else the Holy Spirit reveals as suitable for the occasion). The concept of prophecy as, "Speaking to men for edification and exhortation and consolation," seems relevant in this context (I Corinthians 14:3). Prayer is certainly never out of place.

No one is designated to preside over these meetings in the Scriptures. No clergy, not even the elders, are so much as mentioned in these primary instructions on how the church is to meet. The congregation itself is instructed to maintain its own decency and order by waiting patiently on one another (I Corinthians 14:40). In the context of exercising spiritual gifts, I Peter 4:11 tells us, "*Whoever speaks, let him speak, as it were, the utterances of God,*" Obviously, the more the participants earnestly try to present only whatever the Holy Spirit prompts them to, the more He will be free to preside. He is the one Who knows what the congregation really needs. The congregation is instructed to evaluate what is presented; and the elders are to be knowledgeable enough to be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict it (Titus 1:9).

Church Leadership

If the Elders would eld and Deacons would deak,
And the gifted were opened to godly critique;
And if all the rest would all do their best
To speak as the Spirit prompts them to speak;
What else would we need? What more could we ask,
For the church to accomplish it's difficult task?

But if we don't know what a Deacon's about;
Or how to give Elders some spiritual clout;
Or if God wants girls to pitch all their pearls,
And worship in silence, or have them speak out;
Then what will occur? What can we expect,
Except for confusion with none to correct?

But when Christians gather and inwardly vow
To tackle the work God has given them now;
If they are not blinded the Spirit'ly minded
Will open the Scriptures and show them just how;
And they'll be the Elders and Deacons they've got,
No matter whether they name them or not.

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