

Church Government 2 Elders and Bishops

Last week we discussed the difference between man's way and God's. God's work remains and is fruitful. The idea is for us to join God's way. His Word says we can be co-laborers with Him. He picks the job and the method and we join Him in what He is doing. Scripture gives us the guidelines to recognize if we are going the right way, but like Peter in Acts 1, we also need to obey what we have already heard. We should not presume too much. And we need the guidance and power of the Holy Spirit.

First we look to Scripture to see what we can learn there. This is what we already know to be the will of God. What has He revealed in His word as to the nature of church government? We don't find any specific instruction but there are many clues. Lets examine them one at a time and see if we can draw out information that we could apply.

John Legg, in his paper on Eldership: The Biblical Doctrine given in 1969, states that "there is to be found in the Bible a divinely ordained system of church government. I do not claim that every detail is to be found laid down, even to Sunday services at 11 a.m. and 6.30 p.m., but I do claim that what we find is a pattern and a sufficient one. We must assert that what we find in the pages of Scripture is for our use and that having discovered, as best we can, the Apostolic practice, it is our duty to follow it."

Apostles are at the top of the list of authority. We saw in Acts 1 that one of the main responsibilities of the Apostles was to bear witness to the resurrection. Apostle means an official representative. In Acts 2: the Apostles performed signs and wonders that were evidence of their authority and of God working through them. There is one mention of other apostles by Paul. (Rom. 16.7). Since these two men were not numbered with the Twelve, Paul obviously has some wider definition in mind, the common understanding of the word, meaning messenger or agent. In John 13:16 Jesus says that a messenger (lit. apostle) is not greater than the one who sends him; this is another non-technical use of the word.

In his book 'The Charismatics and the Word of God' Victor Budgen says, "We are not told in Scripture how to appoint apostles, whereas the instructions as to how to recognize and appoint an elder or deacon stand in clear contrast." He then quotes John Owen; "Where no command, no rule, no authority, no directions are given for the calling of any officer, there that office must cease, as doth that of the apostles, who could not be called but by Jesus Christ." Later in this lesson we will see this is not entirely the case but it makes a strong point.

One of the offices we see mentioned and for which qualifications are given are 'elders'. As the Apostle Paul wrote to Timothy and Titus, he gave a list of qualifications of elders. The term bishop (episkopous) and elder (presbuteros) used interchangeably in Acts 20:17,28 and Titus 1:5,7.

Our first big surprise is that letters and appointments are always to elders. The term is always plural and the implications are that they hold an equal standing. We never find a letter from Paul to the Senior Pastor of (name of a city). We never find a letter to a staff. The first mention of NT elders is Acts 11:30. The disciples (learners) in Antioch gave Barnabas and Saul an offering to take to the elders in Judea. Elders apparently handled the financial matters or at least the distribution of funds.

Next is Acts 14:23. Barnabas and Saul have become Paul and Barnabas. Can we draw any conclusions from this change? They appointed elders for the disciples in each church. There was no vote. Titus 1:5 we learn that Titus was assigned the unfinished business of appointing elders in every town. Each church had elders. How is this different from most churches today?

They had spent time in these places and knew the men there. 1Tim 3:10 5:22 They did not choose them the first time through but on the return trip. Maybe they wanted to see how they fared in their absence before appointing them. Then with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they put their trust. When was the last time you saw men pray and fast over the appointment of men to a church office? Is the men's trust in the Lord part of the reason they were chosen?

In Acts 15:2,4 the two church offices are mentioned side by side. Here is an example of the decision making process of the early church. Verse 6 both were a part of the decision. They shared testimony and Scripture. To sum the process up in a word, consensus. See in verse 28 after discussion there was a general sense of the direction of the Holy Spirit to which they agreed.

1Tim 4:14 the elders laid hands on Timothy and he received a prophetic message through which he received a gift. James 5:14 they prayed for the sick. 1Pt 5:1 Peter writes to the elders and calls himself a fellow elder. Even though he is an Apostle is there a sense of equality with other men of God? Rev 4:4 Around the throne are 24 elders.

Paul mentored two Gentiles to assist him in the work, Timothy and Titus. In the Pastoral letters he instructs them to choose elders for each city or town and teaches them what to look for in an elder.

1 Timothy

Titus 1

above reproach
one wife
temperate
self controlled
respectable
hospitable
able to teach
not given to drunkenness
gentle
not quarrelsome
not a lover of money
manage family well
children obey and respect him
not a recent convert
good reputation with world

blameless
one wife
disciplined
self controlled
upright
hospitable

not given to drunkenness
not violent
not quick tempered
not pursuing dishonest gain

children believe not wild or disobedient

not overbearing
loves what is good
holds firmly to the message
holy

And here is a list from John's disciple Polycarp in the next generation of believers:

Polycarp 5

"Knowing then that God is not mocked, we ought to walk worthy of His commandment and glory. In like manner should the deacons be blameless before the face of His righteousness, as being the servants of God and Christ, and not of men. They must not be slanderers, double-tongued, or lovers of money, but temperate in all things, compassionate, industrious, walking according to the truth of the Lord, who was the servant of all.

6 And let the presbyters (elders) be compassionate and merciful to all, bringing back those that wander, visiting all the sick, and not neglecting the widow, the orphan, or the poor, but always providing for that which is becoming in the sight of God and man; abstaining from all wrath, respect of persons, and unjust judgement; keeping far off from all covetousness, not quickly crediting an evil report against anyone, not severe in judgment, as knowing that we are all under a debt of sin."

Clement wrote: Clement 44 Our apostles also knew, through our Lord Jesus Christ, and there would be strife on account of the office of the episcopate. For

this reason, therefore, inasmuch as they had obtained a perfect fore-knowledge of this, they appointed those (ministers) already mentioned, and afterwards gave instructions, that when they should fall asleep, other approved men should succeed them in their ministry. We are of opinion, therefore, that those appointed by them, or afterwards by other eminent men, with the consent of the whole Church, and who have blamelessly served the flock of Christ in a humble, peaceable, and disinterested spirit, and have for a long time possessed the good opinion of all, cannot be justly dismissed from the ministry. For our sin will not be small, if we eject from the episcopate those who have blamelessly and holily fulfilled its duties.

Do you see any evidence of a Pastor or head elder? In spite of the clear evidence that churches were led by a group of elders of equal status chosen for their life and not education or preaching ability most commentators equate elder with a single or Senior Pastor you would see leading a modern church. Does it sound the same to you? The deciding factor for many pastors is the salary offered, yet we see in all three lists a warning about money being a problem. For those desiring more information on this I would be glad to print for you John MacArthur's letter on elders and a rebuttal by David A. Brash claiming the Scriptures nowhere teach a senior pastor position. You can access it at: http://www.talk-101.com/users/dabrash/pages/art/resp_jm.htm

Finally we have Deacons. A deacon's job is clearly defined in Acts 6:2,3. Though the qualifications are almost the equivalent of an elder(1Tim 3:8-13), the deacons looked to the material and administrative needs of the body. Philippians was written to the bishops and deacons. 1:1

After the death of the Apostles there appears to be one more position created that took the place of Apostles. The title Bishop applied to an overseer of several churches or an area and its elders. This is only found in the writings of Ignatius. We can not be certain that he was directed to do it by an apostle or if he thought the position was expedient to keep unity.

Ignatius 6 "Now the more anyone sees the bishop keeping silence, the more ought he to revere him. For we ought to receive every one whom the Master of the house sends to be over His household, as we would do Him that sent him. It is manifest, therefore, that we should look upon the bishop even as we would upon the Lord himself." Ignatius letters are much disputed as to their authenticity. The letters that are quoted by other church Fathers do not mention bishops. Other church Fathers do not mention this special position. Next week we will carefully examine Eph 4:11-13