

Bishops, Deacons, and the Church

by Carol Berubee

We will examine church government, the Body of Christ, and the infiltration of the Nicolaitans.

The Greek word for “elders” is *presbuteros*. There are two types of elders specified in the New Testament: bishops and deacons.

Philippians 1:1 says, *“Paul and Timothy, bondservants of Jesus Christ, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons...”*

Bishops

The Greek word for “bishop” is *episkopos* and it refers to those who are overseers or shepherds.

According to 1 Timothy 3:1-7, the bishop *“must be blameless, the husband of one wife, temperate, sober-minded, of good behavior, hospitable, able to teach; not given to wine, not violent, not greedy for money, but gentle, not quarrelsome, not covetous; one who rules his own house well, having his children in submission with all reverence (for if a man does not know how to rule his own house, how will he take care of the church of God?); not a novice, lest being puffed up with pride he fall into the same condemnation as the devil. Moreover he must have a good testimony among those who are outside, lest he fall into reproach and the snare of the devil.”*

Titus 1:7-11 says, *“... a bishop must be blameless, as a steward of God, not self-willed, not quick-tempered, not given to wine, not violent, not greedy for money, but hospitable, a lover of what is good, sober-minded, just, holy, self-controlled, holding fast the faithful word as he has been taught, that he may be able, by sound doctrine, both to exhort and convict those who contradict. For there are many insubordinate, both idle talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision, whose mouths must be stopped, who subvert whole households, teaching things which they ought not, for the sake of dishonest gain.”*

Here, we see that the bishop is one who is well-grounded in the faith and is so much so that he is able to act as a shepherd for the flock, as one who is able to help the flock to flee from false teachers. But this bishop must prove his faith not only by his ability to teach, he must display the fruit of the Spirit in all areas. His life must be witness to his professed faith. Notice that he also must have a good testimony in the world, among the lost.

In 1 Peter 5:1-4, we see the shepherd and we can assume that Peter must be referring to bishops, for we have just seen that Paul describes the bishops as overseers and shepherds. *“The elders who are among you I exhort, I who am a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that will be revealed: Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock; and when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that does not fade away.”*

The bishop is not to “lord it over” the flock. Rather, the shepherd is a fellow servant, but he is one who is more knowledgeable in the things of the faith; therefore, he is there to help the flock.

We see another word in Hebrews 13 that may also refer to “bishop,” but is, at the very least, in reference to an “elder.” The Greek is *hegeomai* and is found in verses 7, 17, and 24. These immature Christians are exhorted to give heed to “those who rule over [them].” Those who rule must be those whose faith is borne out in their actions (v. 7). This is the same admonition as we saw with the bishops and deacons; their lives must be demonstrative of their faith in Christ. The connotation of *hegeomai* is that of “guide,” or “leader.” In this sense, we see that those who are in a place of authority over immature Christians must be those who have the ability to guide, not only by a direct understanding of doctrine, but by experience.

Deacons

The other type of elder is the deacon. The deacon is one who is also a fellow servant, just as is the bishop. The deacon is an administrator, primarily, but not a teacher. The Greek word for “deacon” is *diakonos* and it literally means to “run errands,” to “attend,” to “wait tables,” etc. As with the bishop, the deacon’s life must be proof of his sincere faith.

1 Timothy 3:8-13 says, *“Likewise deacons must be reverent, not double-tongued, not given to much wine, not greedy for money, holding the mystery of the faith with a pure conscience. But let these also first be tested; then let them serve as deacons, being found blameless. Likewise their wives must be reverent, not slanderers, temperate, faithful in all things. Let deacons be the husbands of one wife, ruling their children and their own houses well. For those who have served well as deacons obtain for themselves a good standing and great boldness in the faith which is in Christ Jesus.”*

General Eldership

We also see in Scripture some other general guidelines on eldership.

1 Timothy 5:17-19 says, *“Let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and doctrine. For the Scripture says, ‘You shall not*

muzzle an ox while it treads out the grain,' and, 'The laborer is worthy of his wages.' Do not receive an accusation against an elder except from two or three witnesses."

We get the sense from these verses that Paul is probably referring to bishops more so than deacons because the bishops would be the ones who "labor in the word and doctrine." All Christians must study the doctrines of the faith, but we see here that Paul is setting apart a ministry that is of particular concern to bishops. The study and teaching of the word and doctrine is the bishop's labor; it is his life's work. It is also implied here that the flock should give monetarily to the bishops who labor in doctrine. One note of caution, however: The true bishop would never teach doctrine or guard the sheep just so he can get a paycheck. The bishops of the early Church received donations, not salaries; thus, they had to trust the Lord, for they did not know whether anyone would be moved to give at any particular time.

The other very important thing to keep in mind is that the eldership functioned as a group, not as a "head bishop" over many elders over many Christians. There was no such thing as a "senior pastor" or "head bishop." There was no hierarchy. Only twice in NT teaching do we see "elder" singular -- in 1 Peter 5:1 and 1 Timothy 5:19, both referenced above. In all other references to elders, the plural is used and this shows that elders were always seen as a group.

But now let's go back to Peter's teaching.

1 Peter 5:1-5 says, *"The elders who are among you I exhort, I who am a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that will be revealed: Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock; and when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that does not fade away. Likewise you younger people, submit yourselves to your elders. Yes, all of you be submissive to one another, and be clothed with humility, for 'God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble.'"*

In verse 5, we see that it is the "younger people" who are to submit to the elders, particularly the bishops. Who are these younger people?

The Greek word for "younger" is *neos*. This word refers to those who are new to the faith. Thus, we see that bishops are especially concerned to shepherd those who are new to the faith, and the new converts are exhorted to give heed to the bishops' teaching. Deacons help out in the more practical ways of serving the flock, but through their humility, the flock recognizes them as a particular group. The goal is for the bishops to help the new converts to grow up in Christ and His doctrine. As that happens, some of those young, immature Christians become mature deacons and then bishops. When they become bishops, they do the same as the bishops did for them: They work with new Christians to help them grow in the Lord. (It is not my intention to say that all mature men must be bishops in a specially designated sense, but the Lord does continue to call on all of us to come to maturity and "teach" in some way, to pass on the knowledge of the Lord

to the immature. While bishops have responsibility for many and must be good teachers in the classic sense, all mature Christians can teach one on one in various ways.)

Nowhere do we see that bishops are to remain bishops over mature Christians. The mature who have been shepherded by the bishops are to then move on to be overseers and shepherds of another flock of new believers. This is how the Church grew in the first couple of centuries. This is not to say that mature believers are to never receive teaching. Rather, the mature are to be the teachers, but understand that the Holy Spirit will continue to teach them in all things (1 John 2:25-27; Hebrews 5:9-14). The mature do receive teaching, but do not depend on another man for spiritual growth. We see throughout the Scriptures pertaining to eldership and teaching that it is the new converts who need the milk and then the solid food. The mature are to be the teachers.

We also see in 1 Peter 5:5 that all Christians are to submit to one another. In other words, the elders and all the saints were one unit, esteeming each other higher than themselves. Of course, we only submit to others insofar as the others are walking in a Godly way. We do not submit to false teachers or those with no fruit of the Spirit. Above all, we are to submit to Christ, and any person who deviates from His truth is to be avoided (Romans 16:17, 2 Timothy 3:1-7, 2 Thessalonians 3:14, 2 John 1:9-11).

The Body of Christ

Now, we see something about the building of the Church in the letter to the Ephesians.

Ephesians 4:11-21 says, "And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting, but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head-- Christ-- from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love. This I say, therefore, and testify in the Lord, that you should no longer walk as the rest of the Gentiles walk, in the futility of their mind, having their understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardening of their heart; who, being past feeling, have given themselves over to lewdness, to work all uncleanness with greediness. But you have not so learned Christ, if indeed you have heard Him and have been taught by Him, as the truth is in Jesus..."

Before we look at the pastor-teachers, let's look at the overall meaning of this passage. Paul is saying that it is Christ who builds His Church and part of that process is the appointment by Christ of the apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastor-teachers. Through their work, the Body is built up and, according to verse 17, those who are so built up "no longer walk as the rest of the Gentiles walk, in the futility of their mind..." Why?

The mature Christian is not like the world, for he has "...not so learned Christ..." (v. 20). Then notice verse 21. Not only does the Lord give these gifts for the edification of the Church, but, more importantly, it is He Himself who teaches.

When we look at this overall picture, we also see that it is the cycle of which we have already been speaking. These men are given to be ambassadors for Christ, to speak the Word, to preach the Gospel among the lost, and to shepherd and teach the new converts. As those new converts grow and mature, they become the new ambassadors and evangelists and shepherds. This is the building up of the Body. Notice that the Body is never stagnant. The cycle never ends. A healthy Body grows, not only **from within**, through maturity, but **from without** as new converts are made and are welcomed into the Body. A church that does only one or the other is not acting according to Biblical standards. Each congregation must not only labor to edify and teach to maturity each of its members, it must also be concerned that the Gospel be preached to the lost.

(I do not mean to imply that a church must make converts, but I do mean that a church must preach the Gospel of Grace. God will save whom He will save. We must not be focused on converting a certain number of people or participating in a church growth program. I simply mean that a Christian should be concerned that the lost hear the Gospel. And when someone is saved, we must be concerned for their spiritual maturity.)

Let's look at the words "pastor" and "teacher" in Ephesians 4:11. "Pastor" is *poimen*, which means "shepherd." That being the case, we see that the pastor is nothing more than the bishop, a type of elder. We saw that the shepherd, or overseer, was a fellow servant who helped the new believers especially, and was, in general, the one who guarded the flock. And we must always remember that there was no one head bishop over a flock. Now, let's look at the "teacher." The Greek word is *didaskalos* and it means "instructor." The Greek construction dictates that pastor and teacher make up one office. Thus, the "five-fold ministry," as is often spoken of today, is incorrect. The Greek necessitates that "pastor and teacher" is actually "pastor-teacher."

Now we can see that the bishop fulfils the role of pastor-teacher. He is to be a shepherd who guards the flock. How does he do that? By teaching the Word, by communicating the truths of the faith to the flock until the flock is mature in the faith. We see in verses 13 and 14 that the goal of such teaching is to bring the flock to maturity so that they are no longer carried away by "every wind of doctrine," and to understand who they are in Christ and in His Body. The bishops, or pastor-teachers, work together in unity within the flock, with no one bishop having authority over another.

Elders (both bishops and deacons) were recognized by the flock as being more mature. You can see the cycle: The original apostles appointed by the Lord taught the new converts; the new converts grew in maturity and as they did so, more elders emerged. These elders then would help the new converts who were coming to the faith as a result of, primarily, the evangelists. In such an organic system, the growth never stops. But do we see such a faith-filled, obedient, mature Church today?

Man's System

Yeshua said that He would build His Church and the gates of hell would not prevail against it. John said that if those antichrists had been “of us [born again Christians], they would have continued with us; but they went out that they might be made manifest, that none of them were of us [born again]” (1 John 2:19). Why did they leave? The true Church would not allow such false teachers to remain in the Church. It was the job of the elders, primarily, to root out such false teachers.

Today, the “churches” are full of false doctrine and people who profess Christianity but are not Christians. We see “churches” led by men (and women) who are false teachers and false prophets. We see churches full of tares. In the early Church, such people were confronted and if they did not repent, they were not allowed in the Church. Yes, they kept coming, but as they were found out, they were rooted out. Today, they are allowed to stay. And where we see such infiltration being overlooked or ignored, we also see immature Christians, never growing in the faith (2 Timothy 3:7). Where we see such “churches,” filled with false doctrine, and pastor-teachers who do not guard the sheep or feed them to maturity, we see the influence of Satan. But our Lord said that the gates of hell would not prevail against the Church. So, how can we have churches filled with antichrists if the Church cannot be overcome by Satan? Today, the Church is a relatively small group of people in contrast to the many “church buildings” full of people who are not saved. This is not to say that there are no saved people within the “church system,” but the Lord desires that those who know Him obey Him in His commands to flee from the false (2 Timothy 3:5).

Today, so many “churches” are just buildings where people meet. The early Church met in homes. In fact, the first “church building” that has been discovered by archaeologists in Israel was not built until the mid-third century or early fourth century. If the early Church did not erect a specific building for meetings until some 250 years after the death of Christ, this tells us that the early Church did not find it useful or necessary, but instead continued to meet in homes. We see in Acts 2 that some 3000 people were added to the Church in one day just weeks after our Lord ascended to heaven. If there were no specific church buildings, where did all those thousands of people meet? In homes. In small groups. It is not difficult to see that if gatherings are limited in size, the elders can much more effectively shepherd and teach. But just a couple of centuries after the Church began, we see false teaching and pride taking over, with men gathering larger flocks and constructing fancy buildings.

There is also evidence that even before church buildings were erected, there arose a hierarchical system of leadership. Such thinking, however, leads to all sorts of erroneous ideas. If we are to follow the teachings of our Lord and his appointed apostles, we must recognize that such a hierarchical system is sinful. This is not to say that everyone who participates in such a system is not saved; yet, today’s “senior pastor” (salaried, not less) with his “board of elders” is not following the pattern established by the apostles.

Matthew 23:6-12 says, “[The Pharisees] love the best places at feasts, the best seats in the synagogues, greetings in the marketplaces, and to be called by men, ‘Rabbi, Rabbi.’ But you, do not be called ‘Rabbi;’ for One is your Teacher, the Christ, and you are all brethren. Do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. And do not be called teachers; for One is your Teacher, the Christ. But he who is greatest among you shall be your servant. And whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

Here, we see that our Lord commanded that no one is to be called Teacher or Father or Master. For many centuries now, we have seen that the false teachers of the Roman Catholic religion love to be called “father.” Clearly, this is a false system of religion and is to be avoided (for many reasons, only one of which is the failure to comply with this simple command in the text before us). But what about teacher? Who is called teacher? We have seen that the bishop or shepherd has the role of pastor-teacher. What man has done is create a system in which certain men are elevated (or they elevate themselves) to the office of pastor. Notice that most pastors do not stop anyone from calling them pastor. Today’s pastor does not correct those who mistakenly believe that he is greater than they are. He fails to tell them that, although he may have some different tasks than they, he is a fellow slave, no greater than they. Indeed, in verse 8, Yeshua says, “...for One is your Teacher, the Christ, and you are all brethren.” The true bishop understands that he serves in humility and is simply one of the brethren.

In Revelation, our Lord tells John to write to seven churches that were in Asia Minor. In speaking to the church at Pergamos, Yeshua says he hates the doctrine of the Nicolaitans in that church (2:15). The word Nicolaitan comes from two root words, one being *Nicolas*, whom, it is presumed, was chief among the Nicolaitans. *Nicolas* means, “conqueror of the people.” The other root word comes from the word *Laodicea*.

You may recall Yeshua's words to the church at Laodicea: "...[B]ecause you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth" (Revelation 3:16). The Laodicean church thought it was just fine. They looked upon themselves as “rich,” not necessarily in the monetary sense (although wealth is not precluded in this context), but primarily in the spiritual sense. They thought they knew the mind of God. They thought they were “doing church right.” They thought that they were the blessed ones because they were the “right” ones. Yet, Yeshua says they are lukewarm. They say the right things, but they do not do the right things.

What does the church at Laodicea have to do with the Nicolaitans in Pergamos? The Nicolaitans were those who “held the pre-eminence,” who “lorded it over” others. The Nicolaitans were those who rose to the top by any means necessary so that they could have control over others. The Nicolaitans were those who wanted others to think of them as “spiritual,” as having attained a higher position. It is not a coincidence that the lukewarm Laodicean church today is also one that produces Nicolaitans, just as the church at Pergamos did in Asia Minor.

John speaks of a Nicolaitan in one of his letters. In 3 John, we see a man named Diotrephes, whom John says is not saved (v. 11). Diotrephes was very controlling. He did not want other Christians to speak to, or teach, "his flock." He would not allow his flock to receive other Christians who were travelling through. He wanted the flock to see him as the supreme authority.

Contrast Diotrephes with Gaius, to whom this letter is written. John says that Gaius is faithful, loves the lost, and loves the Church (v. 5-6). John also commends Gaius in sending out those whom Gaius has taught (v. 6-7). Here, we see that Gaius is a faithful servant, not afraid to build up others in Christ and send them out, whereas Diotrephes keeps the people dependent on him, a sure sign of immaturity, both in Diotrephes and his flock.

How many Gaiuses are there today? How many bishops or pastor-teachers today refuse to be elevated and called "pastor"? How many are true slaves and see themselves as just one of the brethren? How many are not afraid to build up and encourage others without fear of the others coming to more knowledge than they have? How many are not afraid to teach others who they are in Christ with no fear that these others may receive "larger ministries" than they have? How many are not afraid to teach others who they are in Christ with no fear that these others will no longer be dependent on them? How many are willing to give up the big building and the large flock for the sake of the true Gospel and true discipleship? How many are willing to give up their regular paychecks and trust the Lord?

There are "churches" being led by pastor-teachers who are not equipped or called to be bishops. They may be able to teach intellectually, but are they doing so for the sake of the brethren, or for their own gain? The true bishop wants nothing more than to see the saved grow and grow quickly, lest they fall into error on the way. The true bishop will do everything he can to see his brothers and sisters in true ministry, ministry that is built on the proper foundation of Christ. The true bishop will be glad to send off the mature brethren and not worry about his own flock dwindling. The true bishop will be glad for the day when the people do not come to him for milk but for solid food, and then not to have to come to him at all, but instead be the givers of the food to another flock.