

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNMENT OF THE CHURCH

The fact that there are many functions, purposes, and elements making up the pattern of the New Testament church points to the necessity of some kind of organizational government. For a church to efficiently carry out the many responsibilities there must be some kind of leadership. The Godhead demonstrates organization in God's plan (I Cor.11:3; Jn.14:13-14,31). God is a God of order as revealed from the beginning of time and throughout Scripture. He is "not a God of confusion" (I Cor.14:33) and requires that "all things be done decently and in order" (I Cor.14:40). We are to be imitators of Him (Eph.5:1) and follow His instructions as revealed in the New Testament for leadership and government within His church. God has chosen to use qualified human instruments who are responsible for leading the church and carrying out their prescribed functions.

Over the centuries three basic forms of government have developed which have been adopted by most churches. One is the Congregational Church which is democratic and where the final authority rests with the congregation. It is autonomous and has been called "the system of independence."¹ The officers consist of a pastor, who is usually the only "elder" and deacons, who supervise the welfare of the church.

The Presbyterian Church is representative of the second form in that the final authority resides in the elders as representatives of the congregation. There is a distinction made between "teaching" elders (pastors) and "ruling elders" (laymen). Deacons serve in various benevolent ministries

within the church but are not in any position of authority or leadership as are the elders.

The third form is an Episcopal Government which has an hierarchy with the final authority residing in the bishops. Bishops serve in this hierarchical capacity over all the local churches within its particular denomination. Some may have elders and deacons but mostly the ultimate authority comes from the bishops, or pope, as some may use the term. In the early centuries this was the system of the Roman Catholic Church.

The New Testament must definitely be the starting point for understanding the ways that Christ has intended His church to operate. The first place we begin to see any authority being given to human instruments for leading God's people is after the resurrection of Christ, when He spoke to Peter as a representative of the apostles.

"When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, 'Simon son of John, do you truly love me more than these?' 'Yes, Lord,' he said, 'you know that I love you.' Jesus said, 'Feed my lambs.' Again Jesus said, 'Simon son of John, do you truly love me?' He answered, 'Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.' Jesus said, 'Take care of my sheep.' The third time he said to him, 'Simon son of John, do you love me?' Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, 'Do you love me?' He said, 'Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you.' Jesus said, 'Feed my sheep' " (Jn.21:15-17).

The specific responsibility commanded by Jesus was to "feed and shepherd the sheep." The Apostles Paul and Peter also commanded the elders of the local churches to shepherd and feed the flock of believers (Acts 20:28; I Pet.5:2). Elsewhere, the term "shepherd" is used in Eph.4:11 to describe one of the groups of "gifted men" that Christ had given to the church to "equip the saints."

The term pastor is the Greek word, poimea, which means shepherd, and "the pastor-teacher obviously had a dual role--that of shepherding and teaching the flock of God."³ In the Old Testament the Lord God is portrayed as a shepherd who leads, protects, and carries His sheep (Ps.23; 68:7; 80:1;

Isa.40:11; 56:8).

The term shepherd was used of political and military leaders for Israel, too (I Sam.21:8; II Sam.7:7; Jer.2:8; 3:15), but never to describe a reigning king. Jesus Christ calls Himself the Good Shepherd (Jn.10:4,10-15, 27) and continues to shepherd the sheep as the Great Shepherd (I Pet.2:25; Heb.13:20). It is Christ Himself who has established "undershepherds" or elders as the leadership. He will work through them in overseeing, leading, feeding, and caring for His flock (Jn.21:15-17; Acts 20:17-28; I Pet.5:1-5; Eph.4:11-16). The teaching shepherd must also be an elder, or an overseer (I Tim.3:1-7; 5:17-18; Titus 1:5-9). He must lead the church by teaching the Scriptures (Col.1:28; I Tim.4:13; II Tim.4:2) and by the pattern of his life (Phil.4:9; Heb.13:7,17). Finally, he is responsible to equip (perfect, or prepare) the saints to do the work of the ministry (Eph.4:11-12) as has been explained in the chapter, "The Process of Building Up the Body."

There are several terms in the New Testament used interchangeably in reference to men in the same position, or office, carrying out common functions.

A study of the Scriptures reveals how these terms are synonymous in reference to the leadership that God has ordained in the church. The following passages show that the terms elder, overseer and pastor all refer to the same office or function in the New Testament church. Paul addressed the "elders" of Ephesus (Acts 20:17) stating:

"Guard yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood" (Acts 20:28).

This passage uses elder, overseer, and shepherds synonymously. The next passage from Titus 1:5-7 uses elders and overseers synonymously.

"The reason I left you in Crete was that you might straighten out what was left unfinished and appoint elders in every town, as I directed you. An elder must be blameless, the husband of one wife, a man whose children believe and are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient. Since an overseer is entrusted with God's work, he must be blameless--

not overbearing, not quick-tempered, not given to much wine, not violent, not pursuing dishonest gain."

In I Pet. 5:1-4 the terms elders, overseers, and shepherds are also used

"To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder ... Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers--not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it 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 will never fade away."

Christ is called the "Shepherd" and "Overseer" of our souls (I Pet. 2:25).

Each one of these terms, though used synonymously, denotes some distinction. The term elder is the Greek word presbuteros, meaning "an older man", indicating maturity, spiritual experience, and capability.⁴ The term overseer (bishop) is the Greek word, episcopos, which means "overseer" or "guardian." It is used five times in the New Testament as seen in the previously cited references. It indicates the exercising of oversight (leadership) in the church in relation to the spiritual responsibilities that are to be carried out, and regulating its affairs.⁵

Finally, the term pastor, or shepherd, is the Greek word, poimen (previously explained) denoting the responsibility for the spiritual care, protection, and provision for the church as a shepherd tends the flock.⁶

The New Testament always speaks of a plurality of elders. As churches were established elders were appointed at each one (Acts 14:23). Paul instructs both Timothy and Titus to establish elders in the churches they were responsible for (I Tim. 3:2-7; Tit. 1:5-9). Scripture shows there were more than one designated for the responsibilities of ruling, teaching, and preaching (I Tim. 5:17). No one man was in charge.⁷ III Jn. 9-10 shows the negative example of one man's dominating manipulation.

The ultimate seat of authority and responsibility in the congregation, or church, speaking on a human plane, rests with the elders, not the congregation or "the board."⁸ The New Testament never speaks of decisions being made by a majority vote of the congregation. The congregation voiced some opinions in certain matters, but the final decisions were that of the leadership (Acts 15:1-22). The elders are to lead by example rather than acting as "lord" over those placed in their charge (I Pet.5:2-3; Heb.13:17). The elders are among the flock, yet they as overseers, are responsible to shepherd the church (Acts 20:28; I Pet.5:2). They are only to make decisions after prayer and careful study of the Word; if necessary fasting (Acts 14:23) and using outside consultation (Acts 15:1-22; Prov.11:14; 12:15; 15:22). In doing this they will be making decisions with the mind of Christ (Phil.2:2; I Cor.2:16) and in the power of the Holy Spirit. They should be unanimous because anything else indicates that some do not have the mind of Christ.

The selection of elders for the church, according to the New Testament, is accomplished by appointment of God's Spirit through human instruments (Acts 14:23; 20:17-28; Tit.1:5). An elder must be a man who strongly desires to hold the office (I Tim.3:1), demonstrates a willing heart to serve (I Pet.5:2), meets the qualifications in I Tim.3 and Titus I and is committed to fulfilling the biblical responsibilities--these will be explained later. Scripture also indicates there was recognition of the qualifications and abilities of its leaders by the local body of believers (Acts 6:1-7; 14:21-23; 16:1-5), as well as the recognition of the present elders (Titus 1:5; Acts 13:1-5).

The duration of the elders' active "term" of responsibility according to Scripture appears to be indefinite. Scripture nowhere indicates an elder being voted in, or out, of office every few years. In the case of a sin issue against an elder, that issue may warrant his dismissal. Paul says:

"Do not entertain an accusation against an elder unless it is brought by two or three witnesses. Those who sin are to be rebuked publicly, so that the others may take warning" (I Tim.5:19).

Only in the case of unrepentant sin or failure in fulfillment of the qualifications and responsibilities would it mean that he would no longer be an elder, since the "gifts and callings of God are irrevocable" (Rom.11:29).

The qualifications for elders, overseers, and pastors are listed in two places in the New Testament:

"Here is a trustworthy saying: If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer, he desires a noble task. Now the overseer must be above reproach, the husband of but one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not given to much wine, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect. (If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church? He must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil. He must also have a good reputation with outsiders, so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil's trap" (I Tim.3:1-7).

"An elder must be blameless, the husband of but one wife, a man whose children believe and are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient. Since an overseer is entrusted with God's work, he must be blameless--not overbearing, not quick-tempered, not given to much wine, not violent, not pursuing dishonest gain. Rather he must be hospitable, one who loves what is good, who is self-controlled, upright, holy and disciplined. He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it." (Titus 1:6-9).

These qualifications can be practically observed by breaking them down into several categories: His relationship to God, his personal life, his relationship to his family, his relationship to the church, and his relationship toward others.

First, regarding his relationship with God; he must be a man of spiritual maturity. He must not be a new convert (I Tim.3:6) but one who has been a growing Christian for some period of time--"long enough to demonstrate the reality of his conversion and the depth of his spirituality."⁹ The reason Paul gives is that he does not become proud or conceited and doesn't fall into

the same judgment the devil did and lose his esteemed position. Also, regarding his relationship with God he must be devout (Tit.1:8), committed to God, separated from sin, and devoted to holy living.

Second, in regard to his personal life he must be a man of inner control--"self-controlled" (Tit.1:9) and "temperate" (I Tim.3:2). That is to say he's not in bondage to himself or the desires of the flesh. He needs to be sensible, prudent, or wise (I Tim.3:2; Tit.1:8), careful and balanced in his judgment. He should not make quick, irrational, or "superficial decisions based on immature thinking."¹⁰ Nor should he be quick-tempered (Tit.1:7) or one who flies off the handle at the least little thing; he is to be in control of his emotions. He must not be addicted to wine (I Tim.3:3; Tit.1:7) or, in that sense, he should not be addicted to anything. He is to be a man of proper values in that he is free from the love of money (I Tim.3:3), not greedy of filthy lucre (I Pet.5:2), not fond of sordid gain (Tit.1:7). His motivation in the ministry cannot be to financially take advantage of people or to be in it for the money. Instead he should be a lover of what is good (Tit.1:8) in regard to his values. His desire and focus should be aimed at what is good and beneficial to the church, not wasting any resources (time, money, energy) on what is futile and worthless. He must seek to do the will of God (Rom.12:1-2; I Pet.5:2) which is for the ultimate good of all.

Third, in regard to his marriage and family he must be a man who manages his own household well (I Tim.3:4; Tit.1:6). Concerning his wife he must have only one (I Tim.3:2; Tit.1:6) meaning that he is not to be a bigamist as some were in that culture. It also means that he must be a "one-wife man"--loyal and faithful to her and to her alone. Incidentally this does not exclude single men. Paul was an elder and he was single (I Cor.7:7-9). Nor would this statement exclude a divorced man who is presently living by the God-

honoring pattern. The point is aimed at sexual purity; he cannot be an adulterer, but faithful to one wife.¹¹ In regard to his family, his children must be believers (Tit.1:6). They must be in submission with all dignity and respect for authority (I Tim.3:4), and should not be accused of dissipation or rebellion (Tit.1:6). The reason an elder must be managing his own marriage and family in an exemplary fashion is the implication that otherwise he would not be able to care for the church of God if it is not a reality in his own home (I Tim.3:5).

Fourth, in his relationship to the church he must be a man of the Word. He must "hold fast to the faithful word" (Tit.1:9) in the sense that his own life reflects a stable faith and obedience to the Scriptures and that he is not living hypocritically but practicing what he preaches. An elder must also have the ability to teach (I Tim.3:2) and communicate God's Word clearly and practically. Along those lines he must be knowledgeable enough to "exhort in sound doctrine" (Tit.1:9) and know how to refute those who contradict, twist, (or reject the truth.

The final qualifications of an elder are seen in relationship to the community, both saved and unsaved. He must be able to get along well with people. He must not be pugnacious or violent (I Tim.3:3; Tit.1:7); he cannot be one who strikes out at people, physically abuses others, or who looks for a fight. Nor should he be contentious, quarrelsome, or argumentative. Neither should he be self-willed (Tit.1:7) or stubborn; one who tries to have his own way insensitively forcing his own ideas and opinions on others.¹²

On the other hand, in his dealing with people he should be gentle (I Tim.3:3), characterized by patience, forbearance, and tenderness. He should be hospitable (I Tim.3:2; Tit.1:8) in that he is willing to open himself and his home--not being reclusive and withdrawn from others. He must be just

(Tit.1:8), That is "fair and impartial. He must be one who can make objective judgments based upon principle"¹³ and not be emotionally persuaded to take sides. He must have a good reputation in regard to the community; above reproach (Tit.1:6,7; I Tim.3:2), meaning blameless in the sense that there should be no grounds on which people can accuse him of wilful, continual sin, or improper Christian behavior. Instead he should be "respectable" (I Tim.3:2)) in that others think highly of him because of his positive character and testimony. This should carry outside the church, too; "he must have a good reputation with those outside the church" (I Tim.3:7). Even unbelievers "respect his character and integrity."¹⁴

The qualifications have been expanded in definition because of their importance regarding the leadership of the church. The intention is not that one must be sinlessly perfect, for that is impossible, but they must be reflective of the present character and continual commitment of all elders within the church.

RESPONSIBILITIES OF ELDERS

The elders, overseers, and/or pastors who are committed to the leadership of the church must be willing to faithfully fulfill specifically prescribed functions as revealed in the New Testament. They must be actively involved in shepherding the flock (I Pet.5:1-4; Acts 20:28; I Tim.3:5). This includes having sensitive concern for people in the church as the shepherd cares for his sheep. He must meet their needs and assist them in whatever ways he can.¹⁵ He must guide them in the truth and lead them in following God's commands. The passage also includes the aspect of guarding them and protecting them from false teachers and teachings (Acts 20:29-31) because Satan will use them to be divisive and pull people away. As already stated he must know the Word well enough to refute those who contradict the truth (Tit.1:9).

administrative responsibilities in the sense of planning, organizing, leading, and delegating the necessary ministries in the church to meet needs. Elders are seen in Scripture as having determined church polity (Acts 15:13-29), approving and selecting deacons (Acts 6:3), equipping others to do the work (Eph.4:11-12), sending out missionaries (Acts 13:1-3; Rom.10:14-15), training other reliable and capable men (II Tim.2:2), determining the distribution of funds (Acts 11:30), and ordaining others (I Tim.4:14; 5:22; II Tim.1:16).

ORDINATION OF ELDERS

While Scripture shows no apostolic succession, they do show that the apostles ordained overseers or elders in their place (I Pet.5:1-2; II Jn.1-2, cp Acts 14:23; 20:17ff). To be ordained a man is

"Set apart to do what laymen may indeed do if need be; but he is set apart to give full time energy to the work of God, having received God's call to do so, and in the confident hope that his ministrations will be the more effective because of his calling, his gifts, and his training."¹⁷

The very Greek word for ordain is "kathistemi" which is used many times in the New Testament. It means "to set aside" or "to appoint." The official sign of ordination was the laying on of hands (I Tim.4:14). When this was done by the apostles or elders they were symbolically acknowledging that person's gifts and calling. They were publically "affirming their union with him and in a sense transmitted their blessing to him."¹⁸ It was not to be done hastily (I Tim.5:22), but as the Holy Spirit led (Acts 20:28) and the church affirmed the will of God regarding the matter through prayer and fasting (Acts 13:2-3; 14:23). Titus, a pastor and elder, had the responsibility to further ordain other elders (Tit.1:5) and the "succession" has continued into the church today.

REMUNERATION FOR ELDERS

The Scriptures show that those who lead God's people had the right to remuneration even in the Old Testament (Deut.25:4). In the New Testament many

references confirm it as well (Matt.10:10; Jn.10:12; Acts 20:33-35; I Cor.9:3-18; Gal.6:6; Phil.4:14-19; I Thess.2:9; II Thess.3:8-9).

"The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching. For the Scripture says, 'Do not muzzle the ox while it is treading out the grain,' and 'The worker deserves his wages!'" (I Tim.5:17-18).

"Who serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard and does not eat of its grapes? Who tends a flock and does not drink of the milk? Do I say this merely from a human point of view? Doesn't the Law say the same thing? For it is written in the Law of Moses: 'Do not muzzle an ox when it is treading out the grain.' Is it about oxen that God is concerned? Surely he says this for us, doesn't he? Yes, this was written for us, because when the plowman plows and the thresher threshes, they ought to do so in the hope of sharing in the harvest. If we have sown spiritual seed among you, is it too much if we reap a material harvest from you? If others have this right of support from you, shouldn't we have it all the more?... in the same way, the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel" (I Cor.9:7-14).

And so the church has the responsibility to pay its leaders, pastors, and elders when they serve in a position where time will not allow them to earn support in other ways. It is especially intended for those who teach and preach in a full-time capacity (I Tim.5:17-18).

DEACONS

Within the realm of church leadership the New Testament reveals a second group called deacons. The word for deacon in the Greek is "diakonos" which literally means "menial servant" and "from the meaning of this word we must determine the function of those in this position."¹⁹ The term was commonly used to describe waiters, cooks, bakers, and other household servants (Matt. 22:13; Jn.2:5,9). It came to be used more widely in terms of any form of humble service under the authority of others. In Romans 13:8 the civil ruler is viewed as the "diakonos" of God. According to the New Testament all Christians are to be a "diakonos" in the non-technical sense. However, within the first few decades of the church's existence a special office of deacon was developed to meet certain needs. In Acts 6:1-7 (approximately AD 34-35) the office did

not exist, but by AD 60-65 the churches had progressed to the point where the "office" of deacon had developed (Phil.1:1; I Tim.3:8-13). Thus the deacons became the "official servers" in the church.

The nature of the work of a deacon can be seen in the meaning of the words episcopos (overseer) and diakonos (humble server). The elders have oversight responsibility and the deacons, as servers, have service responsibility under the oversight of the pastors or elders. The deacons serve Christ and His church by taking from the elders some of the more mundane, menial responsibilities which are inevitably a part of the leadership of a congregation. This pattern of role relationship may be seen in the deacon-type role created in Acts 6:1-7; probably a prototype of "deacons" when seven men were appointed to "serve tables" because it wasn't right that the ministry of the Word be neglected" (Acts 6:2).

Since the New Testament shows that the role of deacon had become necessary, qualifications were also given to those who would be selected to this official position. Paul gives this information in I Tim.3:8-13:

"Deacons, likewise, are to be men worthy of respect, sincere, not indulging in much wine, and not pursuing dishonest gain. They must keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience. They must first be tested; and then if there is nothing against them, let them serve as deacons. In the same way deaconesses are to be women worthy of respect, not malicious talkers but temperate and trustworthy in everything. A deacon must be the husband of but one wife and must manage his children and his household well. Those who have served well gain an excellent standing and great assurance in their faith in Christ Jesus" (I Tim.3:8-13).

The qualifications of the deacons are as follows: The deacon must have a Christlike desire to serve (Jn.13:1-17; Mk.10:42-45). Perhaps this is what is involved in possessing the gift of service, or helps (Rom.12:7; I Cor.12:28). He must be a sincere man, worthy of respect (I Tim.3:8), a man of dignity, integrity, and truthfulness. He must be committed to the truth and have a clear conscience (I Tim.3:9). He must not be addicted to much wine (I Tim.3:8)

--or anything for that matter. He must not be fond of sordid gain (I Tim.3:8) or dishonestly pursuing his own selfish desires for money or advantage over others. Like the elder he must be a man who manages his household well and has his children under control (I Tim.3:12). He must also be a man of good reputation in the community, above and beyond reproach (I Tim.3:10), in the sense that no one can accuse him of character and actions that are not Christ-like.

The matter of women serving as deacons can be argued either way, but I Tim.3:11 seems to refer to an official group of "deaconesses." Phoebe, in Rom.16:1, is called a deaconess. (The other main option of the I Tim.3:11 passage is that it is referring to deacon's wives). Every congregation needs a group of women whose desire is to selflessly serve Christ and His people in the humble role of server. Probably single women best fit the demands of such an office due to the married women's prior commitment to husband and family. In I Tim.3:11 the qualifications and characteristics for deaconesses are given. She is to be dignified and worthy of respect, not a malicious gossip, temperate (in control of her emotions and desires), faithful in all things, dependable, and trustworthy. It is only reasonable that the other verses qualifying those who serve in the position of deacon would also be appropriately applied for women serving in the same capacity.

Paul continues to explain that those who faithfully serve well in this capacity shall be rewarded (I Tim.3:13). They will achieve, or acquire, a good standing. That means that not only will others appreciate and honor their service but when they humble themselves God will exalt them (Js.4:10). Someday they will hear, "Well done good and faithful servant." Another reward is that of great assurance or boldness, a confidence in their Christian life. "If you serve God well, you will see His power and grace at work in your life, and that will energize you for greater service...successful service builds

confidence and assurance."²⁰

Therefore, deacons and deaconesses are a necessary role as seen in the New Testament pattern for the church. Their function is that of serving and they need to meet certain qualifications in order to do so in this official position. When they faithfully fulfill their responsibilities as unto the Lord He will reward them spiritually. The selection of deacons, or the best means of choosing them seems to be the pattern in Acts 6:1-7 where the congregation recognizes and designates qualified candidates and the elders confirm them.

In conclusion, God's plan for leadership in the church is made quite clear in Scripture. He has given gifted men to the church for the purpose of equipping the saints to do the work of the ministry so the church can be built up to maturity (Eph.4:11-16). Since the apostles and prophets were foundational (Eph.2:20) evangelists and pastor-teachers are necessary to fulfill the task. The New Testament reveals the pattern and necessity for qualified elders to be committed to fulfill specific leadership responsibilities and teaching roles in the local church (I Tim.3:1-7; Tit.1:5-9). Because of the vast scope of material needs within a congregation deacons and deaconesses (I Tim.3:8-13) are necessary to function in the capacity of official servers in carrying out varying forms of practical ministries. A governing leadership committed to Scriptural principles is the starting point that gives each local church the freedom to develop and grow. The leadership in each church is vitally important to oversee and organize the necessary ministries needed within the body of Christ so it can evangelize (make disciples), effectively build itself up in love, and thereby glorify God.

¹L. Berkhof, Systematic Theology,
(Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1939) p.580.

²Ibid., p.579.

³Gene Getz, Sharpening the Focus of the Church,
(Chicago: Moody Press, 1974) p.97.

⁴John MacArthur, Answering Key Questions About Elders,
(Panorama City: Word of Grace Communications, 1984) pp.4-5.

⁵Ibid., p.9.

⁶Ibid., p.10.

⁷MacArthur, Shepherdology, p.106.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Getz, Sharpening the Focus, p.106.

¹⁰Ibid., p.105.

¹¹John MacArthur, Church Leadership,
(Panorama City: Grace to You, 1989) pp.45-51.

¹²Getz, Sharpening the Focus, p.106.

¹³Ibid., p.107.

¹⁴Ibid., p.106.

¹⁵Ibid., p.107.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Saucy, Church in God's Program, pp.114-115.

¹⁸MacArthur, Church Leadership, pp.32-33.

¹⁹Getz, Sharpening the Focus, p.108.

²⁰MacArthur, Church Leadership, p.159.