

BY WHAT AUTHORITY?

A BRIEF OVERVIEW PERTAINING TO AUTHORITY AND ITS STRUCTURE IN THE
NEW TESTAMENT CHURCHES

©Copyright 1996
John A. Difley

Permission is granted to quote from this article provided that such use does not violate the intent or meaning of the author. Credit for authorship must be given when any part of this article is quoted.

This article may be copied only in its entirety and distributed free of charge. However, a small fee for printing and shipping may be charged by those distributing this paper. Authorization is specifically granted for electronic transmission and reproduction. This copyright notice must be included in any such distributions.

The Bible text designated (NAS) is from The New American Standard Bible © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977,1988, by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

BY WHAT AUTHORITY?

In the first century C.E. the Jewish synagogues in Judea and some parts of the diaspora (regions of residence of Jews living outside of Judea) were the places for local fellowship, social gathering, religious instruction, and worship. Apparently each was independent, and most must have been relatively small since Talmudic tradition sets the number of synagogues in Jerusalem for this period at 480. Jews in Judea, the Levant, and throughout the diaspora desired to worship God, but the temple was difficult to attend either because of the fees charged or the distances required. It is true that many village squares within Palestine housed a maamodoth (priestly-scribal station), but these were more the nature of official outposts of the temple system for the purpose of governance and taxation than places for worship. Furthermore corruption abounded among the officials of the maamodoth which also dissuaded much of the population from looking to these for spiritual guidance.

The synagogues followed the basic pattern originated during, or soon after the Babylonian captivity. A synagogue was organized under the leadership of between three and twelve zaqenim (elders). Each zaqen (elder) was apparently elected by the local synagogue members. The zaqenim, as a council, formed the Kneset (Council of Elders) that governed the synagogue. The elected spokesman for the Kneset was the Roch ha-Kneset.

During the first century C.E. there is no evidence of a resident priest or presiding rabbi within the synagogues. Rather, the Kneset appointed a common member as “the ruler of the synagogue” (Luke 8:41, Acts 18:8). It is thought that this individual had the duties of governing the affairs of the synagogue, and maintaining order. There are some indications that he may also have been the one to assign members to read the scriptures during the Sabbath services. Rabbis (teachers, master-teachers) within the synagogues were appointed and promoted based upon their ability to teach, but there is no indication that these rabbis had any official capacity in the congregations.

An interesting feature of each synagogue was a special chair at the front of the congregation, “the seat of Moses” (Matt 23:2), which was reserved for the most distinguished scholar (scribe) in attendance. We have no way of knowing how one was chosen for the honor of occupying this chair, but we do know that this chair was much sought after because of the prestige associated therewith. There is, however, no mention to be found of any authority that went with the prestige.

The Hazzan ha-Knesset or simply Hazzan (Cantor) worked very closely with the ruler of the synagogue and was appointed to physically clean the synagogue and light the candles. He also blew the trumpet heralding the Sabbaths, cared for the Torah scrolls, lead the music, and performed certain other assigned duties. In some instances he may have been a full time employee of the synagogue.

When needed, there were Shammash (deacons, deaconesses) appointed within these synagogues to assist the hazzan . These were not officials, but rather servants who often earned their livelihoods as full time employees of larger synagogues. They were laborers, secretaries, janitors, and the like who were necessary to keep the physical affairs and buildings of the synagogue operating.

Finally, because the scriptures of the Torah were in Hebrew and the common people spoke primarily Aramaic in Judea, and a combination of Aramaic and Hebraic Greek in the Levant, an interpreter or Methurgeman was needed. The Methurgeman translated three verses at a time. Some not only translated the scriptures but added, it would seem, considerable embellishment.

The early followers of Jesus did not immediately leave these synagogues that were central to the life of the people of the region, but continued to participate until they were eventually driven out. When they were driven out, the organization of the new churches appears to have followed a form similar to that with which these disciples had become familiar.

Over the years that followed, the organization of the churches changed from an undominated responsibility shared by all the local disciples into the dictatorial domain of a minister or priest appointed and ordained by the centralized (Catholic) church. This usurpation of power definitely was not the way of God, but was the way that had been incorporated from the pagan religions adopted by Rome. The "Christian" churches of this world, including most of the Churches of God, have inherited this pagan organization and now try to foist it upon the membership as the way established by God. It is time to carefully look at the scriptures to see how the elders and ministers within the Church of God should be selected and what their duties truly are. Unfortunately there is insufficient space in this article to critically analyze each pertinent passage, but I challenge you to find any passage within your Bible that, under careful scrutiny, contradicts those discussed herein.

Before we start our combined efforts in search for the truth, it is important to set down a few ground rules. First, no one but you can ultimately decide what you consider to be acceptable belief. It is upon our beliefs that we base our faith (Rom 10:17). Blind belief is not faith! Only you can determine what actions to take when you have determined what is correct doctrine for belief. I will attempt to help you find the facts, but you must decide. It is a joint search for truth. Second, what some commentator has said, that is, other than the writers of the Bible, simply doesn't count. Can you think of a single sermon or article that you have heard or read on the subject of authority within the church that has not been authored by someone with a self-serving

interest? Third, and last, "proof," which you ultimately may establish, will be in the logical form called inductive logic. This means that you may be able to show that there are no known exceptions to the illustrated patterns of selection for service in the Bible, but this does not necessarily mean that there never are any exceptions. God may, in fact, accept those chosen by other means, but that does not relieve us of our responsibility to follow the biblical example when possible. To state it differently, we will be able to establish guidelines for church operation, but only God establishes his church, and only God ultimately chooses individuals to serve in His church.

Our starting point shall be to establish what the duties are within the church. In order to do this we need to address the meanings of some words.

There are several words in the Bible that are translated as "elder." From the Hebrew language this word is transliterated to be "zaqen," and means *an elder in age, an old man or woman*, or simply *old*. The strictly feminine form of the word is "zeqenah." Zaqen is used about 174 times in the Old Testament to mean *old*, but another usage of the same word occurs more than 100 times. This other usage refers to the *elders* of Israel. These were mature men, skilled in justice, having the gift of wisdom, and having developed skills necessary for the people to willingly follow their leadership. The first major recorded example of a full-fledged assembly of *elders* for the purpose of giving counsel was the assemblage of the seventy leaders (elders) of families and tribes who gave counsel to Moses (Numbers 11:16). These were definitely not young men, and you will note that they were already *elders*, Moses did not make the determination of who were *elders*, but only selected from those who already were. The *elders* also were the counselors to the kings (Josh. 23:2, I Kings 12:8). In light of the quality of counsel, it may be worthwhile for you to review the differences in the counsel given to Rehoboam by his young friends and that given by the elders (II Chron 10, I Kings 12).

With age does come some degree of wisdom, and the *elders* were integral to the functioning of society. They were respected by the people. This traditional custom of the mature being respected and being looked to for advice continued up to, and well past, the time of Jesus. In many societies respect for elders and their advice is still the norm.

The biblical Greek also has several words related to "elders." "Presbuteros" is an adjective comparing the degrees of "presbus," that is, it compares the relative amount of old or elder. An example would be to say, "He is the elder (older) of the two." Forms of *presbus* were also applied to those who were the managers of public affairs. Related words are "sumpresbuteros" meaning an elder of equal standing or a fellow elder; and "presbuterion" denoting the collective statesmen of the Senate or of the Council of the Jews, and was later used to mean the local church council of elders or council of bishops. In each of these usages in both Hebrew and Greek there is some definite element of age, wisdom, experience, and maturity that is stated or implied.

Another group of words that we need to examine are those for "minister." In the Old Testament the most common term for a minister is "sharat." This term refers to one who ministers, serves,

or officiates, particularly one who was in service to another as was Joseph to Potiphar or Elisha to Elijah. The term also applied to the Levites who ministered to the Lord. In the Greek of the New Testament the term is “diakonos.” The meaning is very similar except it covers a broader range of servitude including both domestic servants (John 2:5,9) and a civil ruler (Rom. 13:4) and even Christ (Rom. 15:8). There are several synonyms and related words in Greek which we need not go into for this study. In New Testament Greek there is absolutely no difference in the *diakonos* that is translated *deacon* and the *diakonos* that is translated *minister*. The only variant is how the translator rendered the word. A deacon is a minister, and a minister is a deacon, both are equally servants. The term also applies to women that serve.

In the Old Testament the “prophet” was a “nabi,” that is “a mouthpiece for god.” The god spoken for was any god, and not necessarily the true God. When God was using a prophet the scripture always lets us know. In the New Testament the Greek word is “prophetes” and means, when applied to a true prophet, “one who speaks openly the counsel of God.” The general term is applied equally to women and men.

An “apostle” is strictly a Greek term and means literally “one sent forth,” or we could use the terms ambassador, delegate, or commissioner. If this is applied to the representative of the emperor we expect the ambassador to say what the emperor has told him to say. If the apostle represents Christ then he must say what Christ has told him. Some argue that to be an apostle for either the emperor or Christ, the one sent forth must have been instructed in the first person, but this is not intrinsic to the strict definition.

The rendering of “didaskalos” is generally “teacher” in New Testament translations. Some translations and some verses render the word as “rabbi,” or “master.” A variety of individuals are referred to as *didaskalos* in the New Testament Greek. The use of the term is not restricted to followers, or selected followers, of Christ. That which is taught is “didache” and is usually translated as “doctrine” in the King James Version, but is better rendered “teachings” or “that which is taught.” “Pseudodidaskalos” is a false teacher, “kalodidaskalos” is a teacher of good things.

There is a definite relationship between the word “kalodidaskalos” and a “euangelistes,” that is an “evangelist”, because literally the Greek word “euangelistes” means “a messenger of good.” “Euangelizo” means “to proclaim good news” or “to proclaim glad tidings,” or “to evangelize.”

In the Old Testament there are numerous references to shepherds of the people including the most widely known of all the Psalms where David writes “The Lord is my shepherd... .” It is very important to note that a shepherd has a very close relationship to his flock, not just to feed them, but also to care for them, protect them, nurture them, and lead them (not drive them); that is, he is of service to the sheep, a “pastor.” The flock willingly and eagerly follows the true pastor. The Greek word for *pastor* is “poimen,” and has exactly the same meaning.

In the New Testament the word “episkopos” is most commonly rendered “bishop” by the King James Version. The literal translation is “overseer.” If there is but a single overseer the current term would be superintendent. If there are multiple overseers we would call them a board of directors.

I strongly suggest that you examine several expository dictionaries or exhaustive lexicons to verify the meaning of each word heretofore presented and to get a more complete feeling for the possibilities of each usage. The brief definitions found in Young’s Analytical Concordance, or Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance are entirely inadequate for this purpose, and even those given in this article fail to convey the complete shades of meaning.

Now we have a minimal background of the setting for the scriptures and the meanings of some words used in them. With this information we are prepared to start our search for who should currently be serving God within His churches, how they should be chosen, how God would have them appointed, and the extent of their duties. Again, this is not a complete study. You must complete the process on your own, but when we finish the joint portion of our venture you will be better prepared to do the rest. For your own study you will, of course, need a complete concordance, a good lexicon, and sufficient time. You may, in fact, want to start work on this search in conjunction with your study of the remainder of this article.

The point of embarkation that we are going to use for the core of this study is Eph. 4:11-13:

- 11 And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers,
- 12 for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ;
- 13 until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ. (NAS)

First, read this entire chapter in context. You will notice that it is God through Christ that gives the talents and abilities to conduct the duties of certain positions. Even if an individual is chosen and “ordained” to a position by some ecclesiastical body it does not mean that God has given that person the necessary talents to fulfill the duties prescribed. Let us examine, for instance, the work of a pastor. We just looked at the meaning of being a pastor, and what a real pastor must do. Suppose that some ecclesiastical board appoints a man to be a pastor, and sends him to a local church and says to him, “Shepherd this flock.” Will that man necessarily have the experiences of life necessary to give sound advice? Will he necessarily have good judgement? Will he be mature? Will he have the traits that the congregation will really desire to follow? What if the congregation just simply doesn’t like the man? Can he then be a shepherd even if he truly is committed to the task? We shall see later that all elders in the church also must hold the God-given position of pastor. If God does not so choose, can one function in the position? Can we see why only God is prepared to select those who can pastor?

If we, as a local congregation, get together and appoint an individual to be our teacher, does it give that person the ability to teach us in a manner so that we will understand and learn? Of course it doesn't! Some may argue that if that person were then properly trained, then he could teach. Did you ever have a truly poor teacher when you were in school? Had that "teacher" been trained and received certification? Was that individual truly a teacher? In most cases the poor teacher's training is essentially identical to the training of an excellent teacher. But, the poor teacher remains not actually a teacher at all. It is possible that the gift of being able to teach is intrinsic with what God plans for an individual. Furthermore, if God has not given the teacher the ability to see the truth, can that one be held responsible for teaching the truth? Can anyone but God appoint teachers for Him?

Can anyone other than a prophet speak direct counsel from God on a specific matter? That is, can one be God's own mouthpiece unless God gives the direction for utterance? Can any person appoint another person to be a prophet or personally choose to be a prophet himself? Some of us have encountered those "ministers" or "elders" that have tried to apply biblical principles to specific situations and then claimed that their application was the very word of God being expressed. Have we not seen such "ministers" who then commanded someone else to obey their counsel which was based upon their own personal ideas of a solution, instead of God's utterance? Weren't these frequently matters where the "minister" had no business even giving an opinion? Was he a true prophet or a false prophet when he spoke? How often have we seen disastrous results of such counsel? *No one* can speak for God unless God gives the utterance!

Just because you would like to be God's Apostle, does that make you God's Apostle? Can you send yourself forth to represent another? Does not a king or president select his own ambassador? Just as an earthly king must appoint his own ambassador, so must God appoint his own.

We can see that it is up to God to give the abilities, skills, and personalities necessary for certain callings. We, being only men, the creation of God, simply have no power to bestow talents and spiritual gifts upon anyone. Further, if God gives the talent and gift, do we, being only human, have any right to deny the use thereof simply because some ecclesiastical committee has not "ordained" the possessor of the talent? Later in this article we will see that Stephen and Philip acted in callings to which they were not set apart by the church.

In the last paragraph we approached ordinations in a rather oblique manner. Let us digress from our primary topic long enough to briefly look at the issue of "ordination." A thorough examination of the practice and appropriateness of ecclesiastical ordinations would encompass an article at least as long as this article. Allow, however, a few succinct comments, which you may wish to research on your own. *Ordination*, in the religious sense, comes strictly from pagan origins and customs and is not biblical in foundation. It is very true that the King James Version, and many later translations, often use the word "ordain" in many forms. Most of the words that are translated "ordain", whether from Hebrew or Greek, have the 15th and 16th century English

meaning of "ordain." This middle English meaning of the word is "to set in place," "to establish," "to appoint," or similar usages.

The Greek of the New Testament actually contains at least twenty-two different words that can be correctly translated as "ordain" using the middle English meanings thereof. One Greek word, "cheirotoneo", translated nine times as "ordain," actually means "to vote by stretching forth a hand." No place does the Bible command, espouse, or suggest a service (ceremony) of ordination. Quite to the contrary the biblical example is for the local congregation or fellowship to collectively lay their hands upon an individual that they have jointly chosen and together commend that individual to God for the appointed position. The purpose of the laying on of hands, of course, is that God will bless that individual with His blessing in the undertaking for which the congregation has chosen.

The laying on of hands to commend one to God is very common throughout both the Old and New Testaments. Can this accurately be called ordination? Certainly not! Was a father's blessing an ordination? Was the collective laying of the elder's hands on the sick for healing an ordination? The purpose of laying on of hands was always the same no matter what the cause, *to commend one to God*. The intent was always that God would bless. Never was the intent that man, through ceremony, could somehow make binding decisions for God, or commit God to work through an individual chosen by man.

In order to better tie the above comments together let us look at a scripture pertaining to the apostles Barnabas and Paul (Saul of Tarsus). Please turn to Acts 13:1-4.

1 Now there were at Antioch, in the church that was there, prophets and teachers: Barnabas, and Simeon who was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul.

2 And while they were ministering to the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them."

3 Then, when they had fasted and prayed and laid their hands on them, they sent them away.

4 So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia and from there they sailed to Cyprus. (NAS)

In this passage there are several very important points. First, note that God had already appointed all those named as either prophets or teachers. We cannot tell specifically whether either Barnabas or Saul was a prophet, but we can find that they already had been teaching (Acts 11:25-26). Second, for this special calling in the work, the Holy Spirit actually made a very direct additional appointment to service. This was most uncommon! Although this passage does not name the calling, we find out in Rom. 1:1, I Cor. 1:2, II Cor. 1:1, and many other passages that the calling was to be apostles. Because of this passage, and the lack of any other passages where an apostle was called after the replacement of Judas by the casting of lots, many argue that to be an apostle there must be direct calling from God, and some say that the called one must have

physically seen Christ. The third thing to note is that even though the Holy Spirit did the actual calling, the local church still had the responsibility for the necessary spiritual and physical conduct.

The church sought after God's special commendation for Saul and Barnabas through prayer, fasting, and the laying on of hands.

Having reviewed those positions that the scriptures indicate require talents given directly by God, and having seen that "ordinations" are irrelevant, it is time to look at the positions in the church that God expects to be filled by the choice of men, through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. The first such appointments recorded for the early church are in Acts 6:1-7.

1 Now at this time while the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint arose on the part of the Hellenistic Jews against the native Hebrews, because their widows were being overlooked in the daily serving of food.

2 And the twelve summoned the congregation of the disciples and said, "It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables.

3 "But select from among you, brethren, seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task.

4 "But we will devote ourselves to prayer, and to the ministry of the word."

5 And the statement found approval with the whole congregation; and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch.

6 And these they brought before the apostles; and after praying, they laid their hands on them.

7 And the word of God kept on spreading; and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly. (NAS)

Importantly we must note that nowhere in this passage are the seven referred to as deacons or ministers (diakonos), but the function to which they were chosen certainly is of the definition of one who ministers or is a deacon. Of even more importance is the fact that the very apostles seem not to have had the necessary authority to do the choosing of the seven, since they said to the entire congregation, "Select from among you... ." Can we not assume that if anyone had authority to unilaterally choose another to serve in the ministry it would have been the apostles? Yet the apostles told the entire congregation to do the choosing. The Greek word used for select is "episkeptomai" and means to visit or to seek out.

After the selection was made it would appear from the translations that the apostles collectively prayed and laid their hands upon those chosen to commend them to God. Actually we have no way of knowing who prayed and laid their hands upon those chosen. Scholars and translators of even classical Greek will quickly tell us that it is very difficult if not impossible to translate from Greek to English without the loss of certain shades of meaning, and often without actually changing the meaning (even if there is no desire to do so). Because of certain peculiarities inherent in Hebraic Greek (the principle Greek of the New Testament) the problems are even more profound. The problems specific to this particular scripture are that in verse 6 the word

translated "brought" could equally well be translated "presented", and that there are no words in the Greek where "these" and "they" are inserted into the English text. The Greek language, particularly Hebraic Greek, is much more concerned with what is done than who does it. Because of the lack of certain words in the source text it becomes impossible to make an exact translation into English because it would not be a sentence. Therefore some words must be added. The translator is forced to make a choice of which word to *add*, and is, of course, influenced by his own beliefs. It is entirely possible that the apostles prayed over and laid their hands on these seven men, but it is also possible that it was the congregation, or quite possibly a combination of both. We cannot tell.

Of interest to the structure of the church, and God's way of giving talents, we need to look just a bit further at this same chapter. Please read Acts 6:8-15. Immediately after being selected a "deacon" we find Stephen doing the work, not of a *diakonos*, but that of an *euangelistes*, an evangelist. In Acts 8:5-8 we also find Philip, another of the seven, doing the work of an evangelist. Neither of these men were specifically called to be evangelists, yet God gave them the talents as we read in Eph. 4:11. If the talents necessary to be evangelists were bestowed, it then became their responsibility to use the talents that God had given. Certainly the apostles did not stop them and tell them not to do the work of evangelists, to which God had apparently called them! And, we can rest very assured that neither Stephen nor Philip went around bragging, "I was ordained an evangelist by the very apostles of Christ."

We have already looked at the definitions of an *elder*; you may want to review those definitions. Surely, you may say, one must have at least the "rank" of an elder to participate in the selection of another elder. Not so! Throughout the Old Testament there are hundreds of references to *elders* yet not one single statement about the selection of an elder. To become an elder, first and foremost one had to be mature. If one was of maturity he or she was automatically an elder in at least one sense of the word. We also need to remember that an elder is not necessarily male, although those elders acting in a council do always seem to be men.

In the New Testament the selection of elders does have some commentary. Let's read Acts 14:23:

And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed. (NAS)

You will want to review this in context. At first reading this seems to be very clearly stated. It appears that Barnabas and Paul simply appointed some of the mature men to be *elders*. But hold your horses! Don't gallop off so fast! Is that what it really says? As we found before, the translator who needed to complete the English sentence with implied, but unknown, pronouns has added "they" three different times in this verse. We have no way of knowing which pronouns may actually be correct because they are not in the original text. Further, the Greek word translated "appointed" is the one we isolated earlier as "cheirotoneo," and in classical Greek, is primarily used to denote voting in the Athenian legislative assembly. Literally it means "to stretch

forth the hands." Interestingly at least one commentary says that this cannot mean to vote, but must have some other, but undefined, meaning when involving the selection of elders. The reason given for this comment is rather circuitously worded through several paragraphs, but to paraphrase, goes something like this, "We know that Paul and Barnabas personally appointed these elders, therefore who could have done the voting?" Have we not each, at some time previously, encountered this form of non-reasoning in the guise of reasoning? What does the verse really say? In light of our previously reviewed scriptures, who do you suppose made the actual selection? Who do you think might have done the voting?

In Titus 1:5 we read:

For this reason I left you in Crete, that you might set in order what remains, and appoint elders in every city as I directed you. (NAS)

The Greek word used here for appoint is the verb "kathistemi," and literally means "to stand down." It is the same word used by the apostles in telling the congregation to choose the seven, and is sometimes used in classical Greek when discussing the appointment of a person to a position. It is most frequently translated "ordain" in the King James Version, but is translated into about twenty different words or phrases in various other translations. Some translations of the word include: "(to) place," "set down," "set in order," "set over," "constitute," "make," and even "the significance of bringing to (a certain place)." We can see that it is not as definite in meaning as simply "ordain" or "appoint" in the English language, and does not imply how it should be done.

There is in this same passage another word that is in the New American Standard Version (cited above) translated as "directed," and has some bearing on this discussion. It is usually translated in other versions as "appointed." The Greek word is "diatasso" which unlike other words meaning "appointed" or "directed" has a bit of a different emphasis. In English it can be better characterized as "arrange or prescribe an appointment." It does not necessarily mean that the one sent to do the appointing does the actual work, but rather that the one sent makes sure the work is done. The same word is used of Paul's arrangement for a ship in Acts 20:13; he did not actually arrange for the ship; he only stated his desire as to where it should be. His companions made the actual arrangements. To put the meaning in a more modern light, the following analogy is offered: If, in the height of battle, a general summons a colonel and orders a hill to be taken from the enemy, saying, "Take that hill." The general certainly does not mean that the colonel should engage the enemy and take the hill alone, but rather that the colonel should employ all the troops at his disposal to take the hill.

It now becomes clear in Titus 1:5, and we can justly say, that Paul was telling Titus that he should make certain that elders were selected, not that Titus was necessarily to make the selections unilaterally. Do you suppose that we may also assume that the congregation did the actual appointing even as other scriptures indicate? Verses 6 through 9 go on to give guidelines to be used in the selection of those elders. But, let's look carefully, while we are here, at verse 7.

Titus 1:7 For the overseer must be above reproach as God's steward, not self-willed, not quick-tempered, not addicted to wine, not pugnacious, not fond of sordid gain, (NAS)

Beyond the guidelines for selecting an elder, two other things are important in this verse. An elder is an overseer of the church. King James Version translates this to be "bishop." Remember from previous commentary that an overseer in modern English might be called a "superintendent," or when there is more than a single one, we might consider them to be a "board of directors." It may be that the elders chosen by the congregation should be members of the board of directors of the local church! Also the elder is answerable to more than the congregation for he is also "God's steward." Look up steward in your dictionary. A steward is one employed by a master, does the bidding of the master, and cares for the master's guests, household, or belongings in the same manner that the master would perform the tasks for himself. Now compare this verse with Acts 20:28.

"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 which He purchased with His own blood. (NAS)

We find that not only is an elder an overseer appointed by the Holy Spirit, and a steward answerable to God, but he also serves as pastor (shepherd). We have already seen that only God can give the talents necessary to be a pastor, Since Titus 1:7 indicates that an elder is God's steward, then we can be assured that even if we, by vote, appoint an elder that is not of God's own choosing, that man will be unable to properly serve in the position. It becomes very evident why fasting and prayer were part of the appointing process, and are necessary today.

Maybe you have noticed as we have gone through the scriptures to this juncture that NEVER IS ONLY ONE ELDER SELECTED! There is always to be more than one elder in a congregation!

No place is the number limited, and no place is the number stated, but never is the choosing to be of only a single one. Also you may have noticed that no term of service is given, and no method of removal is stated. However, by implication, if at any time an elder ceases to maintain the qualifications listed in the guidelines, it would appear that the congregation would be obligated to remove him from the position. It certainly seems that all who are worthy and mature could be appointed to the position if the Holy Spirit so leads.

We should also note that an individual elder is given very limited power to function, probably no more than any other individual member. In many instances, it takes more than one elder to do the work. Look at James 5:14.

Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. (NAS)

Note that not just one is to be called for prayer and anointing of the sick, but many, maybe all in the local church. Several other scriptures indicate similar need for multiples in order to have power to function.

Some have said that all elders should be paid, and it has even been said that an elder should be paid twice as much as the average wage of those in the congregation. What a bunch of hooley! The justification given for these ideas (of course expressed by “elders”) is in I Tim. 5:17-18.

17 Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching.

18 For the Scripture says, "You shall not muzzle the ox while he is threshing," and "The laborer is worthy of his wages." (NAS)

As before, let's look at this scripture critically. The Greek word for honor is transliterated as “time” (pronounced tee'may). In the King James Version this word is eight times rendered “price,” one time “precious,” one time “sum,” and thirty-one times “honor.” A more generalized American English rendition would be “of value.” There is definitely a connotation of honor, but absolutely no indication of monetary remuneration for service. The word translated wages in verse 18 is “misthos” which can mean “reward, hire, or wage.” These two verses are definitely a comparison of various rewards for different services. A good elder deserves great (double) honor; a working ox is to receive grain to eat, and an employee is to receive a fair wage. The *elder* that is a good leader and works hard at preaching and teaching is of twice the *value* of the one that does not do those things.

Even if this scripture is twisted so as to indicate that the elder is to receive monetary compensation, we must ask the question, “Who is his employer?” We have already seen that the true elder is the steward *hired* by God, not the church. This can, of course, lead to a discussion of tithing, which is not the subject herein addressed, but has been entirely abused by much of the Church of God as well as other denominations.

I Tim. 5:17-18 does not mean that none within the greater church structure should be paid for employment, but it definitely does not indicate that every congregation should have a paid leadership. It's yet another topic, but the study of appropriate compensation within the church is worth your time.

The last question we are going to address concerning elders pertains to any hierarchical order of those serving in that function. Undoubtedly you have been aware of the controversy surrounding the supremacy of Peter or James. Have you stopped to think why this controversy can exist? The only reason for the controversy is that your Bible gives no apostle, including Peter or James, authority over another. Further, your Bible gives no apostle supremacy or authority over an elder! Certainly no scripture gives one elder any rank over another. May I challenge you to find a single scripture that unquestionably places one of God's called over another. Are we not given direct access to God through Christ? Do we need any other intercessor than Christ? Are we not told to prove all things? Do we need some man or men to dictate to us what we should believe? Is that not our responsibility? Are we so lazy that we are not willing to study for ourselves? If

we rely on another to tell us "doctrine" do we not throw our own responsibility away? Are we not still responsible for working out our own salvation?

We, under God's plan, are to be led, not driven. Note, though, that there are ample examples of strong suggestions being given to churches by elders, especially by Paul. But, even the strong suggestions are not in the form of orders.

In support of the last two paragraphs turn to Acts 15 and read the entire chapter. Here was probably the most heated doctrinal discussion in the entire New Testament. We read of various arguments that were advanced. We read of consensus expressed. But, may I challenge you to find any "pulling of rank" by the apostles over the elders, or the elders over the entire congregation, or of the senior apostles over Barnabas or Paul? It did not happen! Initially there was considerable disputation among the entire group, apparently becoming rather boisterous. The process toward consensus started when Peter offered his experiences and opinions. When Barnabas and Paul spoke, the entire multitude was courteous and remained silent. After Barnabas and Paul had spoken, James got up and rendered his arguments and his own conclusion. The result was that the entire multitude became convinced of the matter (verse 22). This entire multitude (apostles, elders, and members) were all equally worthy of decision making in God's sight, but all were not bestowed with the same callings. No one told another how they were required to decide. Wouldn't this have been an ideal setting for the author of Acts to show unequivocally who Christ left in charge? Wouldn't this have been the place for the "chief apostle" to exert his "authority" and avoid all the discussion? There is no such comment! There was no chief apostle! God is not a respecter of persons (Acts 10:34). Christ left no single man or group of men solely in charge!

Now, in your Bible, read I Cor. 5:1-5. The King James Version fails to capture the relationship of Paul to the Corinthian Church, so I suggest reading this in some other version. In these verses gross sin of one in the Corinthian church is addressed. Did Paul actually put the sinning man out? Absolutely not! He instructed the church when gathered together to judge the man, and he tells them in absolute terms how he would judge the man if he were present. He, in fact, says that he has already made judgement if the charges are correct. The action was, however, definitely up to the local congregation who first had to determine guilt. Paul did not make final judgement, but asked that his judgement be added to the others when they voted! Did he have the authority to unilaterally make the final judgement? May I suggest that we truly do not know, but we do know that he did not use such authority if he had it.

In the eighth and eleventh chapters of Acts there is yet another important lesson that tends to be overlooked. In Acts 8:14 we can verify that there were apostles in Jerusalem, and there is no doubt that they were a part of the church. Yet in Acts 11:22 we find that it was not the apostles, but rather the church that sent Barnabas to Antioch. The apostles apparently did not even attempt to take precedence over the others in the church, but the church acted as a whole. Barnabas was not sent by or in the name of the apostles, but on behalf of the church. In your Bible there is but

one who is placed above all, and that one is God. Furthermore it does not appear that Christ established any "chain of command."

There is left a final item to be resolved in this article, and that pertains to the attitude of a true Christian in regard to desiring to serve in the church. We have all seen and encountered "the clergy" or "ministers" whose primary motivations seemed to be position, power, prestige, and money. We have viewed many of these who obviously thought that the only way to the top was to climb the pile of bodies they left in their wake. We may have been hurt by "ministers" who did not minister (serve) but instead demanded to be served.

We know that one day we must answer to our God for ourselves. We will be judged on our own merits, not by what some minister said or did. Christ said to you and to me, "You are the light of the world!" We are expected to be the examples. We are to be judged not by the position of preeminence we hold in the church, but rather on the service we perform. In Matt. 23:10-12 it says:

10 "And do not be called leaders; for One is your Leader, that is, Christ.

11 "But the greatest among you shall be your servant.

12 "And whoever exalts himself shall be humbled; and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted. (NAS)

Paul tells us in 1 Tim. 3:1:

It is a trustworthy statement: if any man aspires to the office of overseer, it is a fine work he desires to do. (NAS)

But, James informs us in James 3:1:

Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we shall incur a stricter judgment. (NAS)

From everything we have reviewed in this article we can say with certainty that it is God's desire for each of us to serve, and to serve freely, in such a position as He shall determine through the Holy Spirit. It is not for us to campaign for position, but we should always be willing when the Holy Spirit, sometimes through a vote of the congregation, calls us. It is not wrong to want to serve, but it is always wrong to seek for preeminence. God is to be exalted, not those that have position in His church.

For you to ponder,

John A. Difley
Sandy, Utah
1996

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

It has been my endeavor to present this article as fairly as possible, but I have found that task to be very difficult. I make no claim to be a student of either classical Greek or Hebraic Greek. In order to prepare this article I have been forced to rely on others for guidance in the meanings and usages of words and phrases. Many lexicons, critical analyses, exhaustive and analytical concordances, commentaries, translations, interpretive studies, and other scholarly works have been consulted.

I have found that there is significantly less consensus among scholars concerning translation from, particularly, Hebraic (Semitic) Greek to English than I had previously assumed. Interestingly, but not surprisingly, each scholar thinks that he is correct and the others are some wrong to some degree. It is not the major points of translation where the disagreements occur, but rather the very minor points. Surely you have encountered the vast array of New Testament translations that are available. They all agree in the major story flow, but the differences are mostly in the choice of individual words. Unfortunately, for many of us, these minor points of translation have been used in the past to form major “doctrines” that have been foisted upon us as a means for subjugation.

Unlike most words in the English language, many words in the Greek can change meaning based on their position in a sentence. It becomes very evident to even a novice, such as I, that a true mastery of Greek syntax is required to determine shades of meaning. When the differences originating from varying manuscripts are discounted, I have noticed that some of the greatest variance between scholarly translations is obviously related to syntax. The correct meanings of certain idiomatic expressions and proverbial material found in Hebraic Greek that are not in the classical language also seem to cause considerable controversy, but I do not think that our topic is greatly dependent upon these idioms of speech. Again I suggest that you use all of the tools at your disposal as you attempt to define any “doctrine” related to this article.

I would much appreciate your comments. You can reach me by telephone at **(801) 942-5260**. Or write to me at: **John Difley, 2275 Creek Rd., Sandy, UT. 84093 U.S.A.**

(This page is not copyrighted and need not be reproduced when copying.)

This paper taken from the World Wide Web page: **Bible study, The church of God.**
Web address: **<http://www.biblestudy.org>**