

# Authority in the Church

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Many of us have come to see that the office of the one-man pastor has no Scriptural support. Nowhere does the New Testament ever imply that one man is to have authority over a local church. On the contrary, the earliest house churches enjoyed the ministries of multiple elders whose job it was to pastor the flock (cf. Acts 20:17, 28; I Pet. 5:1, 2).

Many churches correctly eschew the one-man pastor and ordain multiple pastors of the local body. However, the nature of the pastoral office and its authority remains unchanged. In fact, many churches with multiple leaders are, paradoxically, even *more* authoritarian than ones with single leaders. The purpose of this article, therefore, is not to argue for the multiplicity of pastors within the local church. That case has been made in other articles.<sup>1</sup> In this article the multiplicity of pastors, or elders, will be assumed. The point of this article rather will be to argue against the traditional (worldly) view of authority in the church bound up in the concept of the church "office".

## "Offices" Unscriptural

That subtitle might sound strange at first. After all, didn't Paul write to the Romans: "inasmuch as I am the apostle of the Gentiles, I magnify mine office"? (Rom. 11:13 KJV). And in his first letter to Timothy did not Paul write of "the office of a bishop" and "the office of a deacon" (I Tim. 3:1,10,13, KJV)?

Those words certainly do appear in the King James Version of the Bible. But what is truly astonishing is how foreign to the Greek text those terms are. In the Romans text it is his *diakonian*, i.e., his "ministry" or "deaconship," which Paul magnifies. In I Timothy 3:1 it is *episkopes*, which means an "oversight" which is sought. This may or may not bear the traditional connotation of "church office." Most interesting of all is how the King James Version translates a single Greek verb,

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<sup>1</sup>cf. Steve Jones, "The Traditional Pastor Reexamined," *Wisdom & Power*, June/July 1993, Vol. 7, No. 2, pp. 8,9,11; also, "The Pastor: Is He Biblical?" *Christian Perspectives*, Feb. 1995, Vol. 1, No.2, pp. 1-3.

*diakoneo* ("to serve"), with the clumsy phrase "use the office of a deacon" in I Timothy 3:10,13.

Are these matters mere semantics? Does it matter whether or not we regard elders and deacons as holding "offices"? I believe it matters insofar as it presupposes a worldly authority structure in which man dominates man. *This* type of authority has no Scriptural sanction.

## "Obey Your Leaders"

But is not this type of authority implied in the New Testament's exhortation of believers to "obey" our leaders? "Obey your leaders and submit to them," wrote the author to the Hebrews, "for they are keeping watch over your souls and will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with sighing - for that would be harmful to you" (Heb. 13:17). We might note also the basic meaning of the term "bishop" (*episkopos*) which literally means "overseer."

At first blush this concept seems to create an immediate tension with the concept of *diakonia* which means "deaconship" or "service" or "ministry." In fact, these two terms, "deacon" and "bishop," evoke contradictory images. Yet we know that all elders are deacons (i.e., servants).<sup>2</sup> How can these two concepts be reconciled? How can the same people both rule and obey?

## Spiritual Authority

I believe the key to unraveling that tension is to be found in passages such as Matthew 20:25-28 and Mark 10:42-45. In these passages Jesus clearly points out that spiritual authority is exercised in an entirely different way from worldly authority. To rule or "oversee" the church means to *serve* the church. In the household of God, the concept of

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<sup>2</sup>This includes even the apostles: Cp. I Cor. 3:5; 2 Cor. 11:23; Eph. 3:7. The distinctions between "deacons" and "bishops/elders" in Philippians 1:1 and I Tim. 3 indicate not that elders aren't deacons, but rather that deacons aren't *necessarily* elders. This observation is strengthened by the fact that nearly all of the stated qualifications for "deacon" or "servant" in the church are also qualifications for elders, whereas the reverse is not true. To serve in the church does not make one an elder; but to be an elder is to serve in one of the servant roles of the church. For more information on "deaconship" see Steve Jones, "The Traditional Deacon Re-examined," *Wisdom & Power*, Sept./Oct. 1993, Vol. 7, No. 3, pp. 9,10,17.

"oversight" is radically transformed and interpreted entirely in terms of "deaconship" or "ministry" or "service." Peter states this explicitly in I Peter 5:1-5: "I exhort the elders ... to pastor the flock of God among you, exercising the oversight, not under compulsion but willingly" (vv. 1,2, my translation). Furthermore, they are not to exercise authority as "lords" but as "examples" (v. 3). "*In the same way*" younger Christians are to accept the authority of the elders (v. 5a); "and all of you must clothe yourselves with humility in your dealings with one another" (v. 5b, NRSV).

Note that key phrase in verse 5a, "in the same way," as well as the sentiment in the remainder of the verse and the context of the passage. Yes, younger Christians are to submit to the older and wiser Christians in the church; but the elders in turn submit and defer to the interests of others. Pastoral authority must not be taken out of the context of the *mutual* business of submitting and serving in the church.

### **Ramifications**

The ramifications of this fact are far-reaching. It means that the elders are *not* the primary decision makers in the church, contrary to popular practice. In the early church it was on the contrary the holy Spirit operating through the context of the *entire body* which made decisions on behalf of the church (cp. Acts 13:2,3; 15:22; I Cor. 1:10-15).

To illustrate this point we need look no further than Jesus' great disciplinary outline of Matthew 18:15-20. Of course it is the duty of any member of the body, not just a (serving) leader, to approach the one who has sinned; and in any case a member who has been sinned against must approach the offender

to reconcile (cp. also Luke 17:3,4). If reconciliation and/or repentance is not achieved, does the case *then* go to the elders? Not necessarily. A third party is brought in, but Jesus doesn't indicate that the third or fourth parties need to be elders. If *that* effort is unsuccessful, does it *then* go to the elders. No. On the contrary, it then goes straight to the entire church body for prayerful resolution.

Just where are the elders in all of this? If they truly are the "rulers" and decision-makers of the church, surely they would figure prominently in this passage. But they don't.

This is what strongly implies that the oversight of the church is not an office but a function. Leaders lead by example and by submission. Elders are just that: older and wiser people in the church who are known, trusted, admired and imitated; whose opinions, insights and advice are sought; and whose character and spirituality are beyond reproach. This pastoring is a role or function, but it is *not* an office invested with certain powers or political authority.

So it isn't enough to do away with the one-man pastor. We must do away with the very pastoral "office" itself and replace it with the *true* pastoring of our older, wiser brothers and sisters whose lives we seek to emulate in our discipleship.

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