

# How the Church is to be Governed

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## Introduction

The Scriptures speak of three groups which are involved in governing the local church: the church as a whole, the elders and the deacons. Each has a different role to play. Just as a happy marriage depends on both the husband and wife fulfilling their roles in a loving and humble way, so happy church government depends on each body that is involved in governing the church acting in a responsible, loving and humble way. This booklet is an attempt to sketch the Biblical teaching on the roles of these three bodies. I shall look at each one in turn.

## 1. The church as a whole

There are places in the Scriptures where the church as a whole is given responsibility for making decisions. In Matthew 18.15 – 18 Jesus gives teaching about church discipline. He says,

"If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.

This passage shows that ultimately it is the whole local church which has the responsibility for deciding if a professing believer is guilty of sin, and whether this person is to be regarded as a believer or not.

In Acts 6.3 we read that the apostles told the church to choose from among them those who were to look after the widows. It is widely held that the Seven who were appointed were the first deacons in the church. If this is the case the church has the responsibility of appointing deacons.

As regards the appointment of elders, in the New Testament times it seems to be clear that the apostles and their deputies appointed elders (Acts 14.23, Titus 1.5). The question is how should they be appointed today? Some would say by "bishops" who, they argue, are the successors of the apostles, or by modern day "apostles". Others would say by the

elders of other churches. However, historically Baptists and Congregationalists have argued that elders should be appointed by the local church (or perhaps, to put it better, *recognised* by the local church, since it is God who gifts and calls elders to serve him). Here are some of the reasons why this position has been taken:

a) There are no apostles today, since all the witnesses of the resurrection are dead (see Acts 1.22).

b) The word which the King James Version translated "bishop" actually is "episcopos" which, it is commonly agreed, means an "overseer" of a local church. From 1 Peter 5.1 - 2 we see that elders are to act as overseers ("episcopeo" the verb derived from "episcopos").

c) By the time the book of Revelation was written, each local church was clearly autonomous and directly answerable to Christ (See Revelation chapters 2 and 3)

d) The Scriptural qualifications for elders (1 Timothy 3.1 - 7; Titus 1.6 - 9) are arguably given so that churches can properly discern if those they are thinking of appointing as elders meet the qualifications.

e) Churches are deemed by Christ to be capable of judging who should be regarded as a believer, perhaps the most solemn and important decision that can be taken by the church. If so, then by extension, they are capable of judging who should be regarded as an elder.

f) It is the local church which will really know, much better than a committee of elders from other churches, or a denominational body, what a man's life and teaching are really like.

So we have churches corporately deciding who should be regarded as church members, and who should be deacons and elders. What about other matters in the church? About these there is no indication from Scripture that the church as a whole needs to decide them. The elders and deacons may perhaps consult the church on them, or even want the church to decide some of them. But there is no Scriptural imperative that they should do so. Indeed there are strong practical arguments why church members meetings should not be bogged down with the details of church life. Arguably, the church members' meetings of many Baptist Churches get cluttered with unnecessary matters, wasting the time of members, and sometimes leading to fruitless arguments and divisions.

## **2. Elders**

We have already noted from 1 Peter 5.1 - 2 how the terms "elder" and "overseer" are used interchangeably. In the same verses, Peter also says that elders are to be "shepherds of God's flock." In Acts 20.28 Paul instructs the Ephesian elders "Keep watch over 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." So again elders are spoken of as overseers and shepherds. In my view these verses rule out the distinction that is made in some churches between pastors and elders, as if they were different offices. Some elders may work full time at teaching and preaching (1 Timothy

5.17). Undoubtedly some elders will be more experienced than others. In an eldership one elder may be recognised as a leading or senior elder by the others. There may also be a differentiation in gifting between different elders, for example between the ability to teach publicly and the ability to teach privately or in small groups. But there is no ground, I believe, for the view that there are two distinct offices of pastor and elder.

The Bible gives clear teaching about the qualifications for elders. In 1 Timothy 3.2 - 7 we read:

Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church? He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil. Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he will not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil. (ESV)

We see here an elder must have an exemplary moral character, both in public and at home, and he must have the ability to teach. In Scriptural language the term "able to teach" means not just that someone has got "the gift of the gab", but that he can be relied upon to speak sound, Scriptural truth in a helpful way, and in a way which is backed up by his life (See 2 Timothy 2.24). Similarly, Titus 1.6 - 9 says

An elder must be blameless, the husband of but one wife, a man whose children believe [or whose children are faithful] 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 drunkenness, 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.

There are numerous indications from Scripture that it is the norm for church life is that there should be a plurality of elders in each local church (see for example Acts 14.23, Titus 1.5). However, we are also warned not to be "hasty in the laying on of hands" (1 Timothy 5.22) which is perhaps a warning not to appoint people to the office of eldership too quickly. Certainly, given the great responsibility that elders have, the church needs to be very careful whom it appoints, or terrible damage can ensue. It would be better to have the anomalous situation of having only one elder, than to have a plurality of elders but with one or more of them not properly qualified for the task.

What is the task of elders? To act as shepherds of the church of God (Acts 20.28, 1 Peter 5.2). This means that they are to feed the church with the Word of God, or, if they do not always teach themselves, at least to supervise those who do so at their request. They are also to "direct the affairs of the church" (1 Timothy 5.17). The very term "elder" implies a ruling function. The elders of the city in the Old Testament were the local rulers who sat at the gates (Proverbs 31.23, Ruth 4.4). The term "shepherd" also implies

ruling and directing, as indicated by Psalm 23.1 - 4. Equally, the term "overseer" also implies ruling. In Acts 15 we see the apostles and elders of the church in Jerusalem gathering and deciding what to do on the question of how much of the Old Testament ceremonial law the Gentile believers should be expected to obey. So we see that elders are to govern and direct the life of the church, for the good of the church and its members.

This authority that elders are to exercise is to be exercised with humility, gentleness and love, not for personal gain but for the good of the church. In Matthew it is recorded that Jesus said to his disciples

"You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave – just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Jesus said that true greatness is to be found in serving others. In the Kingdom of Heaven those with authority are not to "lord it over" others in the way that unbelievers do. 1 Thessalonians 2.6 – 12, Paul speaks of the tenderness and love with which he looked after the church, which is clearly an example for all elders:

As apostles of Christ we could have been a burden to you, but we were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children. We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us. Surely you remember, brothers, our toil and hardship; we worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone while we preached the gospel of God to you. You are witnesses, and so is God, of how holy, righteous and blameless we were among you who believed. For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory.

Peter says in his first letter, chapter 5 verses 1 – 4:

To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder, a witness of Christ's sufferings and one who also will share in the glory to be revealed: 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.

Elders have no power to bind the consciences of members of the church with any rules or laws which have no foundation in the Word of God. For elders to do so would lead to a sect-like totalitarianism which is very damaging.

No doubt, in the desire not to "lord it over" the church, elders will often want to consult deacons and church members about matters which arguably could be decided by elders alone. This is particularly likely to be the case if there is only one elder.

A parallel may perhaps be drawn with marriage. The husband is the head of the relationship between him and his wife, and is the head of his household. A wise and godly husband, however, will discuss decisions which are coming up with his wife and children, even though technically he would be within his "rights" to make a decision on his own account without referring to others.

For their part, church members are instructed "Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you" (Hebrews 13.17). As the elders teach God's Word, the members are to respond by obeying the message that they hear, unless, of course, they believe that the message is not faithful to Scripture, in which case they need to query what they have heard with the elder who taught them. In church matters where there is no direct teaching from Scripture, but where elders have given a lead to the church, then members of the church should submit to the elders and follow their lead, unless conscience or practical considerations will not allow. An example of this might be where the elders call upon the members of the church to come to a certain number of meetings per week.

Church members are also to "respect those who work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord and who admonish you. Hold them in highest regard in love because of their work" (1 Thessalonians 5.12 - 13). There should be love and respect for elders because of their work, though elders should not be "put on a pedestal", which would be to verge towards idolatry. Members of churches also have a responsibility to provide for the material needs of those who teach them. Paul says in 1 Timothy 5.17 – 18

The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honour [or double pay], 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." (See also Galatians 6.6 and 1 Corinthians 9.7 – 14)

It needs to be remembered, however, that an elder can fall into sin, whether the sin of false teaching or of wrong living. If this happens, he needs to be challenged according to Matthew 18.15 – 17. If an elder sins in a serious way and will not repent he should be disciplined by the church and dismissed as an elder.

### **3. Deacons**

The term "deacon" means a table servant, or waiter. This implies that the task of a deacon is to serve unobtrusively rather than to rule in the church.

Although the term "deacon" does not occur in Acts 6, I believe the passage gives us an account of the appointment of the first deacons, and its rationale. The apostles were getting "snowed under" with administrative tasks to do with the distribution of food to widows. In addition, disputes were breaking out, and they were being accused of being

unfair. With wisdom which was no doubt granted by the Holy Spirit, Peter says "It would not be right for us [apostles] to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables." He instructs the church to choose seven men from among themselves who are known to be full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom. He then says "We will turn this responsibility over to them, and will give our full attention to prayer and the ministry of the word" (verses 2 - 4). Deacons were appointed so that those whose main ministry was prayer and the ministry of the word could get on with their task without distraction.

So we see that the task of deacons is to take responsibility for "practical" concerns, so that the elders can get on with the "spiritual" work to which they are called. I use speech marks for "practical" and "spiritual" because of course the "practical" side of the church's life must be governed by spiritual considerations, and also the "spiritual" side inevitably has implications for the practical life of the church.

As for the qualifications for being a deacon, as well as the requirement to be "full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom" Paul writes the following:

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....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 (1 Timothy 3.8 -10, 12 -13).

It is worthy of note that both passages that speak of the qualifications for being a deacon stress the moral and spiritual character of a prospective deacon, rather than his practical abilities. Many churches have failed to heed this teaching, and have sometimes appointed people who have been successful and able practically, but who lack spiritual maturity and judgement, with disastrous consequences.

How are the tasks in the church's life to be divided between elders and deacons? It is important to remember that *all* that the deacons do is done as servants of the elders and of the church as a whole. It is not as though there are two centres of "power" or "jurisdiction" in the church. Still less is it right that there should be a power struggle between the deacons and the elders. Arguably, much harm has been done in Baptist Churches in the last 100 years or so through some deacons taking upon themselves authority in the church which does not belong to them.

In an ideal situation with a well-functioning body of deacons, I expect that the elder(s) would ask the deacons to take responsibility for such matters as, for example, the maintenance and cleaning of the church building, the accounts, giving to missionaries, payment of salaries to employees of the church, and any gifts to the poor. I would expect that the elder(s) would want, in normal circumstances, to decide who was preaching when, to decide about the format of meetings and their length, to have charge of pastoral visitation and any outreach activities undertaken on behalf of the church. Although the elders would no doubt want to consult deacons and church members on some or all of these things, it would be ultimately their responsibility to make decisions in these areas.

## **Love is crucial**

Whatever system of government a church adopts, the crucial thing is that there is love between elder(s) and deacons, and elder(s) and church members. One could have what one believes to be the most perfect and Biblical system of government, but without love, and without the operation of the Holy Spirit to save sinners and build up saints, it will achieve nothing.

Unless otherwise stated, scripture quotations are from the New International Version.

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