

## Church Offices and Ordination

In an article on church officers in the *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, S. B. Babbage lists over twenty titles: Archbishop, Archdeacon, Archpriest, Auxiliary Bishop, Bishop, Canon, Cardinal, Coadjutor Bishop, Curate, Deacon, Deaconess, Dean, Elder, Metropolitan, Moderator, Patriarch, Prebendary, Presbyter, Rector, Rural Dean, Suffragan Bishop, Superintendent, and Vicar. Babbage's descriptions of these offices are notable in that only two are accompanied by New Testament examples – deacon (or deaconess) and elder (or bishop). The rest of the offices have been created over time by various churches and denominations.

**Question:** Is it appropriate for the church to have formal offices that are not described or mandated in the New Testament?

Other than the apostles, the first "office" that may be observed in the New Testament church is that of "deacon" (Greek: *diakonos*). The Hellenistic Jewish believers complained that their widows were being neglected in the distribution of food because of ethnic favoritism on the part of their Palestinian brethren (Acts 6:1). The apostles said that "serving" the tables themselves would hinder the ministry of teaching and evangelism to which they had been called, so they told the protesters to select seven men from among themselves who could distribute the food equitably. Those called upon to "serve" in this way were to be "men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom" (v. 3). Since "deacon" means "servant," many have argued that these seven individuals were the first deacons. If so, several observations are worth noting:

1. They were selected by the congregation (or at least a portion of the congregation).
2. The listed requirements pertain only to Christian character. Deacons are not selected on the basis of their spiritual gifts, much less their careers. Paul made this even more explicit in 1 Timothy 3:8-12, where he wrote, "Deacons likewise must be men of dignity, not double-tongued, or addicted to much wine or fond of sordid gain, but holding to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. And let these also first be tested; then let them serve as deacons if they are above reproach. Women must likewise be dignified, not malicious gossips, but temperate, faithful in all things. Let deacons be husbands of only one wife, and good managers of their children and their own households."
3. Nowhere does the New Testament list the appropriate duties of deacons, but that is just as well, for apparently their ministry is not limited to the assigned duties of the office. Stephen was selected to serve tables, but he "was performing great wonders and signs among the people" (Acts 6:8) and was presenting the Gospel with wisdom and boldness (v. 10, chapter 7).
4. The deacons were brought before the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them (v. 6), apparently conveying their blessing and publicly identifying with the deacons' assigned ministry). Though they did not feel it was appropriate for them to neglect their other tasks to

serve tables, the apostles did not regard the ministry of the deacons as insignificant (cf. Paul's mention of the deacons when addressing his letter to the church at Philippi [Phil. 1:1]).

### Questions:

Should every local congregation have deacons, or is this more of an occasional office that is not universally mandated?

Though the New Testament is not specific with regard to their duties, in later church history deacons generally have been assigned to ministries of service, provision, and care for the congregation. Has that been appropriate?

Paul and his coworkers in ministry saw many people come to saving faith in Christ. They made it a goal to appoint elders in each of the churches that began as a result of their evangelism (Acts 14:23; Tit. 1:5), and Paul was explicit about the requirements for this office. As with deacons, the qualifications focus on Christian character, but at least one "skill" is added – the elders are expected to be "able to teach" (1 Tim. 3:2). Still, this requirement likely has more to do with personal maturity and a knowledge of the Scriptures than with technique. The list of requirements from 1 Timothy 3:2–7 is as follows: "An overseer, then, must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, prudent, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not addicted to wine or pugnacious, but gentle, uncontentious, free from the love of money. He must be one who manages his own household well, keeping his children under control with all dignity (but if a man does not know how to manage his own household, how will he take care of the church of God?); and not a new convert, lest he become conceited and fall into the condemnation incurred by the devil. And he must have a good reputation with those outside the church, so that he may not fall into reproach and the snare of the devil." The list from Titus 1:6–9 is very similar: "if any man be above reproach as God's steward, not self-willed, not quick-tempered, not addicted to wine, not pugnacious, not fond of sordid gain, but hospitable, loving what is good, sensible, just, devout, self-controlled, holding fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, that he may be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict." Again, several observations are in order:

1. The elders are appointed by the apostles and their companions. Is this pattern normative? If so, then who is to appoint elders in a local congregation (especially after the first generation has passed from the scene)?

2. As the spiritual leaders of the congregation, the elders are expected to fulfill these requirements *before* they are appointed to office. These are not to be regarded as goals for the future, but as present realities. Again, no mention is made here of the elders' careers, for they are not primarily "trustees." They should have a good reputation in the community, but that reputation is built on character, not financial strength.

3. As suggested by their title, elders are expected to be mature men (cf. 1 Tim. 5:22). This was the case in Israel as well (and in most ancient societies), as elders rendered judgments and gave direction to the people (Lev. 4:15; Deut. 22:15–18; Josh. 24:1; Matt. 21:23; Acts 4:5, 8; etc.).

4. Each church was expected to have a plurality of elders, though no number is given (either as example or mandate).

5. Like the deacons, the elders are not required to have particular gifts in order to qualify for their office. However, they are expected to "shepherd the flock" (1 Pet. 5:2; cf. Acts 20:28), an expression that is based on the same word as "pastor." Since "pastors and teachers" are noted

alongside apostles, prophets, and evangelists as gifted persons in Ephesians 4:11, it may well be that those who shepherd the flock and teach should be expected to be gifted in those areas (cf. Rom. 12:7; 1 Cor. 12:29; 1 Pet. 4:10-11). Still, it is noteworthy that the biblical lists of elder qualifications do not mention spiritual gifts.

### Questions:

How does one identify spiritual gifts? Might Paul have assumed more of a connection between gifts and duties than we usually acknowledge? In light of the priority given to godly character (cf. 2 Pet. 1:5-8), can you justify the contemporary emphasis on identifying one's spiritual gifts as a prerequisite for effective service?

The elders were responsible for shepherding and teaching the congregation. Is there any New Testament justification for the "pastor" or the "priest" as a distinct office?

Paul wrote, "Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching" (1 Tim. 5:17). Does that mean that some elders do not have teaching responsibilities? Does the New Testament model include teachers who are not elders?

Peter describes himself as a "fellow elder" (1 Pet. 5:1). How is that significant for our understanding of the office?

The pastor of a relatively large denominational church "planted" that church about fifteen years ago. He personally appoints both the elders and the "governing board," which deals primarily with financial matters. What are the potential difficulties with this arrangement? Are there better alternatives?

What was Timothy's role when he received the two epistles from Paul? Was he the lone pastor of a congregation? It seems inappropriate to consider him a "bishop" in light of that term's application to elders in 1 Timothy 3:1, but was he an apostolic representative with delegated authority that might have eventually been passed on to someone else? Who were the "elders" who laid hands upon him (4:14)? Was Paul in the group (2 Tim. 1:6)?

Those last questions raise the issue of **ordination**. The Old Testament priests were "ordained" through a special ceremony (Ex. 29:9, 33), meaning that they were set apart unto God for a particular ministry. Similar ceremonies have been employed throughout the history of the church, and they have generally been defended by appeal to the example of Timothy (1 Tim. 4:14; 5:22; 2 Tim. 1:6), the "deacons" of Acts 6 (Acts 6:6), and Paul and Barnabas (Acts 13:3).

In the Roman Catholic Church, ordination is regarded as a sacrament whereby individuals are set apart for the priesthood and given the authority to perform the mass and administer the Eucharist to the people (note the Levitical connections, which are not coincidental). Protestants have rejected that approach to the grace of God, arguing that no human mediators are required for its distribution. They have also rejected the Roman Catholic belief in the succession of authority, in which certain empowered individuals go on to empower others. Still, Protestants have maintained the practice of ordination, even in a desacralized form, seeing it as a normal means of inducting church officers. Since Protestants also desacralized the Eucharist, ordination came to be seen not as the *impartation* of authority to distribute grace, but the *recognition* of authority to *preach*.

Within our evangelical circles, we have tended to be “Protestant Protestants.” That is, we go further from the traditions of the church than did the Reformers themselves. In the case of ordination, we often ordain individuals for ministry in the sense that we convey some special status upon them, but we may or may not have any further relationship with them. In contrast to the Roman Catholic priests who continue to represent the centralized authority of the church after their ordination, our ordained evangelical pastors are typically turned loose to roam the land as independent preachers, serving one congregation at a time, but perpetuating an unfortunate distinction between clergy and laity while never functioning as true members of any local church. These preachers are not elders, except perhaps in title, for the “real” elders have the ability to hire and fire them. They have been “ordained,” set apart at some time in the past to be members of this itinerant fraternity, but there appears to be little connection between this practice and the New Testament examples.

If biblical ordination involves the setting apart of particular individuals for assigned tasks, then it stands to reason that the task can be completed and the ordination thus expire. Further, ordination can apply to other duties or offices in addition to that of elder or “pastor.” In that case we should have no difficulty with the ordination of women, though we may disagree on the tasks to which they are assigned.

Ordination can be a wonderful way to recognize and affirm an individual’s giftedness, suitability, and calling for ministry, but I would suggest that it be practiced with regard to a broad range of assigned duties, that it be regarded as an assignment to ministry rather than the permanent impartation of special status, that it be accompanied by continuing accountability to those who ordain (perhaps Paul’s point in 1 Tim. 4:14?), and (in the U.S.) that it not be done simply to gain a tax break from the Internal Revenue Service.

## **A Final Word**

Where our traditional practices seem to have little connection to biblical patterns, we may be tempted to call for radical and immediate change. However, the New Testament does not place much emphasis on offices within the church except to say that those who lead must be spiritually qualified. That is a non-negotiable. The titles, means of selection, job descriptions, analyses of giftedness, and views on ordination are all significantly less important than the fact that those who shepherd the flock of God are expected to walk with God themselves. Even if he wasn’t the first pope, the questions and commands given to Peter are instructive here. “Do you love Me? . . . Tend My lambs. . . . Do you love Me? . . . Shepherd My sheep. . . . Do you love Me? . . . Tend My sheep” (John 21:15-17).