

Where are the elders, bishops, deacons, etc.?

Part 1

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[00:00:01] Good afternoon, I hope you've all had a very good lunch. You know, when I saw which session I'd been asked to take, my heart sank a little, because this is known as the graveyard slot. It's when we've all had a nice lunch and our bodies just want to have a siesta. And I've never really decided whether the graveyard slot is given to the most interesting and dynamic speaker, so that everyone's kept awake, or whether it's given to the most boring, because everyone's going to go to sleep anyway and no one will notice. I'll leave you to decide afterwards.

Anyway, we've had a number of subjects already this morning, and I hope already we're having a feel for the approach that we must take when looking at subjects such as this. And that is essentially that we must really set aside perhaps all our ideas of tradition, maybe those things we've been brought up with, or looking around us, we must really get back to the scriptures.

[00:01:08] And I'd like us just to, I haven't put this actual scripture on the notes, but if you turn to the very opening verse of Paul's letter to the Philippians, he writes, well it's from him and Timothy, he says, Paul and Timotheus, the servants of Jesus Christ, to all the saints in Christ Jesus which are at Philippi, with the bishops and deacons.

And what I think is interesting there is that a letter's written to a church, it's not addressed to the minister, or the vicar, or the pastor, but it's addressed really to everyone, it's written to the saints. And if we're a believer in the Lord Jesus and we belong to Christ, if we're members of his body, then you and me, each one, we are part of those saints in any one local church or assembly. [00:02:06] So it's very interesting I think that the scripture, the apostles, they write firstly to the saints, that's to everyone, equally, not to any one man, minister. And then, of course, we have with the bishops and deacons.

And maybe we'll just have your finger in that scripture as we proceed. We have these two words, bishops, and it's from the Greek episkopos, and elders, presbytos, aged person.

Now, you may be familiar with these two words. There is a church, you might refer to the Presbyterian Church or the Episcopalian Church. And this would be an indication of perhaps their way of organization. They have in mind these bishops and elders.

[00:03:03] If we turn to Acts chapter 20, Acts chapter 20 and verse 17, we read that Paul, from Miletus, he sent to Ephesus and he called together the elders of the church. So there we have a reference to this word presbytos, aged person.

So they're clearly those of some maturity in years. And in the same passage, if you look down to verse 28, he says to these elders, the Holy Ghost has made you overseers.

So this verse, as well as the one in Titus, makes it clear that bishops and elders are one and the same person. [00:04:01] And it's just a different name given. Now, it seems clear that in Jewish tradition, the Jewish congregations, they had those to whom they looked. They looked up to the elders, the elderly ones, those with maturity and experience and a measure of moral dignity. And the Jews, they had these elders. And it would seem that where Jewish folk were converted to the Lord Jesus and churches were established on the basis of what had been a Jewish area, that those same Jewish elders continued in this role.

And where there was what we might say a church or assembly, which had been formed in a place which didn't have a Jewish background, but was a Gentile area, it would seem that in such cases, the elders, as there weren't any Jewish elders, the elders were appointed. [00:05:03] And it seems that the apostle and his delegates, they appointed elders in places where the assembly was primarily a Gentile background.

And I put in the second paragraph, they're always mentioned in the plural. And that comes out very clearly in the salutation to the letter to the Philippians. It's with the bishops and the deacons.

So it's clear that in a church, in a local setting, there was always more than one elder. And I think if we understand that, it helps us to disabuse ourselves of the notion that the structure of a church should necessarily have one man in charge.

You may say, well, you know, it doesn't really matter what name we give to that person, whether it's a minister or a vicar or a pastor or an elder. [00:06:02] Now, I'm suggesting it's not a question of names or descriptions. It's a question of principles. And quite clearly, we don't have in the New Testament examples of, we might say, a one man ministry, but rather of a plurality. And in the case of elders, it's certainly always the case that elders and bishops were always referred to. There's always more than one, the elders and bishops. And when we've been looking at this subject of the church, I hope we learn from our brother Hugh's session that there is only one church, there's one body.

And in any one place, there might be many different representations of it.

But essentially, the church comprises every true believer on the Lord Jesus in any one place. [00:07:01] Now, that being the case, the bishop, if he was such, was a bishop in a locality and therefore he was a bishop in a place.

We might say a town, to make it simple. We don't get in Scripture any idea that the bishop was over a larger region than one locality, a town.

So this notion that we have a bishop over a whole district and under him is another layer of administration is quite contrary to God's Word, the Bible. No, the elder, the bishop, his sphere of ministry and work was in a locality.

And he was such over the whole church in that locality.

And I've often wondered, you know, if we had a letter sent, such as the letter to Philippians, supposing the royal mail had a letter addressed to all the saints, let's say in Catford, [00:08:05] all the believers on the Lord Jesus in Catford with the elders, where would the royal mail deliver such a letter? Well, sadly, because of the breakdown in Christendom, it would be an impossible task. But I hope that little question might just settle in our minds this idea that a bishop would have to exercise his work over every believer in one place, say in Catford. So there's a difficulty nowadays in seeing how this works.

Nevertheless, the scriptures, if we follow them carefully, will be our guide. And then in Acts 20, 28, this verse we've already looked to, Paul says to these elders and bishops, talking about the flock, he says, over which the Holy Ghost has made you overseers. [00:09:06] And I think that's very important that we notice this. An elder or bishop is made such by the Holy Spirit, not by men. It's not a question of going to a theological college or having any other such man-made appointment. It's something which the Holy Spirit does.

So the Holy Spirit made elders and bishops such, and they were appointed either by an apostle or an apostle's delegate.

So in the case of a Jewish congregation, the elders were already in place. In the case of a Gentile congregation, the bishops and elders were appointed by either an apostle or expressly at the request of an apostle.

And this helps us now understand the question, are there apostles today?

[00:10:06] Well, we'll cover that question hopefully by the end of the session. We have to be careful.

I would say yes, there are bishops and elders today, but they are not and cannot be appointed in the same way.

We have no apostle, we have no apostles, we have no apostles' delegates, and therefore there's no one to appoint bishops and elders in the same way that they were appointed at the beginning. Another difficulty is that there is no undivided local church.

In any one place, you could not see all true believers together. Sadly, we're all split up and divided amongst ourselves. So the sphere in which the bishop and elder would do his work is no longer available to him. So for that reason, we don't have in this official sense bishops and elders today, [00:11:04] but we do have them in another sense which we'll look at very soon.

So I've written that their role is an office, though not an official position. What I mean by that is if you're following the authorised version, you occasionally come across this word office, and I think in most cases the word isn't really there. It's been used by the translators because they had sort of a certain understanding or certain view, and that's the word they use. If you look at a good translation, you don't find the word office as such. I want just to get away from this idea of an official position such as we find in organisations. We've already seen that in the church, the setup is completely different from that which we have in this world, [00:12:01] and our brother Jeff's given us a good suggestion as to why that is the case. And I think it's helpful to say that the church is not an organisation, it's an

organism. And we've already seen that it's a body, it has a head, the Lord Jesus in heaven, it's a living thing, and it's comprised every true believer, and it's being added to, it's being built up. The Lord Jesus said, I will build.

And so it's a body, a living thing, it's an organism, not an organisation.

And therefore those that are elders and bishops, they're not really fulfilling an official position as we might give someone a place in a company, a managing director or a secretary or an office manager. It's not that idea at all. But really it's a work or an area of responsibility.

And if you care to check, as I hope we will do, these references in Acts and Titus, [00:13:05] you'll see that the scripture says, if someone desires to do the work of an elder, so it's a good thing to have that desire and to do that work.

And it's a great responsibility, as Paul says, take heed therefore to yourselves, this is to the elders, and to all the flock over which the Holy Ghost has made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he, the Lord Jesus, has purchased with his own blood, or with the blood of his own. God has purchased with the blood of his own. So it's a very wonderful and, it's a responsibility.

An elder or bishop is not there to rule over the flock, he's not to consider those beneath him as mere minions, as we might have that manager with his workers, it's not that at all. [00:14:05] But he's been given a responsibility to take care of, to look after and to oversee the flock.

And the word is used, to shepherd, to pastor.

I think that's interesting, because so often we refer to, or people refer to the pastor, as if there's only one, the pastor, the minister of the church. Well, no, scripture refers to bishops and elders, plural, whose role is to shepherd and to pastor.

And, again, it's not a matter of gift, you don't have, it's not exactly akin to what our brother Jeff has brought before us, though the scripture does seem to indicate that those who are able to be elders and pastors are to be apt to teach. So one would expect it would be normal for them, perhaps, to have the gift of a teacher. [00:15:01] And we saw that little couplet, one of the gifts is pastors and teachers. I think there'll be some overlap there, although it's a different matter. Well, bishops and elders, they must have certain qualities, they must be qualified, not with a theological degree, but if you read 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1, these verses I've put down, we get this long list. Blameless, irreproachable, discreet, of good behavior, husband of one wife, sober, hospitable, not given to excess from wine, not a striker, mild, patient, and so on. Now, one thing that struck me in reading these qualities is they're not really qualities that we can say, well, these are only applicable to that upper echelon, those special people who are to be bishops or elders. We would, I would hope, we would say, well, these are qualities that any Christian should have. [00:16:07] If, for instance, someone is not blameless, or indiscreet, or not good behavior, given to excess from wine, we'd say, well, those characteristics, they're incompatible with normal Christian life. So really, we ought to read these with a view to ourselves. Not to say, well, of course, I'm not an elder, I don't aspire to the work of an elder, and therefore I don't need to follow such exaltations. No, this is something we can each take to our own heart. What it seems to be is that to be a bishop or an elder, if you're not exhibiting normal, expected qualities of a Christian, then you're disqualified from being such. Well, certainly these are things, features which we should see in all of us. But, for instance, husband of one wife.

[00:17:04] Well, in some societies, of course, where there's polygamy, that would disqualify one from being a bishop or an elder. Hospitable. Are you hospitable?

No, that's not just inviting your friends round. That's being hospitable to strangers, as well as your friends. Not given to excess from wine.

Not a striker.

So if you hit your wife, then you're disqualified from being an overseer. How can you shepherd the flock? How can you care for them if you don't have care for your own wife? And so on. So all these things. Not greedy for money. Conducting his own house well. Children in subjection. It's very clear that if a man doesn't have his own family in order, he can't look after his own family, how can he look after a bigger family with greater and more difficult difficulties? So these are all, we might say, well, they're common sense. [00:18:03] But it's spiritual common sense.

So we've seen that they can't now be appointed as such.

There are no apostles. There are no delegates. Nor would they be in a position to care for the whole Church of God in any one locality. Because there's breakdown. So officially, we might say, no, we don't have in the same way that they did in the beginning. We don't have bishops or elders.

But we have the Holy Spirit.

And it was he, divine person, God himself, who made these such.

The Holy Spirit made these elders to be elders. He gave them the ability and the care for souls. We have the same Holy Spirit. There's the same need.

So we can say, yes, there are those for whom the Holy Spirit has qualified them to be morally and in practice a bishop or an elder.

[00:19:07] And hopefully we can look at our own Christian fellowships and we can recognize those who care for and feed the flock of God, who devote themselves to the work and have these qualities that we can recognize. So although we don't have an official appointment, we don't have those that can say, you are, you and you, you're to be a bishop of this assembly. Nevertheless, I think it would be right for us to recognize those who are older in the faith.

Yes, one of the disqualifications would be not a novice, not a new Christian. No, someone that's mature in faith and has experience of the pathway and whose characteristics are not excluded from this list.

Have we not such in our Christian fellowships, those in whom we have confidence, those who love us and care for us? [00:20:07] And if need be, put us right, keep us in order. I trust we do.

So in this sense, yes, we have bishops and elders today.

Lastly, then we have deacons.

Now this word deacon comes from the Greek diakonos, which simply means servants. And these are those who serve or work in some way, some administrative way. And this word is translated variously, servant, minister or deacon.

Here again, we get this word minister, the minister of the church. And I've had people ask, are you the minister?

Or I've heard people introduce themselves as I'm the minister of such and such a place. Sounds very grand, doesn't it? I'm a minister, a capital M. But what does it mean? I'm a servant. [00:21:02] Doesn't sound quite so grand, does it? I'm just a servant. Well, we're all servants of the Lord. And there are many who serve in this way.

Now, the difference between an elder and a deacon is that the former is over, oversees the church.

Whereas the deacon, we might say that they're under them. They're appointed by the church to serve in some practical way. And Romans 16 refers to Phoebe, says she's a deaconess or a servant of the church.

So deacons, again, it's plural, is open to both brothers and sisters. Now, all manner of work and service comes under this phrase.

Whatever little work you've got to do, maybe your job is to put the chairs out. Maybe you've not even been asked to do it. [00:22:01] You see a work and you do it. Maybe you're the one to whom all correspondence comes.

Well, that's a deacon service.

You might say it's an important position, but really it's a very lowly matter. It's a service.

And maybe you're the treasurer. It's your role. You've been asked and entrusted with looking after the finances of the Christian fellowship. In that case, you're a deacon. You're acting as a deacon. And therefore, it's quite in order for the church to appoint such because you're doing something for them. Now, normally the work of a deacon would be local.

But in some cases, it might extend a bit further afield. There may be many Christians who have recognized some who do a service which covers a wider sphere. And I think that would be in order.

[00:23:03] Interestingly, deacons are given much the same moral qualifications.

And if you read the list of things which must characterize a bishop or an elder, a little bit later on, similarly or likewise, the ministers, the servants, the deacons must be, and you get an almost identical list. Not exactly the same because, of course, it's not so essential if you're doing a practical work.

Some of these moral qualities of a minister are not applicable. But nevertheless, these same general characteristics of what would be deemed normal for a Christian apply. Grave, not double-tongued.

You know, in the old cowboy films, the Red Indians, I'm probably not supposed to talk to them about

describing that way, it's not politically correct, [00:24:04] but the Red Indians always used to say, white man speaks with forked tongue. We know what that means. Double-tongued, not telling the truth, not trustworthy. You're never sure whether what you're hearing is the truth. Christians shouldn't be like that. No Christian should be like that. And a deacon, a servant, mustn't be like that. Again, not given to much wine. It doesn't say, you know, not to touch any. But not given to much wine.

Not greedy for money.

Many people, they live for work and for money. We've all got to work, we've got to earn our living, but that's not what drives us and motivates us. A Christian doesn't live in such a way. Holding the truth faithfully, without charge. Husbands of one wife, again. Conducting their house and children well. And a similar list for the women.

So again, we can think, well, I don't aspire to be a great gifted person. [00:25:05] I don't aspire to lead the church or to rule over them or to care. But I'd like to do a little bit. I'd like to do the bookstall or put the chairs down or do something practical. Well, there are still these moral qualities which are necessary. And all of us, all of us should aspire to be of service to the Lord and our brethren in some way. Well, we need to look at these qualities and challenge ourselves as to whether they're true of us. So I hope that's helpful.

There was a little side question in my brief. Do we need more organisation?

I've already said the church is not an organisation, it's an organism. So there's a short answer. No, we don't. We don't need more organisation. What we need is more dependence, more dependence on the Lord Jesus, more dependence on the Holy Spirit, [00:26:04] more bowing to scripture and following its line.

And if that's true, then we're giving way, we're being filled with the Holy Spirit, giving him a way to equip us.

And if it's his will that he wants to equip us with those qualities and gifts and abilities that enable us to be a bishop or elder, then that's a good thing. If he equips us to serve one another and serve the Lord Jesus, then that's a good thing. So let me turn the question around. Do we need elders and deacons?

Yes, we do.

Do we need more organisation? No, we don't. We're not able to organise ourselves in this way. We can't appoint an elder. We're not apostles.

We don't have their delegates and the sphere of their work is no longer available. [00:27:01] But we need them. We need those to care for us, to keep us in line, to guide us, to feed us.

And we certainly need those to serve us and to help one another and to serve the Lord. And there are always these moral qualities which, if we read them, we should don't look at the other person, we look at ourselves and we see whether we're being challenged as to these things. But then to finish, we're exhorted to give honour to such.

If we recognise brothers amongst us who are elders, they're mature in the faith and experience, they have these moral qualities and they look after us. Do we appreciate them? Do we value them? Do we account them of double honour, especially if they're apt to teach? We should be able to recognise such. They're God-given.

The Holy Spirit's made them such and we should bow to them where appropriate. [00:28:04] And in regard to deacons, we should seek to serve one another and the Lord in this way. Oh, yes.

How could I forget?

Okay. I thought this list might be on the handouts, but here it is in the first half.

All these books can be recommended. Of course, we have to say that the best book to read is the Bible. And any work of man is capable of failure. So don't treat any book as absolutely authoritative. But insofar as they base their writings on the Word of God, we're happy to recommend them and to encourage us to buy the prices as keen as we can manage.

Church of the Living God. That's a very good overview of all these subjects that we're considering today. Similarly, God's Order. [00:29:02] Are you a member and of what? There's a little book which covers really the first session. What is the church? How do you become a member? What is the meeting of the assembly? This is a very helpful book about Gavin's session.

All about speaking in tongues. We've already had a plug for that.

Office, Gift and Priesthood, I suppose, would be the book which really applies to this session. Assembly Relationships is a chapter printed out of the first book. So if you buy the first one, you don't need to buy Assembly Relationships. But it's a helpful book on a subject coming up. Beginning with Christ. It's a very good book for new believers.

We've got some free copies to give away and you can give them to your young Christian friends. Unity and Authority, to cover a subject coming up.

Similarly, Christ is seen in the offerings. Hope for the church and the Lord's coming. And then this Bible dictionary.

[00:30:02] We're almost sold out of the bargain value, but I'm sure we can get some more for tomorrow when we're together. And lastly, just to reiterate, we have a very good bookstall in Spanish. So for all you who speak Spanish, just wait for the translation. These books are for you. If you've got Spanish friends or you know someone that's likely to bump into a Spanish speaker, avail yourself of these very helpful books.