

Ecclesiastical Government (15th)

(The study for today continues looking at the officers in the congregation that the Lord Jesus Christ appointed and their particular function. This session concludes studying the word for elder and his relationship within the assembly and begins looking into the office deacon.)

Today we will conclude our study of elder as we look at the remaining verses where the word is found in the New Testament. In Titus 1:5, Paul instructed Titus to “ordain elders in every city” in Crete. If we only had this passage to consider regarding the ordination of elders we might conclude that Titus received some special office to qualify him to make the appointments himself. However, this would violate what is previously revealed in the Scriptures thus far. Though Paul and Barnabas ordained elders in the cities or congregations in the regions of Antioch in Pisidia and the surrounding areas (Acts 14:23), we discovered that it was done by the congregations by way of voting and not by Paul and Barnabas acting independent of the assemblies. Equally, such that were to be ordained were men who had been taught (Titus 1:9) obviously by other ministers and members within the various congregations already established on the island. The passage in Titus does not support the idea of an independent minister or synod setting up elders for the work of the ministry.

The next passage in order is found in James 5:14: “Is any sick among you? 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.” There are various lessons to be learned from this verse and the other passages associated with it in the context; however, they are not directly related to our current study. The passage itself does not support any particular view regarding the subject at hand. It only affirms, as other passages, that there was generally a plurality of elders or bishops in the early congregations. This verse does not give any insight as to the functions associated with the eldership.

The following verse where elder is located is in I Peter 5:1. Though this passage was included somewhat in previous lessons, we shall review it somewhat briefly. Peter, an apostle of no mean standing, not only spoke of the elders among the saints (and not over them), included himself among the elders. He did not indicate that he was superior to elders that were among the flock in which they were to feed. It is admitted that the apostles were a unique gift within the congregation of God—indeed the first gift (I Corinthians 12:28)—they did not hold some rank or superior status over and above the other ministers or the assembly of the saints. And though Peter instructs the elders to take the oversight (functioning as a bishop) it was for the purpose of feeding “the flock of God” that was among (not beneath) them. Equally, the elders were to so live among the flock in such a capacity that they were examples to the flock or congregation. As elder is also mention in verse five, some maintain that it may refer to the office, but it is generally believed that in this verse it only refers to old men. Sadly, in our modern times, this practice is lost in our society. Too often the younger people do not show respect and honor to the older generation. It is extremely alarming that all too often the children of today do not give the proper esteem and reverence to their parents. Obviously, when this is lost in the home and in society in general, is it any wonder that the servant of the Lord, the elders in the house of God, are treated as they are in our current environment?

The last two places where the Greek word for elder (πρεσβύτερος) are found in the first verse in II and III John. While various commentators have differing opinions regarding the “elect lady and her children” in II John “the wellbeloved Gaius” in III John, that does not give insight regarding the status and function of an elder.

The only other passage with reference to the word elder is I Timothy 4:14 where the Greek word πρεσβυτέριον is used regarding the presbytery or group of elders at the ordination of Timothy. (This particular word is used in three other places but it is not relative to the office within the New Testament congregation. They are Luke 22:5 and Acts 22:5 regarding the elders of Israel.) In verse twenty-two in

chapter five of this epistle, the congregation is instructed not to ordain (lay hands on) any man suddenly. Obviously, this refers to the elders or bishops of the congregation and not to some other ecclesiastical officer in a denominational hierarchical structure. It is not known when the presbytery set aside Timothy as an officer in the assembly, but in Acts chapter sixteen and verses one through three, Timothy was “well reported of by the brethren that were at Lystra and Iconium.” Likewise we know that his mother and grandmother were believers, (See Acts 16:1 and II Timothy 1:5.) and he was taught from his youth the truth of the Holy Scriptures, II Timothy 3:15. Therefore, it is likely Timothy was ordained in a congregation at Derbe or Lystra or Iconium. He may have been one of the elders ordained during Paul and Barnabas’ first journey in that area as found in Acts 14:23.

The only other words related to the subject would be *πρεσβύτερος* as found in Luke 1:18; Titus 2:2; and Philemon 1:9 which refers to older men, and *πρεσβύτις* which refers to older women. That there is a separate word designating women should be another proof that the elders within the New Testament congregation are men and not women.

Now that we have reviewed all the places where the words for bishop and elder are found in the New Testament and studied them in their relation to the office within the congregation of God, we did not find any synod or councils to suggest any ecclesiastical authority or any denominational hierarchical structure over individual congregations. Nor did we find a separate body of elders from the pastor or pastors within any congregation that ruled over the body of Christ. We did find bishops and/or elders laboring within the congregation of the Lord, even with apostles at times.

There are other Greek words that are translated as minister, teacher, pastor, shepherd, feed, evangelist, servant, steward, preach, speak, exhort, rebuke, etc., along with fellow laborer and fellow soldier that are associated with the bishop or elder, but they are essentially words that describe the functions and labors of the office instead of the name for the office itself. As is generally believed from the understanding of Ephesians 4:11 the pastor-teacher is descriptive of the bishop or elder within the congregation in our day. Paul did not designate Timothy as an evangelist; he simply told Timothy to “do the work of an evangelist,” II Timothy 4:5. In other words, an evangelist is simply an elder or bishop within the congregation engaged in a particular type of service under the authority of the local assembly.

Now we will begin considering the other office within the house of God; it is the office of deacon. The Greek word central to this office is *διάκονος*. Though it is only translated deacon three times (Philippians 1:1; I Timothy 3:8, 12) out of the thirty times used in the New Testament, the other uses will give insight as to the function of the office. It is translated minister twenty times and servant seven times. It is interesting that the majority of the times this word is used it is with reference to ministers of the gospel such as Paul, Apollos, Timothy, Tychicus, Epaphras, and other ministers. It is used a couple of times to refer to false apostles or ministers of Satan. It is even used twice in reference to Christ. Also twice it refers to civil authorities; other times to household servant; and once to followers of Christ. Therefore, our study of the office of deacon is to center around Philippians 1:1; I Timothy 3:8, 12; Acts 6:1. Also, since the word is used with reference to Phebe in Romans 16:1, we must study this word and its connection with the teaching of the New Testament relative to the place of women within the New Testament congregation.

Before studying the office of deacon *per se*, we will consider the passage in Romans 16:1. It states, “I commend unto you Phebe our sister, which is a servant of the church which is at Cenchrea.” Verse two further explains how she ministered. It says that she had “been a succourer of many, and of myself also.” The word for “succourer” is used only in this passage in the New Testament and means to be “a patroness” or “assistant.” Regardless of what all was involved in Phebe’s labors in the congregation at Cenchrea, it is obvious that she was not operating under an office or in a teaching capacity. The assembly at Corinth, some eight or nine miles away, were instructed that the women were to “keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but *they are commanded* to be under obedience, as also saith the law,” I Corinthians 14:34. Note this injunction was not just for Corinth; it was for all

“churches.” Equally, I Timothy 2:11-12 declares, “Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence.” Equally, I Timothy 3:12 speaks of the deacon being the husband of one wife. No Bible believer can deny or rightly argue against the plain teachings of the Scriptures regarding this that there is no office of deaconess within the house of God.

However, we have exhausted our time for today. The Lord willing, we will study the office of deacon more specifically in our next broadcast.