

Ecclesiastical Government (11th)

(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 the study of bishop and begins studying the word for elder.)

We closed our last podcast while studying I Peter 5:1-3 and saw in this passage some of the duties of this office: (1) feed the flock of God; (2) to do it willingly with a ready mind; (3) not to do it for filthy lucre; (4) not to be a lord over the flock; and, (5) to be an example to the flock. The Greek word for feed is ποιμαίνω and means to tend as a shepherd. It is revealing how God uses this word in the Scriptures. It is the same word translated feed in John 21:16 where the Lord instructed Peter to feed His sheep and in Acts 20:28 where the elders/overseers are to feed the congregation of God. It is also translated feed in Revelation 7:17 where the Lamb of God is to feed those “which came out of great tribulation.” I think it is interesting that this same Greek word is translated rule in Matthew 2:6 where Christ, as the Governor of God, is to rule over His people. The governorship of Christ is that of a loving shepherd rather than a boss or an administrator over the house of God or residing in some denominational headquarter. Yes, in both cases ruling is involved but the type or kind of ruling is different. The bishop or elder is to do so in such a way that the flock of God, the congregation of the Lord, is being nourished and fed and strengthened as described in Ephesians 4:12-16: “For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ: That we *henceforth* be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, *and* cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive; But speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, *even* Christ: From whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love.” Also, notice that the bishop/elder is to feed the flock “which is among you.” He is not to feed the flock beneath him. He is *among* the flock. In Romans 1:1, Paul stated that he was *separated* unto the gospel of God and not *elevated*. The officers are separated to a work among the congregation; they are not elevated to some superior position above the flock of God.

Secondly, the minister is to do it willingly. In other words, it is not just a job. It is a work that he willfully does; he enjoys laboring to nurture souls as they live in this world of sin and endure great trials.

Thirdly, he does not do the work for personal gain (filthy lucre). Without doing a full study of the word used, filthy lucre means any kind of personal gain: money; fame; prestige; or anything to climb the social ladder.

Fourthly, the bishop or elder is not to exercise dominion over the sheep of God using physical or psychological force. Listen to the instructions given by our Lord when James and John desired a superior position over their fellow disciples. He said to them, “Ye know that the princes of the Gentiles exercise dominion over them, and they that are great exercise authority upon them. But it shall not be so among you: but whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister; And whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant: Even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many.” (Matthew 20:25-28. See also Mark 10:42-45.)

Fifthly, the officers within the congregation are to live before the membership so that their lives can be seen and they are to be examples of a true follower of Christ. The Greek word for ensample or example in this passage is τύπος. It comes from the Greek word for a die, as a stamp or some likeness. Our English word *type* comes from this word. The minister is to so live among the congregation so that he can say with the apostle Paul, “Be ye followers of me, even as I also am of Christ,” I Corinthians 11:1.

Previously, he had instructed the congregation at Corinth in his fatherly manner by saying, “Wherefore I beseech you, be ye followers of me,” I Corinthians 4:16. May the Lord Jesus Christ give us ministers after His heart that lead by example and not drive the sheep like a harsh taskmaster. Some person acting as ecclesiastical officer hid away somewhere in a denominational (or congregational) office never to be seen by the congregation (with possible exception of an hour or two during the week) is not the idea portrayed in the Scriptures. It is the idea of a shepherd or a servant living among the people or sheep of the Lord so that the people will emulate him as he seeks to be like Christ. Also, allow me to remind you that it is a calling that he does willingly.

Now let us begin looking at the word for elder. The Greek word is πρεσβύτερος and the basic meaning is one who is older in age or carries the idea of senior in rank. A great deal of history is behind this word and its interpretation and/or usage within Christianity. For our purposes, we must limit our study to the New Testament as to its meaning within the congregation of the Lord. The Greek word is used sixty-six times in the New Testament. Thirty-five times it refers to the religious leaders in Israel which were generally considered to be older men. Twelve times this word is used to designate heavenly creatures in the book of Revelation. Two times (I Timothy 5:1 and I Peter 5:5) it appears to be used regarding older men in the congregation. Seventeen times it refers to officers in the congregation of God.

The first place we find this word used to indicate an officer within the assembly of the Lord is in Acts 11:30 when the congregation in Syrian Antioch sent assistance to the brethren in Judea by Barnabas and Paul. At first glance it might be assumed that these elders were those in Jerusalem since verse twenty-seven mentioned prophets from that city that came to Antioch. However, the dearth or drought extended beyond Jerusalem and Acts 9:31 informs us that there were congregations “throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria.” Therefore, it is likely that this support was distributed among various congregations in Judea and so designated by referring to the ministers or bishops of the assemblies. It is not uncommon to hear of a congregation being so designated as where pastor “so and so” preaches or as pastor “so and so’s” congregation. Obviously, it is the assembly of the Lord Jesus Christ, but so designated by the pastor(s) or officer(s) who minister there.

Secondly, we find “elders” mentioned in connection with the New Testament assembly in Acts 14:23. Paul and Barnabas went back through the various territories and cities of Asia Minor “confirming the souls” and “exhorting” the believers “to continue in the faith” and endure the trials and afflictions of the gospel. At that time they “ordained ... elders in every church” (congregation). Likewise they prayed and fasted and commended them to the Lord, on whom they believed. This passage gives us insight as to how men were placed in the assembly as elders. The Greek word for “ordained” is χειροτονέω [cheirotoneō / khi-rot-on-eh'-o] and means to stretch or reach forth the hand as in voting. It is the same word used in II Corinthians 8:19 where a certain brother was “chosen of the churches to travel with” Paul. (It is not certain who this brother was.) Nevertheless, it appears from the use of the word in Acts that the congregations voted on who they wanted to oversee them. And it is not unlikely that these men were generally (though not always) older men as from the meaning of the word for elder and the qualifications as listed in I Timothy and Titus. It is generally agreed that as the congregation at Antioch in Syria acted this way in sending Paul and Barnabas as recorded in Acts 13:1-4. The congregations in Asia Minor chose men that they believed were called by the Lord to oversee or guide them in the Scriptures. Congregations, denominational boards, Bible colleges, seminaries, missionary societies, or any other institution do not make a biblical New Testament minister. He must first be called by God. Afterward, the congregation (and only the congregation) may ordain or choose him as a minister. If a congregation makes such a selection and the man has not been called by the Lord for such functions, the assembly has only put a man in office that God has not called. Therefore, the Lord does not sanction the action of the assembly and does not consider him as a “God called minister.” As stated before, the only ecclesiastical authority is the congregation as it functions according to the teaching of the Holy Scriptures. Anything

else is manmade and not of God. Also, this passage clearly indicates that the officer (elder or bishop) was selected from among the congregation, by the congregation, and to minister within the congregation.

This concludes our time for today. The Lord willing we will continue our study of elders in the New Testament assembly in our next lesson.