

Overseers and Bishops

BY DAVID DOCKERY

THE GREEK TERM *episkopos* has the meaning of “superintendent” or “overseer.” In ancient times the term described leadership positions not only in the church, but in the community or military as well. In Athens the governors of conquered states received this title. Also in classical Greek Homer employed the term in the *Iliad*, applying it to the gods (xxii.225), as did Plutarch (*Camillus* 5).

Peter applied the word to Christ by calling Him “the Shepherd and overseer of your souls” (1 Pet. 2:25, writer’s translation). The Apostle Paul used the term *episkopos* (bishop) alternatively with *presbyteros* (elder) in Titus 1:5,7; 1 Tim. 3:1; 4:14; 5:17,19.

The earliest offices in the churches were elders and deacons. The idea of elders in the New Testament seems to have developed from Jewish roots, particularly the synagogue. *Elder* was a term of honor and respect for an older person. Egyptians used the term *elder* for elected agents of village councils who carried out judicial and administrative duties. The Old Testament employed the idea of elder for a spokesman or leader of a household. Exodus 3:16,18 describes the elders of Israel as men who were representatives of the nation. By the time of Jesus, the elders were drawn

from the Sadducees and composed the ruling Sanhedrin. The leaders of the synagogues also carried the title “elders.”

New Testament Usage

Elders appeared early in the life of the church, alongside apostles, prophets, and teachers. They were associated with James in the leadership of the Jerusalem church (Acts 11:30; 21:18) after the manner of the synagogue. An apostle could serve as an elder (1 Pet. 5:1), but elders were not necessarily apostles.

During the first missionary journey (see map, p. 57), Paul appointed elders in the churches (Acts 14:23). They were distinct from the apostles but obviously served as key leaders (Acts 15:2,4,6,22; 16:4). So we can say that the term translated “elder” referred both to a place of leadership in the church and probably had reference to one’s age as well.

When Paul addressed the Christians at Philippi, he spoke

Below: A stone relief of the Lord’s Supper, probably Byzantine. The bishop’s role in the ancient church included leading the Lord’s Supper celebration.

LESSON REFERENCE

ETBS: 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1





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of bishops/overseers and deacons (Phil. 1:1). Although some scholars would contend that the terms “bishop” and “elder” refer to two different offices, seeing the words as interchangeable seems to be more accurate. In addition, the word “pastor/shepherd” (*poimen*), which focuses on function, can also be a synonym for “elder” and “bishop” (see Acts 20:17-30). Nowhere in the New Testament is more than one pastoral office suggested. When Paul told Titus to appoint elders, he made no mention of bishops or pastors. The apostle set out similar qualifications for bishops in 1 Timothy 3, but did not discuss elders or pastors.

We can perhaps distinguish an emphasis in the terms by saying that elders represent the man’s maturity, the bishop or overseer is the name of the office, and pastor/shepherd describes the function. Evidently, all three terms can refer to the same persons. These leaders served by teaching and preaching (1 Tim. 5:17); overseeing (Acts 20:17,28; 1 Pet. 5:2), caring for the flock of God (Acts 20:28); and leading or ruling (Rom. 12:8). The Greek term *archein*, “to rule,” in a hierarchical sense, however, is not used to describe those leaders. Generally, the term occurs in the plural, suggesting the possibility (though not the necessity) of a group of elders/bishops in a congregation (Acts 20:17,28; Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 4:14; Jas. 5:14; 1 Pet. 5:1-2). The “elder” in 2 John and 3 John refers to a highly esteemed person in the church. The 24 elders who appear in the Book of Revelation probably are representatives of the church as a whole in their adoration and praise of God and the Lamb (Rev. 4; 5; 19). We can say that during the lifetime of the apostles there appears to be no distinction between elders, bishops/overseers, or pastors.

Qualifications

Though the concept of elder/bishop likely originated in Jewish sources, the New Testament church adopted and adapted the role and enlisted the service of those who were qualified to serve. In some detail, Paul listed the essential qualifications in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1. Above all, an elder/bishop is to be above reproach. Moreover, he must be of blameless moral character; have a hospitable nature; be patient; have a life characterized by integrity, sobriety, maturity, wisdom, and sound-mindedness. He must manage his family well and have the qualities and abilities to teach the Word of God. Paul’s listing the details for the position points to the fact that not every man, not even every older man, was qualified for this role. “If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer, he desires a noble task” (1 Tim. 3:1, NIV). In sum we can say an elder/bishop/pastor must be of wholesome Christian character and a good teacher.

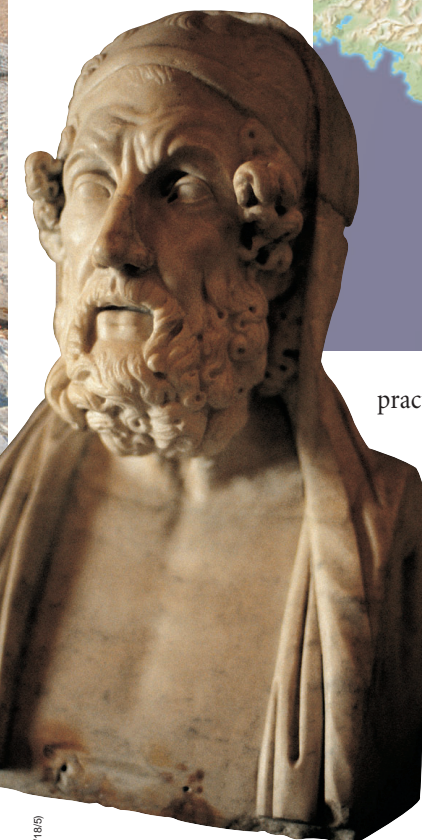
Later Developments

By the second century a clear distinction began to develop between the office of bishop and elder as evidenced in the letters of Ignatius, himself the sole bishop of Antioch. By around A.D. 120, a role for a monarchical bishop began to emerge.

Each church had a bishop, who was assisted by a group of elders and deacons. Thus a threefold order of church offices developed. The bishop served as leader, chief administrator, pastor, teacher, and worship leader— particularly in the celebration of the Lord’s Supper. Also, the bishops evidently were the chief guardians of the church’s doctrine and

Left: Agora at Philippi. Paul addressed Philippi's bishops/overseers and deacons.

Below: Bust of Homer, who used the Greek term *episkopos* to refer to the gods.



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practice, assuming the role and responsibility of first-century apostles, even as successors to the apostles. In this era of the ancient church, Ignatius even suggested that the bishop's presence was essential for the church to meet. Nothing was to be done in the church without the bishop (*Magnesians* 7:1; *Polycarp* 4:1).

Yet other writings of the second century do not uniformly support the picture drawn by Ignatius and Clement. Justin Martyr referred to the president and the deacons. Earlier, the *Didache* seemed to present a more congregational form of government. Polycarp and the Shepherd of Hermes did not stress the monarchical bishop in the same way as Ignatius.

Yet by the end of the second century, the common pattern of bishop, elders, and deacons seems to have been established almost everywhere. Primarily in reaction to sects and heretics, the role of the authoritative bishop developed. In the early third century Cyprian, the disciple of Tertullian, regarded bishops as the true successors of the apostles. Part of the bishop's job was to decide what orthodox doctrine would be, who could belong to the church, and who could be restored.

The responsibility of the bishop was to lead worship as a priest of God. Thus Cyprian was the initiator of the concept of the priesthood. According to him the bishops constituted a college called the episcopate. The unity of the bishops best demonstrated the unity of the church. Submission to the bishop was a picture of submission to God. Though

the hierarchical bishop was in full bloom in Cyprian's writings, there was yet no primary role for the bishop of Rome.

In the next century, though, Jerome and Chrysostom commented that the supremacy of a single bishop arose by custom rather than by the Lord's appointment. A few years later they, along with Augustine, recognized the need for the monarchical bishop to address heresy and schism, to protect orthodoxy, and to promote the unity of the church.

By the end of the fourth century, the idea of the elder/bishop had developed significantly from the teaching of the New Testament. Certainly, the initial goal of safeguarding church doctrine and dividing up the tasks of the elder/bishop with some key responsibilities for the elder and some for the bishop seems understandable. Yet, the New Testament gives no hint that the apostles or their associates (Timothy and Titus) established a provision for personal successors. Let us then learn from the teachings of the New Testament and seek to avoid the hierarchical patterns of the church's early centuries as we seek leadership in our churches in the 21st century. **B**

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