

Elder Questions and Answers

I. What are elders?

A. Hebrew background. The practice of older men offering wise rule and council was common in the Ancient Near East. Elders (Heb: *zaqan*) existed among the Egyptians (Gn. 50:7), among the Moabites and Midainites (Nm. 22:7), and among the Israelites since the time of the exodus (Ex. 3:16). No formal explanation is given of their origin or duties, but it is clear that they helped spread practices, laws, and judgments to the people and made decisions within their sphere of authority (Ex 12:21, Dt. 21:4, Jg, 11:11, etc).

Essence: The main point here is that the concept of eldership was firmly rooted in the minds of Jews.

B. The term “elder” in the New Testament.

The word for “elder” in the NT is *presbuteros*. As one might expect, it is a derivative of the word *presbutes* “old.” It is used 66 times in the NT. As indicated in the word study below, it can refer to someone who is literally older, as an older brother (Lk. 15:25), or people who lived in ancient times (Hb. 11:2). As an extension of the fact that in tribal societies older people were respected advisers, *presbuteros* can refer to someone who holds the office of elder; in Israel (Mk. 14:43), in the Church (Acts 11:30), or even in heaven (Rev. 4:4).

The most common usage in the NT is as a reference to the elders of Israel (30X). Most of the time, these elders would belong to a Sanhedrin (council of 23 elders ruling synagogues in major cities outside Jerusalem) or to the Great Sanhedrin or Council (71 people composed of the High Priest, the Chief Priests, and lay Elders who ruled Jerusalem). The second most common reference is to church elders (15X). Of course it is the application of the term to the Church that concerns us.

Essence: The Greek term for elder is used in a number of ways, most often to describe members of the Sanhedrin and Church Elders as we usually think of them.

C. Mention of church elders in the New Testament. Most Christians would probably think of the NT as mentioning church elders in 1 Timothy, and maybe Acts. But the term is a lot more widespread than that. A reference to church elders appears in every NT literary genre after the gospels.

Acts. In Acts, Luke refers to elders often and in the plural. Luke refers to the elders of the Jerusalem church who acted in the Jerusalem Council (15:22) and received gifts for the poor (11:30). Luke also records that Paul and Barnabus “appointed elders in every church” from their first missionary journey (14:23), and records an extended charge from Paul to the elders in Ephesus (Acts 20:17). Finally, Paul reports to the Apostles and elders of the Jerusalem church (21:18).

Pauline Epistles. Paul gives us our most detailed picture of who elders were and what they did. He gives requirements for elders and deacons in 1 Tim. 3:1-7, and for elders alone in Titus 1:5-9. Paul also mentions that “the elders who rule well are worthy of double honor; especially those who give themselves to preaching

and teaching” (1 Tim. 5:17), and instructs the church not to charges against an elder unless they come from two or three witnesses (1 Tim. 5:19).

General Epistles. It is not just Paul and Luke that mention elders. James tells his readers that the sick should call for the elders to anoint them with oil and pray for them (5:14). Peter instructs elders to shepherd the flock, not because of compulsion, or just to make money, or as a tyrant, but as loving eager examples (1 Pet. 5:1-5). There is also a reference in Hebrews 13:17 that likely refers to elders, but does not use the actual word *presbyteros*.

Revelation. John describes 24 thrones surrounding the throne of God that were for 24 elders (Rev. 4:1-6). Who these elders were, or what their function was is not clearly stated.

*Essence: The concept of church elders occurs throughout the NT in a variety of writers and contexts; they are to have certain **qualifications**, they are to **rule**, sometimes they are **paid**, and they are almost always portrayed as a **plurality**.*

D. Confusing Terminology. If the NT has so much to say about elders and it is so clear, why do we have so many forms of church government? One reason is that there are a number of terms used to describe church leadership. Some of these terms refer to the same thing, others refer to different things. Here are some of the terms that get confused in the NT.

1. Bishop. The Greek term for ‘bishop’ is *episkopos*. It means ‘overseer’, and that is how it is translated in the NIV. The term is used 4 times in the NT as a reference to the church office (Acts 20:28, Php 1:1, 1 Tim. 3:2, and Titus 1:7), and once as a metaphorical reference to Christ as the overseer of the souls of believers (1 Pet. 2:25).

- **The role of bishops.** In many Christian contexts, a bishop is understood as someone above elders, who **oversees several congregations**. This is true in Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Methodist, and Anglican churches. In addition to this, Catholic, Orthodox, and Anglican theologians believe their bishops have **apostolic succession**. That is, they were ordained by people who were ordained by people who were ordained by the apostles themselves. Other denominations (Presbyterian, Baptist, Free church, Bible church, etc) see bishops as **identical to elders**.
- **Are Bishops identical to Elders?** Those who see bishops as over elders would point to biblical figures like Timothy, Titus, and James exercising authority over multiple congregations as apostolic delegates. Indeed, they do seem to do this, appointing elders in churches (Titus 1:5), and holding councils between churches (Acts 15). But were they bishops? Biblical use would suggest that they were not. Note the following evidence that elders and Bishops are the same:
 - **Paul instructs Titus to appoint elders and then immediately describes them as bishops (Titus 1:5-7).**
 - **When Paul called the elders to the church at Ephesus to meet him, he described their position as overseers (Acts 20:17,28).**

- **We never see elders and bishops mentioned as though they refer to different people.**
- **Why does Paul call them by two names?** Some suggest that elder refers to the person, and bishop describes the office. Possible, but a more likely theory is presented by Gene Getz, who says that ‘elder’ was a natural term to use when addressing a context with Jews (remember they had elders in their history), and ‘bishop’ was a natural term to use in a more gentile context, since its literal meaning ‘over-seer’ describes the role. Thus the word bishop is used in Ephesus, Crete, and Philippians, which were founded in more pagan contexts, and the word ‘elder’ elsewhere (1989:137).
- **Conclusion.** A bishop then, is the same thing as an elder. Does this do away with Episcopalian government? Not conclusively. James, Timothy, and Titus did seem to exercise some level of authority over more than one church. But they were never called bishops. Thus the question of whether a bishop and an elder are the same thing is settled, but whether people should oversee more than one congregation is more related to whether someone was supposed to succeed these apostolic delegates.

2. Pastor. The word ‘Pastor’ comes from the Greek word *poimen*. *Poimen* is used 18 times in the NT, and 17 of those times it is translated ‘Shepherd.’ Only once is it translated ‘Pastor’ (“Pastor-teachers” Eph. 4:11), and in this context it is not described at all. This may sound shocking to most modern evangelical ears. Most of us think of a pastor as the ‘main office’ in a church, and elders or bishops as secondary. So it might be surprising to see that elders, bishops, and deacons are mentioned far more times than the Pastor is. Is Pastor a legitimate office? In a word, yes. Even the references where *poimen* is translated ‘shepherd’ are often metaphorical for guarding and feeding God’s flock (cf. Mt. 9:36; Mk. 14:27; Jn. 10:2,11; 1 Pet. 2:25). In addition, the verb ‘to shepherd’ (*poimaino*) is used to describe guiding, guarding, and feeding the church. It is commanded of church leaders in Acts 20:28 and 1 Pet. 5:2...and in both of those passages, **the people it is commanded of are elders.** Hence not only are bishops the same thing as elders, pastors really are as well.

3. Deacon. That deacons were not elders, can be seen from the fact that Titus is given a list of qualifications for both elder/overseers and for deacons. The word ‘deacon’ refers most often to a willing servant who waited tables. See the appendix below for a more detailed description of the biblical description of deacons.

Essence: In biblical terminology, an elder is a bishop is a pastor. Though we often use the term ‘Pastor’ to describe paid clergy, and ‘elder’ to describe laymen, this distinction is practical rather than biblical.

II. How do elders fit into different types of church government? There are three simple types of Church government, and two sub-models that are the most popular.

A. Episcopalian. As the name suggests, this model is government by bishops (remember the greek word for bishop is episcopos). In other words, multiple congregations are 'ruled' by one bishop, and the bishops are ruled by archbishops. The most extreme example of this is the Roman Catholic church, but Anglicans, the Orthodox, and even Methodists follow this form of government. In this model the elders are within the local church, and are ruled by bishops. The elders may be called priests, elders, pastors, etc.

B. Presbyterian. As the name suggests, at its most basic level this model is government by elders (presbyteros). In the case of large Presbyterian churches, this means the church is governed by a body of elders usually called a '**session**', several regional congregations form the **presbytery** (usually the Sr. Minister plus an elder from each church plus regional seminary professors), several presbyteries may form a **General Assembly**, or there may be an intermediary called a **Synod**. The general assembly is the highest court in Presbyterian government. Presbyterian and Reformed churches use this form of government. In this model, the elders are at all levels from the Local Church to the General Assembly, and are called elders.

C. Congregational. Once again as the name suggests, this is rule by the congregation. The congregation has the final say in matters. This may mean pure democracy, where everyone votes on everything, or it may be a representative form, where the whole congregation only votes on major decisions, or representatives vote for them. The key here is that there is no individual (bishop) or group (presbytery, general assembly) above the local church to steer it. Many churches such as Baptists, Bible, Evangelical Free, Charismatic Churches, Pentecostals, even some Presbyterians, etc. would call themselves congregationally governed because there is no court or person above the local church. However, these churches would also fall into one of the following sub-models:

- **Plural Elder/Congregational.** This is the model followed by Bible churches, Evangelical Free churches, many Baptist churches, and even the Presbyterian Church of America. These churches are led by a board of elders. While they almost always have a Sr. Pastor, he is usually "first among equals" on the elder board, meaning he sets the agenda, but only has one vote and should work as a team-member. The elder board has the general oversight of the church, but the actual church body has the final say. They vote on issues like calling a Pastor, budgets, etc. and can overturn a decision by the elder board. The elders here are usually called "elders".
- **Single Elder/Congregational.** This is the model followed by Charismatic churches, by Pentecostal churches, and by many Baptist churches. In this model, there is no 'elder board.' Rather, the Pastor is seen as the single elder of the church. In most of these churches, the Pastor is not a 'law unto himself', as the ultimate control of the church is congregational. He may even have a board of Deacons or trustees, but they are not called elders. Because the elder of the church is normally called 'the Pastor' many of the members of these churches might think they do not have elders.

*Essence: There are three main forms of Church government. Each of these forms have a position they call 'elder.' Church bodies can be governed by over-arching individuals (**bishops**), by groups of elders (**presbyteries**), or by themselves (**congregational**). Congregations that totally rule themselves are usually led by a board of elders, or by a Pastor who may have the help of deacons or trustees.*

III. What do elders do? Scripture has much more to say about who elders should be than what they are to do. This is helpful, because it gives churches in different contexts the flexibility to structure their elders differently.

A. Do elders have authority? The one thing that we do know about elders from Scripture is that they have authority in the church. They are not simply extra hands to do the work. We can see this from the Old Testament background of the term. In Israel and other Ancient Near Eastern cultures, the elders were a council of men who led a town or clan. The fact that the term 'elders' is suddenly used in the NT with no introduction tips us off to the fact that NT elders had largely the same responsibility. In addition to this, the fact that elders are also described as 'overseers' also shows us that they are to lead. Finally, Scripture describes them as ruling. In 1 Tim. 5:17, he notes that the elders "who rule well are worthy of double honour, especially those who give their time to the teaching and preaching." Peter also cautions them not to be "domineering over those in your charge" (1 Pet. 5:3).

B. What is their basic job? We see elders doing, and admonished to do, a number of things in the NT.

- Handling money (Acts 11).
- Working on doctrinal councils (Acts 15).
- Guarding the church from doctrinal heresy (Acts 20:28; Titus 1:9).
- Teaching (1 Tim. 5:7; Titus 1:9).
- Lead the church as good stewards (1 Tim. 5:17; Titus 1:7; 1 Peter 5:2)
- Visiting the sick (Jms 5:14).

How do we summarize their responsibilities? Alexander Strauch has suggested that the responsibilities of elders can best be described by the metaphor of 'Shepherding a flock' (1995:15-34). Just as a shepherd is to feed, protect, and lead the sheep, giving special care to those who need it, so the elders should care for the church. If this sounds like the role of a Pastor, remember that a Pastor is an Elder.

IV. What are the requirements for an Elder? There are a couple of places where the requirements of an elder are directly mentioned (1 Tim. 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9). There are probably a number of ways to categorize these. I would put them under three general headings:

A. Their character has to be godly:

- Above reproach (1T; T)
- Well thought of by outsiders (1T)
- Upright (T)
- Holy (T)
- Sober-minded (1T); disciplined (T)

- Self-controlled (1T; T)
 - Respectable (1T)
 - Hospitable (1T; T)
 - Not arrogant (T)
 - Not a drunkard (1T; T)
 - Not violent (1T; T)
 - Not quarrelsome (1T); not quick tempered (T)
 - Not a lover of money (1T); not greedy for gain (T)
 - Not a recent convert (1T)
 - Lover of good (T)
- B. Their **family life** is to be in check:
- Husband of one wife (1T; T)¹
 - Must manage his own house well (1T)
 - Keeping his children submissive (1T); children are believers, not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination (T)
- C. They have to be able to **handle** the **word of God**:
- Able to teach (1 T); able to give instruction in sound doctrine (T)
 - Able to refute those who contradict sound doctrine (T)
 - Holding to the trustworthy word as taught (T)

Essence: Elders are to lead the church, and while their job is not specifically listed, the requirements that they have good character, good family life, and an ability to teach, are.

Conclusion

The concept of elder is found throughout the Bible. The elders led cities and towns in Ancient Israel, they led councils during the time of Christ, and they led the church in the New Testament era. The New Testament gives a fairly consistent view of elders in the church: They are leaders, they are a plurality, they have qualifications, they may be paid or unpaid, and they are called Bishops (overseers) and Pastors as well as elders. They are given the job of leading the church, protecting its doctrine and people, and dealing with administration. In essence, they are shepherds.

¹ For a discussion of the meaning of this phrase, see Appendix I.

Appendices and Bibliography

Appendix I: Can an Elder have been divorced?

Perhaps the most debated qualification for elder is that he be ‘the husband of one wife.’

Literally this says he must be “a one-woman man” (*mias gunaikos andra*), and we should note that this requirement is mentioned in both passages (1 Tim 3:1-9; Titus 1:5-9) stating the qualifications for elder, and in the passage stating the qualifications for deacon (1 Tim. 3:12). Debate rages over this passage. Does it exclude those from eldership who are divorced?

There are three main position on this issue, which get progressively narrower:

1. This prohibits only polygamy (one woman at a time). Because polygamy and immorality were rampant, Paul is saying that one with multiple wives or mistresses is forbidden from the office.

2. This prohibits divorce and polygamy (one living woman). Paul is prohibiting both those who have mistresses/extra wives, and those who have been involved in divorce, both of which were realities in NT times.

3. This prohibits divorce, polygamy, and remarriage (one woman ever). This view, held by commentator and Patristics scholar J.N.D. Kelly, says that Paul is prohibiting remarriage for any reason whatsoever. Thus remarrying after the death of your wife excludes you from eldership.

Evaluation

I can't pontificate on this issue, but here are some thoughts on this requirement:

(1) In most western societies Polygamy is not practiced or even legal any more. Some note that the background of the passage is not western, and therefore argue that this relates to polygamy only. This seems to make sense in Africa, for example, where polygamy is a reality and many men struggle with the desire to gain status through more than one wife.

(2) The problem with this, is that polygamy was forbidden by Roman law (Getz 1989:146). Hence the passage probably isn't referring to polygamy (the possession of more than one wife) proper.

(3) However, concubines were a regular part of Roman life, as were mistresses. Hence Getz (1989:146) concludes that Paul is referring to extramarital relationships of any kind. In other words, this is a general requirement that the man is to be above reproach in faithfulness to his wife.

(4) If one accepts this, does the passage have any relation at all to divorce? The objection is normally that it is not fair to punish someone forever for one mistake. While the passage likely was not written primarily to speak to the issue of divorce, we should note that at least one other requirement—*having believing children who are not wild or unruly*—also seems to be of a

more lasting nature. Moreover, one is probably more in control over marriage than of whether or not children become believers. Hence we probably should be careful about using this verse as a once-for-all proof text on divorce and eldership, but in the end it may prohibit divorced elders in principle.

(5) We should also note that there are infinite complexities to this issue. How does this relate to divorce before one becomes a believer? What about a 1 Corinthians 7 situation, where a believer is abandoned by his unbelieving spouse? Is divorce OK so long as he is not remarried? What do you tell the African church leader who had three wives when he became a Christian? Which ones should he expel? Is it OK to become an elder if a man did not divorce his wife, but had an affair? What if his unfaithfulness was before marriage? Does a pornography problem exclude one from being a one woman man?

Now...just because obedience to a command is difficult or complex, doesn't mean it's not a command. Nevertheless, I think the complexities show us that it is difficult to make this a rigid requirement unless we go all the way on everything: No remarriage for any reason, and unfaithfulness of any kind at any time prohibits one from eldership. And I'm not sure that is what Paul intended.

It is interesting that though Paul has some very specific 'not's in his list of requirements (not a drunkard, not quarrelsome, not violent, not greedy) he does not say 'not divorced'. Perhaps the reason is that like some other things about elders (i.e. the exact job that they do; their number, etc) Paul is leaving things general because that is best. Thus it may be best to see this as a general requirement that an elder be known as someone who over the years has shown loving commitment to his wife.

(6) What about Kelly's idea that a man not be remarried for any reason, including the death of his wife? Kelly takes his position from 1 Timothy 5:9, where Paul says "let a widow be enrolled if she is not less than 60 years of age, having been the wife of one husband." Kelly argues that "the wife of one husband" here clearly means not remarried after divorce or death, and points out that the words here are the exact feminine equivalent of husband of one wife (literally "a one man woman"). This is a powerful argument, but I think there are a couple of factors that argue against it. First, this would make the requirement completely about marital status, and not about marital fidelity. I say this because that is certainly how Kelly sees 1 Tim. 5:9 functioning. However, since Paul's comments about the elder relate to character, I think it's safe to say that his main point is about fidelity and could relate to the character flaws that a divorce might betray rather than only relating to marital status. Secondly, it is possible that the requirement in 1 Tim. 5:9 is also about fidelity. In other words, it is possible that Paul is saying to enroll only widows who were known as faithful to their husbands. At first the following context seems to suggest otherwise, for Paul speaks of younger widows because "when their passions draw them away from Christ, they desire to remarry." However, Paul goes on to advise the younger widows to remarry. The point is that it is not the remarriage that is bad, but the breaking of a vow of widowhood. Thus Paul may not be stipulating for older widows that they never have been remarried, but rather that they were faithful to their marriage or marriages. And he is probably suggesting the same thing for the elder.

(7) We should also note something else: Does this *require* that a man be **married** before he can be an elder? Does this require that the elder be a **man**? We should be careful about turning these prohibitions into positives. Otherwise we might look at the other requirements and conclude that to be an elder a man must have children and must drink wine.

Conclusion. Perhaps one of the most well rounded statements on this comes from the website of Henderson Hills Baptist Church (s.v. "The 21 Qualifications of Elders"). They conclude that Paul's requirement "speaks to the subject of fidelity in marriage, not to marital status" and that "this phrase addressed fidelity in marriage, not divorce." However, they go on to say "we should not assume from this that divorce is inconsequential or insignificant...When selecting an elder or deacon, a divorce should be seen as a 'red flag' in the candidate's past. Since an elder must be a good steward of his family, a recent divorce disqualifies a man from serving as an elder. However, divorce is not the unpardonable sin. For example, a man may have divorced many years ago. Since then, he may have remarried and lived an exemplary and mature Christian life. This man may now enjoy a godly marriage, raising children who love the Lord. When we take this man's total life experience into consideration, the divorce should not disqualify him from considerations as an elder or deacon. However, if the divorce was recent, or if there is any question about his relationship to his wife or leadership of his family, the man must not be considered for appointment."

Appendix II: Word Study of ππππππππππ

Word: *presbyteros*.

Definition: Elder.

Usage

Usage of the word in the NT suggests the following categories:

I. *Presbyteros* could refer in a literal sense to someone who has been alive longer than others.

A. This could refer to someone who is “older” than others present.

- Luke 15:25** refers to the older son, in the story of the prodigal son. In v.12 the other son is called “younger,” so we know *presbuteros* here refers to someone older, not a position.
- 1 Tim. 5:1-2** prohibits Timothy from rebuking older men harshly, or treating older women with disrespect. Once more the adjective “younger” (*neoterous*) is used to describe contrasting parties, showing that this is not referring to office-holders.

B. This could also refer to someone who was alive a long time ago.

- The author of Hebrews refers to the faith of the “ancients” (11:2) and goes on to discuss Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, etc. So he is not referring to someone who necessarily lived to be old (Abel and Enoch had their lives cut short), nor to any official office-holders because these men existed under vastly different circumstances. Rather he is referring to someone who is “old” in the sense that they lived long ago.

II. *presbuteros* could refer in a more figurative sense to someone who held an office with the title of “elder.”

A. There were elders in Israel. The term is used about 30 times this way in the NT, primarily in the Gospels. These elders are often mentioned in conjunction with (though distinguished from) the Chief Priests and teachers of the Law (Mk. 14:53). The elders of Israel are portrayed as passing down legal ceremony such as hand washing (Mt. 15:2). They are also consistently identified in the synoptics as those who are (along with others) responsible for Jesus’ death (Mt. 27:12).

- Mt. 15:2 Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders.*
- Mk 8:31 The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders.*

B. There were elders in the Church. These elders first appear about half-way through the book of Acts (11:30) where the majority of uses of *presbuteros* shifts from elders of Israel to elders in the church. Upon initial examination, it appears that these elders were appointed by the Apostles and their helpers (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5). They seem to have been responsible for financial gifts given to the church (Acts 11:30). They are described as “those who direct the affairs of the Church (1 Tim. 5:17). Some elders taught and

preached, others apparently did not (1 Tim. 5:17). The Apostles may have been called elders as well. Peter calls himself a fellow elder (sumpresbyteros) in 1 Pet. 5:1. John also writes as “the elder” (2 Jn. 1:1; 3 Jn.1:1) which Zane Hodges says “could be used to designate any Apostle or other original witness to the life and teachings of the Lord Jesus” (1983: 905). On the other hand, the apostles seem to be distinguished from the elders of the church at Jerusalem in Acts (15:2,4) when the Jerusalem Council is described in Acts. This may imply that they were not church elders, or it may be that Luke wanted to point out their presence.

- *1 Tim. 5:17 The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honour, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching.*
- *Acts 14:23 Paul and Barnabus appointed elders for them in each church...*

C. There are elders in heaven. 12 Times in Revelation John mentions the 24 elders that are in heaven. These encircle the throne (Rev. 5:11) and worship (4:10).

- **Rev. 4:10** *the twenty-four elders fall down before him who sits on the throne...*
- **Rev. 5:11** *They encircle the throne and the living creatures and the elders.*

Other Sources

Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich, and Danker.

Bauer gives the following categories for *presbuteros*:

1. Of age
 - a. Of an individual person as older.
 - b. Of a period of time (here he puts Heb. 11:2).
2. As designation of an official.
 - a. Among the Jews
 - a. for members of local councils in individual cities.
 - b. for members of a group in the Sanhedrin.
 - b. Among the Christians
 - a. Elder in the church.
 - b. The enigmatic references in 2 and 3 John 1:1.

His distinction among the Jewish references is helpful. He also seems unclear about the references in Revelation.

New Bible Dictionary

s.v. “elders”

Taylor notes that elders existed among the Egyptians (Gn. 50:7), and the Moabites and Midainites (Nm. 22:7), and among the Israelites since the time in Egypt (Ex. 3). With regards to the elders of Israel in the NT, he notes “by NT times the ‘elders of the people’ shared with the Chief Priests the power of determining religious affairs and, if necessary, of expulsion from the synagogues.

s.v. “presbyter, presbytery”

Beckwith classifies the “traditions of the elders” from Mk. 7:3ff in the same category as the

“ancients” in Hebrews 11:2. Thus the emphasis is not on an office, but the antiquity of the tradition as handed down. This may well be a possibility. Beckwith also explains the usage of the combination “Priests and elders”. Together these compose the 71 members of the Sanhedrin, which is presided over by the High Priest, and was divided into Priests and ruling laymen, called “elders.” The association with “teachers of the law” which may have been identical with Priests and Elders, is that they needed a knowledge of the Law to make correct judgments.

Beckwith further notes that Elders were ordained by their teachers (not by popular vote), usually with the help of a couple of others with the laying on of hands.

Appendix III: Word Study of □□□□□□□□

Word: *diakonos*.

Definition: Servant, Deacon.

Usage

Usage of the word in the NT suggests the following categories:

I. Literally *diakonos* can refer to one who earns a living by serving a master.

Mt. 22:13 *Then the king told the attendants, 'Tie him hand and foot...'*

Jn. 2:5 *His mother said to the servants...*

II. Figuratively, *diakonos* can refer to one who plays the part of a servant by obeying the commands, or meeting the needs of another.

A. By doing God's will

Rom. 13:4 *For he is God's servant, to do you good...*

1 Cor. 3:5 *Only servants through whom you came to believe.*

B. By obeying Christ's commands

Jn. 12:26 *where I am, there will my servant be.*

C. By working for others as a sign of humility and love.

Mt. 20:26 *whoever wants to become great among you, must become your servant.*

D. By doing Satan's will

2 Cor. 11:15 *if his servants masquerade as servants of righteousness.*

E. By serving Sin

Gal. 2:17 *if...we ourselves are sinners, does that mean Christ promotes sin?*

F. By serving the Gospel.

Eph. 3:7 *I became a servant of this gospel...*

III. Figuratively, *diakonos* can refer to a church office. There are two instances where it becomes clear that this is a technical term relating to Church government. The combination with *Overseers* in Phil. 1:1 makes it clear that this is a church role, and this is solidified by the requirements given in 1 Tim. 3.

There may be several other references that are questionable for the precise reason that servanthood itself is such a big concept in the NT. Is Phoebe, for example, a Deaconess in Romans 16:1? Is Paul calling Epaphras a *Deacon* in Col. 1:7? Is he then calling himself a *deacon* in 1:23 (of the Gospel), 25 (of the Church)? At times it is difficult to say.

□ Phil. 1:1 *to all the saints at Phillipi, together with the overseers and deacons.*

□ 1 Tim. 3:8 *Deacons, likewise are to be men worthy of respect...*

Other Sources

Theological Dictionary of the New Testament

TDNT connects the verb *diakoneo* strongly to table service. Other verbs such as *douleuo*, *therapeuo*, *latreuo*, and *leiturgeo* relate to other aspects of service. Secondly the verb relates to general service. As for *diakonos*, TDNT gives the following breakdown of meanings:

1. Waiter at a meal (Jn. 2:2)
2. Servant of a Master (Mt. 22:13).
3. Figuratively, servant of a Spiritual Power (2 Cor. 11:14)
4. As *diakonos* of the Gospel, the Apostle is a special servant of Christ.
5. Timothy is also a servant of God.
6. Pagan authorities are God's servants in Rom. 13:4.
7. Paul is a *diakonos* of the church.

TDNT then lists specially the office of *diakonos* in the Church. It points out that their pairing with Bishops in both passages (Phil. 1:1, 1 Tim. 3) shows that they had duties of administration and service, though these duties are not clearly outlined in Scripture. TDNT points out that in the secular Gk. world, *diakonos* was used to describe such people as messengers, stewards, bakers, assistant helmsmen, and even statesmen.

New Bible Dictionary

This article doesn't give categories of meaning as TDNT, but does offer some useful information. It relates the original concept of waiting tables, and then shows a connection throughout the NT. This is exactly what Jesus did for his disciples (Lk.22:26). Moreover, though the author rejects a connection of the seven in Acts 6, he does point out that literal waiters were needed for the Agape meal. Perhaps deacons had their start as table waiters in this function, and it then spread to other service and administration. The article also points out that in pagan hellenic culture *diakonos* represented certain cult and temple officials.

BAGD

BAGD offers the following 3 categories of meaning:

1. A servant of someone.
2. Generally of a helper.
3. Deacon.

Appendix IV: The Role of Deacon in Scripture

A. Lexical Work. One can easily see that “Deacon” is a transliteration, as there are no related English words. It comes from Latin *diaconus* (Hiebert 1983:152), which comes from the Greek word *diakonos*.

A *diakonos* in Greek culture was a servant. We should note that there were many words that described the position of servant (e.g. *douleuo*, *therapeuo*, *latreuo*, *leiturgeo*); Hiebert (1983:152) states that there are 10.

Why then, did the NT writers choose the *diakonos* word group? There may be a couple of reasons. First, *diaconus* implies willing service. Thus we see people in Scripture rendering *diakonia* not because it was their “job”, but because they wanted to serve people. Martha renders *diakonia* to Christ (Lk. 10:40). Likewise Hiebert states that in NT culture, the servants at the wedding in Cana were not hired servants, but family friends who had volunteered for the occasion (1983:152). Thus *diakonos* implied voluntary service, often motivated by love.

Diakonos was perhaps also chosen because of its original meaning. The word in its narrowest sense seems to relate to waiting tables. We see this frequently in Scripture: Martha renders *diakonia* by preparing and serving food to Jesus and the disciples (Lk. 10:40). The wedding servants at Cana also are described as *diakonous*. It also seems likely that the angels, who are said to have “attended” (*diakoneo*) to Jesus after his fasting, were feeding him (Mk. 1:13). We also see clear examples where *diakoneo* does not refer to waiting tables (cf. Lk. 8:3 where it involved financial support). In Greek culture it came to describe such people as messengers, stewards, bakers, assistant helmsmen, and even statesmen (TDNT). Hence the Biblical range of meaning for the verb includes (1) one who gains his living by serving a master (Mt. 22:13), (2) one who plays the part of a servant by obeying or meeting the needs of another (Jn. 12:26; Mk. 10:43); or (3) the office of deacon.

Nevertheless, *diakonos* did have as its background the idea of waiting tables. This is the verb used in Acts 6, where the Apostles appoint the 7 men because it wasn’t right for them to “wait tables” (*diakoneo*). Were these men Deacons? Probably not (the verb is also used there to describe the Apostles ministry of the word), though they may have been the forerunners of the office of Deacon. Walls (1962: s.v. “Deacon”) has suggested that this table-waiting function was probably the background of the development of the office in the NT. There is good evidence that the observance of the Lord’s table in the NT involved a meal whether or not it was the Agape feast (cf. 1 Cor. 11:17-34). There also seems to be evidence that the Lord’s Table was celebrated weekly in the early church (Acts 20:7). Thus Deacons may originally have been those who organized the preparation and presentation of the meal.

B. Appearance in Scripture

Because the *diakoneo* word group is such an important concept in Scripture, and is so widely

used (100X in the NT), and has such varied meanings, it is difficult to say when the office of Deacon appears in Scripture. We know that Deacons appear as officers in Phil. 1:1, where they are paired with the overseers. We also know the office appears in 1 Tim. 3, where qualifications are given. Other than that, references are debatable.

C. Method of Appointment.

The 7 men of Acts 6 were chosen by all the disciples in the Church at Jerusalem (v.5). The Apostles then laid hands on them, installing them in office (v.6). However, it seems doubtful that we can make this normative, as it is questionable whether these men were even Deacons in the formal sense. Other than this, we are not told anything about how Deacons were chosen from amongst Churches.

D. Qualifications

The list of qualifications for Deacon are given in 1 Tim. 3. In many ways the list resembles that of elder. It may be categorized by the same 3 divisions (Character/Family/Scripture) as the overseers role. There are however, some differences. Notable among these are (1) the requirement that Deacons be tested first, (2) the extended character requirements for elders that seem to center around contentiousness (temperate, self-controlled, hospitable, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome), and possibly (3) requirements for the wives of Deacons. Perhaps though, the most notable difference is that elders are to be able to teach. The gentleness required in elders makes sense because they will be teaching Scripture. Someone who is argumentative can do more harm than good even with truth.

Are women portrayed in the NT as fulfilling the office of Deacon? Some see such a reference in Rom. 16:1 and 1 Tim. 3:11. This will be discussed later in more detail.

E. Functions

We are told virtually nothing about the functions of Deacons in the NT. Whereas elders are to rule the church, and be able to teach (with some having that as their primary responsibility; 1 Tim. 5:17), we are told virtually nothing of the function of Deacons. The consensus among scholars seems to be that the Deacons don't have particular standing responsibilities. Rather they meet the needs of the congregation as directed by the Elders. This may make sense, but it nothing more than an educated guess.

F. Number.

The number of Deacons is also not specified in the Scriptures. Doubtless this would change with the size of the congregation. The only thing we note is that deacons are always referred to in the plural (Phil 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:8, 12).

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