

Offices and Titles in the Local Assembly

by David Huston and Jim McKinley

This paper is presented with the hope of eliminating the practice of using offices and titles within the local New Testament assemblies.

Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment. 1 Corinthians 1:10-11

FROM A BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE, there is great difference between holding an office and functioning in the body. In the Church of the living God, there is only one person who holds an office—the Lord Jesus Christ. He is the Head of the Church, the Shepherd of the Sheep, the Lord of All. No one else holds an official position in His Church. This means that if we use the Bible as our guidebook, there is no such office as pastor, elder, deacon, bishop, administrator, or anything else in a local assembly. What the Bible does describe is the functioning of the members of the body. As Paul explained, We have many members in one body, but all the members do not have the same function (Romans 12:4). He did not say the members do not all hold the same office.

Within the body of Christ there is a great diversity of functions, but no offices. Yet in many assemblies, a man's authority is based solely on the office or position he holds. This is not a biblical concept. In the Bible, authority is based on relationship, character, and gifting. This means that the difference between offices and functions is far more than mere semantics. Getting this right is crucial to establishing proper leadership in the church.

There are at least four very good reasons why we must not establish offices in our local assemblies:

1. Under the office concept, a man with little anointing or very poor character could exercise supreme authority over an entire congregation. This would never be the will of God.

2. As soon as offices are established, an unbiblical distinction is made between the office holder and those who do not hold office. This inevitably leads to a clergy laity division. As we have shown in the opening text, Paul said there are to be no divisions within the body.
3. When an office is vacated, the assembly usually feels the need to fill it as soon as possible. The result is often the installation of an unqualified, inexperienced, or untested man into an office that carries with it vast authority. The practice of placing men in unscriptural offices without accountability to others is a formula for disaster. The multitude of believers wounded by the moral and spiritual failures of unaccountable leaders is powerful testimony against this unbiblical practice. Again, occupying a particular office should never be the basis for authority. The issue is not filling an office; it is enabling the life-functions of the body to operate.
4. Offices inevitably bring with them titles. But the practice of prefacing men's names with titles such as Reverend or Pastor violates the Lord's prohibition in Matthew 23:8-10, where He stated, "But you, do not be called Rabbi; for One is your Teacher, the Christ, and you are all brethren. Do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. And do not be called teachers; for One is your Teacher, the Christ." Paul never referred to himself as The Apostle Paul, only as Paul, an apostle, denoting his function in the body. The only titles appropriate for use in the Church of the living God are brother and sister. In Acts 9:17 and 22:13, Paul is called Brother Saul. The Church is a family, not a corporation or branch of the military.

Please note that the root meaning of the title Reverend comes from the word *rēvere*, which means to venerate or be in awe of someone. Strictly speaking, this attitude should be directed only toward the Lord Himself, for holy and awesome is His name (Psalms 111:9). Imagine writing a letter to believers, exhorting them to be humble like the Lord and then signing it, "Respectfully yours, The Awesome Saul of Tarsus."

None of us would even consider calling a church leader by the title Lord, High Priest, Prince, Master, or King; so why use other titles reserved by the Scriptures for exclusive application to the Lord Jesus or employed by the Scriptures to describe various functions of the members? We ought to do away with both the concept of establishing offices and the practice of using titles in the body.

What a Bishop is Not

Many English language versions of the Bible employ the word *bishop* to describe the leader of local assemblies (e.g. Titus 1:7 and 1 Timothy 3:1). But it is important to note that this word is actually not a translation at all but an anglicized version of the Greek word *episkopos*, which means *one who oversees or watches over others*. This is why *overseer* is a better translation and is used at times in many English Bibles, including the King James version (e.g. Acts 20:28 and 1 Peter 5:2). In Paul's salutation to the Philippians, he wrote: *To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons* (1:1). Notice that in this instance, the word *bishops* is plural (*episkopoi*). This is because the church in Philippi had more than one bishop (or overseer).

In our modern age, as well as throughout much of the past two thousand years, a bishop is thought of by many as the chief overseer of a large church or a collection of local congregations. In some cases the term has been applied to a regional denominational leader. But this is a serious misuse of the biblical term.



God's plan calls for multiple shepherds working together to oversee the flock.

Who were the bishops in Philippi? They were men serving in the same capacity as the elders in Ephesus. In the Bible, elders and bishops are functioning in the same ministry. This can be readily seen in Paul's letter to Titus, where he instructed his protegee, *Appoint elders in every city as I commanded you;...for a bishop must be blameless, as a steward of God* (Titus 1:5, 7). Clearly a bishop is an elder and an elder is a bishop. In this passage the words are used interchangeably. The different terms only serve to provide different emphases. Whereas the term *elder* denotes maturity, the term *bishop* describes the overarching task of these mature men: watching over God's flock. If we were to translate this verse literally, we would see that Paul was instructing Titus to appoint *mature men* in every city to *watch over* the local church.

In 1 Timothy 3:1, the statement *if a man desire the office of a bishop* found in the King James version is misleading. The correct translation is, *If anyone desires*

oversight.... As Vine's Dictionary says of this verse, lit., (if any one seeketh) overseership, there is no word representing office. The only reason the King James translators employed the word office is because in 1611, the office of bishop was a very powerful position in the Church of England. They therefore interpreted the verse through the perspective of their current church polity rather than simply translating it out of the original Greek.

The verse goes on to say that those who desire to serve in an oversight capacity desire a good work. The NIV says a noble task. No translations describe oversight as a good or noble office. Those who only desire to occupy an office rarely accomplish much. But those who desire to do a good work or take on a noble task are the true servants of the Lord.

What Elders and Pastors Are Not

Contrary to common practice, an elder is not a man who advises and assists the pastor of a church; and a pastor is not the highest position within a local assembly. In the Bible, all elders are charged with the responsibility of pastoring (or shepherding) a local assembly. Speaking to the elders of Ephesus, Paul instructed them, Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers [i.e. bishops, watchmen], to shepherd [i.e. to pastor] the church of God which He purchased with His own blood (Acts 20:28). The verb *poimaino* means to tend as a shepherd, which encompasses the complete shepherding task. This is what all elders do.

The shepherding metaphor blends the ideas of leadership and authority with tenderness, genuine care, hard work, self-sacrifice, and constant watchfulness. The noun form of *poimaino* is the ordinary Greek word for a shepherd (*poimen*). Whereas the verb form is used three times in the context of Christian leadership (John 21:16; 1 Peter 5:1-2; and Acts 20:28); the noun form is found only once, where the King James version translates it pastor (Ephesians 4:11). It is interesting to note, however, that in the New Testament the term pastor or shepherd is never once used as a title for church leaders. This practice was initiated by the Reformers in the sixteenth century. In the Bible, Jesus alone holds the title Shepherd (John 10:11; Hebrews 13:20). In fact, in 1 Peter 2:25 He is referred to as the Shepherd [*poimen*] and Overseer [*episkopos*] of your souls. ”

Since the work of overseeing and shepherding cannot be separated, in a general sense, a pastor is a bishop and a bishop is a pastor. In the New Testament, the terms elder, bishop (or overseers), and pastor (or shepherd) all can be used to describe men who are functioning as leaders in a local assembly. This is not to say that everyone doing pastoral work is an elder. Nor is it to say that everyone

functioning as an elder is a pastor. For example, some elders may be gifted as apostles, prophets, evangelists, or teachers (ref. Ephesians 4:11). But irrespective of these gifts, all elders/bishops are responsible for pastoring and teaching the people of God (1 Peter 5:1-2; 1 Timothy 3:2 and 5:17; Titus 1:5-9)

What Deacons Are Not

The word *deacon* is another biblical word which, like *bishop*, is an anglicized Greek word (derived from *diakonos* meaning "one who serves"). In the modern church-world, deacons are usually men who do menial jobs around the church building or assist in managing the business affairs of the church. From a biblical perspective, however, deacons serve God's people in a wide variety of ways. Their principal purpose is to maintain unity among the people and to protect the elders' time so they can focus on prayer and the ministry of the Word (see our paper *The Operations of the Deacon Team*). Deacons do important spiritual work in behalf of others and should never be regarded as merely occupying an office or holding a title.

Unbiblical Titles

The title *Senior Pastor* is the exact equivalent of the term *Chief Shepherd*. Yet would any of the men who have assigned themselves the title *Senior Pastor* allow themselves to be addressed as the *Chief Shepherd*. Not likely. The idea of a senior pastor who operates as a chief pastor over a large church with other sub-pastors under him is completely without biblical mandate.

And what about the title *Pastor Emeritus*? This term literally means one who deserves to be called shepherd but is no longer doing the work of a shepherd. He is retired. Where did these titles originate? Clearly not from the Scriptures.

In Philippians 1:1 we read of the bishops (the overseers), the deacons (the servers), and saints (the holy people of God). This is not to say that those who serve in specialized capacities and those who oversee are not saints. They are just as much saints as the rest of the body of believers. They have simply been called to function in specific ways for the benefit of the assembly as a whole. In the context of local church oversight, we never read of any individual called *The Pastor*, *The Senior Pastor*, or *The Pastor Emeritus*. What we do read of are teams of mature men called elders or overseers, but never do we see a solitary leader over an assembly. And never do we see men seeking out prestigious offices and honorific titles as a basis for exercising authority over the people of God.

Note to the reader:

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Published by

Rosh Pinnah Publications

PO Box 337, Carlisle, PA 17013 717-249-2059

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Rosh Pinnah means Chief Cornerstone in Hebrew.