

Gifts, Offices, and Ministries

By Roger Sapp

Government and Fivefold Ministry Confused

There is a great deal of confusion today over the relationship between five-fold ministry and the government of the Church. Because of the ongoing influence of medieval traditions and paradigms of ministry, assumptions have been made that are not supported by the New Testament. One of these assumptions is that five-fold ministry gifts constitute the government of the Church. Part of this confusion is due to the frequent modern misuse of the noun *office* in describing the fivefold ministry gifts to the Church. In some circles, phrases like *office of the apostle*, *office of the prophet* or *fivefold ministry offices* are commonly misused. This misuse is both the cause and the result of confusion on the relationship between these gift ministries and oversight of the Church. A study of the word *office* and its use in the New Testament seems an appropriate place to begin this discussion.

The Word Office in the New Testament

The word *office* appears seven times in the 1611 Anglican translation of the Bible normally called today the King James Version. Three of these references are translated *office of the priest*. These three references all use a Greek word that is used exclusively in reference to the Old Testament priest. This leaves four references to *office* to consider. There are two very different Greek words mistranslated *office* in three of these four references. In the fourth reference, the translators have simply inserted the word *office*. There is no corresponding Greek word in that fourth reference at all.

The first reference is found in Paul's letter to the Romans. There he says:

For I speak to you Gentiles, inasmuch as I am the apostle of the Gentiles, I magnify mine office. Romans 11:13 (KJV)

The second reference that uses the same Greek word to translate *office* is found in Paul's first epistle to Timothy. Here Paul says:

And let these also first be proved; then let them use the office of a deacon, being found blameless 1 Timothy 3:10 (KJV)

In both these references, the Greek words that were mistranslated as *office* are related forms of the Greek word *diakonos*. Most modern translations more accurately translate this word as *ministry* or with better clarity as *service* since the word *ministry* has a lot of historical baggage to unpack to get back to the New Testament meaning. The Authorized Standard, Revised Standard, the New Revised, the New King James and the Darby Versions all translate *diakonos* as *ministry*. This list is not exhaustive. There are probably many others. The use of this word does not imply an oversight function. It simply describes a ministry, a

service to God and to the Church. It is unfortunate that the King James translators were not more consistent in translation.

Adding to the confusion, the King James translators have chosen to translate another very different Greek word using *office* again. This third reference is found in Paul's writings in the Book of Romans.

For as we have many members in one body, and all members have not the same office... Romans 12:4 (KJV)

In this case, the Greek word *praxis* is again mistranslated as *office*. Our modern English word *practice* comes from this word. This Greek word is more often accurately translated as *function* in modern times. This Greek word is not used anywhere in the New Testament in reference to matters of oversight either.

The fourth reference to *office* in the King James Version of the New Testament is found in another of Paul's letters.

This is a true saying, If a man desire the office of a bishop, he desireth a good work. 1 Timothy 3:1 (KJV)

In this particular case, the phrase *the office of* does not have corresponding words in the Greek text. The Greek word *episkopē* found here in this verse is normally translated *overseer* in modern versions but the King James Version uses *bishop* to translate this word. In translating the Greek word *episkopē*, the Anglican translators made a decision to insert the words *the office of* into the passage. There is strong evidence that they were attempting to make this translation of the New Testament harmonize with and support the authoritarian structure of the Seventeenth Century Anglican Church which was controlled by bishops. This motivation may also account for the previous three mistranslations of Greek words to *office* that we have already covered in this booklet.

Summary of Use of the Term *Office*

The New Testament does not support the idea of offices. It does support the idea of ministries and functions. This is particularly clear when it is discovered that in the seven verses where the term *office* is used in the New Testament, three of them are specific to the Old Testament priest and have nothing to do with New Testament ministry. Of the other four, two verses would be translated more accurately *ministry* or *service* rather than *office*. One of the remaining verses should be translated *function*. The only remaining verse does not have a Greek phrase corresponding to *office*. The phrase *the office of* was added by the translators and does not appear in the Greek text. When we use the term *office* today, we have very little New Testament support. We are potentially being influenced in our thinking by medieval authoritarian misunderstandings of ministry and a possibly slanted translation of the New Testament.

Fivefold Ministry Described

There are two passages where ministry gifts are listed. The first is found in the book of Ephesians Chapter 4. We have not quoted verses 9 and 10 as those verses reveal nothing about our subject. We have only quoted that portion that has words related to gifting and ministry.

But unto every one of us is given grace according to the measure of the gift of Christ. Wherefore he saith, When he ascended up on high, he led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men. Ephesians 4:7-8 (KJV)

There are two Greek words translated *gift* and *gifts* in this verse that pertain to our study. The first word *gift* comes from the Greek word *dorea* which has the idea of a sacrifice or offering implicit within it. In other words, *Christ grace or gifts come in the measure of His sacrifice* could be a way to translate this phrase. In the second usage in the verse above, the word *gifts* is translated from the Greek word *doma*, a very commonly used and general word. *Doma* is used in a great variety of situations in the New Testament and this reveals little of the nature of the gift or giver. However, we find that the passage itself does tell us of the nature of the gift. The gifts in this case are the ministries or the services that Christ has given through His grace which are revealed in the following verses.

And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ... Ephesians 4:11-12 (KJV)

The only other word that pertains to our study is the word translated *ministry* found in the verse above. This is the word *diakonia* that we have already discussed. In this passage, there is no indication that we should consider these gifts as overseeing ministries. They are described simply as *gifts*. The other passage where Paul lists these gifts uses a different Greek word... *charisma*. This word is properly translated *gifts* as well. The root of *charisma* is *charis* which is the Greek word for *grace*.

And God hath set some in the church, first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, governments, diversities of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Are all workers of miracles? Have all the gifts of healing? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret? But covet earnestly the best gifts: and yet shew I unto you a more excellent way. 1 Corinthians 12:27-31 (KJV)

Some have suggested that this gift listing from the apostle Paul reveals a governmental "chain of command" in the five-fold ministries. This seems to be an authoritarian mindset imposed on the New Testament. Here is why we think that there are serious problems with this view.

- There are some important gifts missing from the list: The evangelist and the pastor (shepherd) are not listed. It seems apparent if this was a "chain of command" that the shepherd and evangelist would be included. Surely, if this was a "chain of command" that

the shepherd and evangelist would have more authority than someone who simply speaks in tongues in the Church. It is clear that this list by Paul is not a “chain of command”.

- The listing includes other gifts. There are gifts listed in this passage that are not five-fold ministry gifts. Since God gives gifts to everyone in the Body of Christ, it seems unlikely and impractical that this is a listing of governmental authority forming a hierarchy from greatest to lowest. The hierarchy idea may be a medieval authoritarian misunderstanding of New Testament ministry being imposed on these verses. It is much like the theological idea of archbishops, bishops, and priests being imposed on the passage.
- This passage described them as gifts not offices. Just like the passage in Ephesians Chapter 4, this passage only describes these as *gifts* not offices. The idea of governmental offices is being imposed on these verses. To assume that these are the same things lacks New Testament support and may reveal over-exposure to authoritarian teaching.
- There is another, more likely interpretation: A better interpretation would be that the listing here describes the chronological order in which God established (set) these gifts in the Church and this list is not exhaustive either. Apostles were set in the Church first, prophets appeared secondly and then teachers. Paul's point here is not to create an order of importance or a rank of authority but rather to emphasize that God has created a diversity of gifts and to encourage the individual members of the Church to desire the best gifts. It is the medieval authoritarian mindset that wants to impose ideas of authority on these verses.
- The qualifications for overseers and elders are found separately in completely unrelated passages. The New Testament says in 1 Timothy Chapter 3 and Titus Chapter 1 that the qualifications for the overseer (or elder) have to do with experience, character and successful marital and family life. These passages do not mention gifting except that the overseer and elder should be to be apt to teach. While many are trying to put gifts and oversight together, the apostle Paul always separates them when he discusses them.
- There are important practical concerns that must be considered. No matter how gifted an individual might be, if they lack experience, maturity or character, they should not be given oversight. For example, we would not want a highly gifted new convert or a gifted teenager overseeing believers with decades of experience. Without practical and proven experience, no person, no matter how gifted, should be appointed an overseer or elder. It is not an accident that the actual Greek word that is translated *elder* means literally *old man*.

Overseers Connected with Apostolic Ministry

There seems to be only two ministries connected with oversight in the New Testament. The first ministry is the elder or overseer. The King James Version unfortunately uses the word *bishop* to translate the Greek word *episkopos*. Those translators appear strongly to have been trying to justify authoritarian bishops in the medieval Anglican Church. In the New

Testament the idea of authority over other believers is much more muted. Some passages that describe the overseer warn them not to “lord it over” the flock. This ministry is also connected to the idea of the shepherd. These strongly appear to be various biblical expressions of the same local church ministry. It appears that any five-fold ministry gift could be an elder or overseer if qualified by experience, Christ-like character, ongoing stability and good reputation. However, there is nothing in the New Testament to say that overseers must absolutely have a five-fold ministry gift. Some have suggested that elders should have a five-fold gift ministry in order to have the grace to lead. This certainly seems reasonable on the surface but cannot be validated by the New Testament. Perhaps God has allowed some flexibility in this matter if the situation dictates another approach.

In the New Testament, apostles do not seem to be trying to produce these oversight ministries. They seem to be simply acknowledging what God has done in maturing particular Christians in a region by appointing them to the role of overseer. Our emphasis today on the necessity of these ministries seems much out of phase with the New Testament. It is apparent that the apostles planted churches in homes throughout the known world without initially appointing overseers. They would leave these churches in homes to travel to other places and expected the Lord Jesus to care for them and to direct them. They apparently entrusted to the Holy Spirit the leadership of the Church at a level that we seldom see today. Many of us today seem to think that leaders are an absolute necessity for the church to function adequately. This is apparently wrong thinking. Persecutions of Christianity in the past have proven that the church can prosper without the leadership of clergy and access to public buildings. Often there has been dramatic growth when both of these “problems” are present.

What About Pastors?

We have avoided the use of the word “pastor” at some points in this booklet for specific reasons. It appears that the translators of the King James Version chose to insert this word in Ephesians Chapter 4 for the same reasons that they chose to use the word *bishop*. They were supporting the structure of the medieval Anglican Church. There is absolutely no evidence of the early church having pastors as we now know them. At about the same period in Medieval history, the Anglican Church, began to call their priests *pastors* to distinguish them from Roman Catholic priests. Other groups more accurately called Protestant picked up the term also and did little to return to the New Testament structure of the Church. In other words, they proclaimed “the priesthood of all believers” but did not actually return to the New Testament practice of every member ministry. They continued to allow clergy to dominate the church. The actual Greek word in Ephesians 4 that is translated *pastor* is translated *shepherd* elsewhere even in the King James Version.

The only gift ministry that seems to be strongly connected to church oversight is the apostle. This is revealed through the appointing of elders in local settings by apostles in the book of Acts. However, we must state that appointing elders is not the same thing as being an elder in a local setting. Apostles in the New Testament era in a general sense did not remain often in a local setting after the initial churches in homes were established and therefore were generally not overseeing other believers in practical terms. There is a little evidence that as the various apostles aged, they did travel less and became more of an overseeing ministry.

At least this is true with the elderly apostle John. The other original apostles all were martyred at a younger age than John.

The verse that connects apostles to the ministry of overseers is found in Acts Chapter 1. This verse's context is the apostles' prayerful selection of a replacement for Judas. The passage reveals that these words were coming from the apostle Peter.

For it is written in the Psalms, Let his habitation be desolate, and let no man dwell therein: and his bishoprick let another take. Wherefore of these men which have accompanied with us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, Beginning from the baptism of John, unto that same day that he was taken up from us, must one be ordained to be a witness with us of his resurrection. And they appointed two, Joseph called Barsabas, who was surnamed Justus, and Matthias. Acts 1:20-23 (KJV)

It is highly significant that Judas' ministry is described by Peter as a *bishoprick* by the King James Version. This is a form of the Greek word *episkope*. The New American Standard translates this word as *office* and adds a footnote saying “literally *his position as overseer*”. We think that the footnote is a better translation than the word *office*.

This reference connects the apostle to the ministry of the *overseer*. This is easily seen in the scriptural ministry of the apostle. The apostle oversees regional churches by virtue of his personal relationship with the elders and the members of those churches. This is not only a function of gifting but of experience, ability to influence through his example of Christ-like character and his history among those Churches. The apostle Paul seems to do all these things with the Corinthians. He appealed to them on the basis of his character, his relationship with them, his ministry among them and his founding of their church. He did not appeal to them because he had some sort of authority based on filling a position or governmental office but respectfully as a father might appeal to his grown children.

Summary of Five-Fold Gifting & Oversight Ministries

The five-fold ministry gifts are not necessarily governmental. The only oversight ministries revealed in the New Testament are called overseers or elders. These are expressions of the same regional ministry. The ministry of the apostle is also connected to the overseer in the New Testament. Therefore, it would be entirely possible to have a gift ministry but not be in a ministry exercising authority over others. The ministries of the prophet, evangelist, shepherd and teacher would seem to be ministries that would not necessarily be overseeing ministries.

What About Today's Bishops?

In most religious people's minds, the term *bishop* has come to mean something like a “pastor's pastor.” In other words, the widely accepted traditional view is that a bishop is an ecclesiastical leader with authority over other church leaders and over a group of churches located in a particular geographical area. In some cases today, particularly among Charismatic groups, it is not a geographical area that is being supervised by a

bishop, but rather simply a group of churches that hold a particular theological view or a common practice of a spiritual gift like prophecy scattered over a large geographical area. All such bishops are unscriptural, from a point of strict adherence to the New Testament. But this modern use of the title *bishop* is also not traditional and is a new “wrinkle”.

Exercising oversight, not in an authoritarian way but rather as a father, over infant churches is clearly part of the scriptural role of the apostle. As these churches mature and the individuals in them mature, the apostolic role greatly diminishes. After careful examination of the passages where this word *bishop* is used, there is little doubt that the traditional understanding of this term is also incorrect and is, from a strict scriptural standpoint, a popular and traditional heresy. Traditional heresies always have more friends than biblical teachings that correct them. Nevertheless, we trust that the truth will set us free.

Apostolic Succession

The Roman Catholic Church has propagated the erroneous idea that there has been an unbroken line of bishops descending from Peter and that they have “inherited,” one after another, the authority of the apostles. This belief is not taught in the New Testament and was not taught by the early Church fathers. It also cannot be proven historically. It is a later invention of the Roman Catholic Church. False doctrines like this one sustain the rigid level-by-level authoritarian system of clergy domination found in the Roman Catholic Church and others. There are many other organizations that have similar doctrines, structures and attitudes.

The ministry of the apostle comes from God’s call alone and not through or by the Church. The Church must recognize the ministry of the apostle, however, in order for him to be effective in any real measure. The Church needs to acknowledge the call, but it is not the source of the call or ministry. That is why it is necessary to thoroughly test any man’s claim to this ministry.

Unwittingly Stealing the Role of the Apostle

In some cases, there are men today who have the calling and ministry of the apostle who have been given or accepted the title of *bishop*. This is unfortunate, but it is certainly not as destructive to the work of God as those who are not apostles but who are now considered to be bishops by the Church. The Church often desires to honor outstanding leaders by giving them this title. Some of these men are wonderfully gifted by God, but are not apostles. Perhaps gifted and mature evangelists, pastors, prophets, and teachers are tempted to receive a role and calling they are neither gifted for nor called by God to function in because of the desire of those who have been blessed by their ministry to promote them. These ministries will need great humility to acknowledge fledgling apostles as they develop within their own regions and even more humility to embrace those whom God develops outside their sphere of influence.

Some have even been bold, or rather arrogant, enough to give themselves the title of *bishop* or *apostle*. There are some who hold these as titles who clearly do not have apostolic ministries and maybe unwittingly usurping the ministry of the apostle. Some unwise individuals may simply be out-of-season in declaring their call without any real function or fruit evident yet. In the Book of Revelation, Christ's meaning is clear regarding those who would claim to be an apostle without God's sending:

I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false Revelation 2:2.

It is absolutely necessary for the Church to test those who claim to be apostles. Those who are apostles should be able to show both the seal and sign of apostleship, as well as having the other characteristics. We note that God gave Moses two distinguishing signs to prove God had sent him. So we also expect that apostles will have the *seal* of fully functional churches that they planted and the *sign* of regular creative miracles in their ministries. Without both indicators, the servant of God will fail the most basic test of apostleship. There are secondary tests that must also be applied to any person claiming apostleship today.

The acceptance of the title *bishop* causes confusion in the minds of the people of God about apostles and bishops. It will be necessary for the Church, as she once again makes room for the apostle, to teach clearly the actual meaning of the word that is translated "bishop" and how it is used in Scripture. Before we continue this discussion, a word of warning is appropriate.

No Opposition to Bishops Desirable

Although this misunderstanding of this word and ministry will need to yield to the proper understanding of apostles, it is absolutely essential that no carnal means be used to oppose any man who is called a bishop. Even prayer against another believer is wrong. Believers are to bless one another and pray to the Lord for each other. Should a Christian leader be in error, he needs prayer for the Lord to increase his understanding and to strengthen his humility and willingness to correct himself. Prayer against another believer is on the borderline of practicing witchcraft and will certainly invite the enemy into situations. Public criticism of a specific ministry may damage the work of God through such an individual and is unlikely to change the situation for the positive.

David's attitude toward King Saul should instruct us. He would not injure this man who was still on the throne and was a threat to his life. He patiently waited for God to fulfill that which He had spoken to him. If the man is being used of God, we should not stand in judgment of him. Instead we should patiently allow the Lord to correct and deal with His servant. This does not mean, however, that we should embrace this error or be silent about it. We must believe that God's servants will hear the voice of the Spirit and, when

the time is right, shed this unnecessary title. We must also believe the best. If such men are not apostles, hopefully they will release recruited churches from this relationship without abuse.

Something else needs to temper our relationships with those that we perceive to be in error because of the traditions of men. Remember that Christ told us that new wine can't be successfully placed in old wineskins. Reformations, restorations, renewals and revivals of older organizations and individuals are much more difficult to accomplish than simply starting something new that has the truth about these matters at its inception.

Greek Word *Episkopos* Translated “Bishop”

The King James Version of the Bible translates the Greek word *episkopos* and its various forms as “bishop.” The New International Version does not use the word *bishop* at all, adding to the confusion about this word. New International translators have chosen to use a different and better word, *overseer*, to represent this Greek word. These differences in translation help to obscure the fact that the King James word *bishop* is being seriously misused from a strict scriptural standpoint. It is understandable that the King James translators would have used this word, since bishops were part of that medieval historical scene in England and Europe. Already there were 1,000 years of perpetuation of this authoritarian error and, unfortunately for us, they perpetuated the error in this translation by using the word *bishop*.

As Martin Luther, John Calvin, and others were raised up by God in the Dark Ages of Europe to be forces in the Reformation, they and others were the first to acknowledge the misuse of the term *bishop*. The Reformers correctly explained the relationship between these terms. The terms *presbyter* (or elder) and *bishop* (or overseer) in the New Testament denote the same ministry--with this difference only, that the first term originated from the synagogue and the second from the Greek communities; and that “elder” signifies the dignity of the ministry, while “overseer” reveals the actual practice of ministry.¹

Misuse of *Bishop* Has a Long History

This misuse has a long history, stemming back to the third century. In the third century this word *episkopos* came to mean the single leader of the Church over a given geographical area and was said to refer to the successors of the Twelve Apostles. This misuse carried the erroneous idea that there were only twelve apostles, that all the apostles had died in the First Century, and that the bishops were their successors. There is absolutely nothing in the New Testament to validate this idea. Unfortunately, the writings of some of the latter Church fathers help pass this idea on to the modern Church.²

¹ pg. 491-2, Vol I, Schaff.

² pg. 493, Vol I, Schaff.

The equality and interchange of the terms *elder* and *bishop* continued until the close of the first century, as evidenced by the Epistle of Clement of Rome written about A.D. 95. The Didache reveals that the equivalent meaning remained evident even near the end of the second century. However, with the beginning of the second century from Ignatius onward, the two terms began to be distinguished from each other. In other words, during the second century, the term *episkopos* began to lose its scriptural meaning and be transformed into something else. During this time the term *episkopos* began to mean “a head of a congregation surrounded by a group of presbyters.” Decades later it came to mean a “head of a diocese and successor to the apostles.” The *episcopate* grew out of the “presidency” of the presbytery. It also began to be supported with authoritarian doctrines that allowed for near unlimited exercise of authority over other believers.

The Reformation churches, i.e. the Lutherans, the Presbyterians, and the pre-Reformation Anabaptists, rejected the erroneous idea of bishops leading the Church; however, they did not reestablish the correct order of apostolic ministry and every member ministry. The New Testament uses *bishop* very differently than this later, traditional understanding. We will now address five basic problems with this traditional understanding.

Problem 1: Multiple Bishops in a Single Church

Using the New International Version, if we were to substitute the word *bishop* or *bishops* in every case of the word *overseers*, the problem of the unscriptural historical and traditional erroneous use of the term *bishop* begins to emerge. For instance:

Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers... 1 Peter 5:2a

One of the first things we notice in this passage is that a plural form of *episkopos* is being used in reference to the particular singular church, the “flock,” that Peter has written to. In other words, there are multiple overseers in a single church. This is exactly opposite to the traditional understanding. This usage is clear in other passages as well. For example:

...To all saints...at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons... Philippians 1:1

There were multiple overseers in the one local church at Philippi. These references above clearly show that there were multiple *episkopos* in each church in each locality. Instead of this first-century understanding, however, the term has degenerated from its original meaning and come to mean exactly the opposite, i.e. a single bishop over multiple churches and over a given geographical area. It is unfortunate that many of those who honor God's Word and know His grace in ministry have chosen (often in sincerity, but still in ignorance) to perpetuate this false idea about church leadership.

Problem 2: Bishop Equal to Shepherd

It is fortunate that the New International translators used “overseers” in most passages for *episkopos*, as that is the actual meaning of the Greek word. As we carefully look at the

verses below it becomes clear that *shepherd* and *overseer* can be equivalent terms describing different characteristics of exactly the same ministry.

Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers... 1
Peter 5:2a

In the Book of Acts more instructive information is found. For instance, this verse gives us the same information--that *shepherd* and *overseer* are different descriptions for the same ministry.

Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the Church of God... Acts 20:28

From the passages above, we can see that overseers are told to be “shepherds of the flock.” It is abundantly clear from these passages that the ministries of overseer and shepherd are equivalent. This is clearly a ministry within a local church, not a ministry with a larger geographical oversight over multiple churches. Again, this is exactly the opposite of the traditional understanding.

Problem 3: Bishop Equal to Elder

Paul, while addressing the elders of the church of Ephesus, concludes his instruction to them by calling them “overseers.”

From Miletus, Paul sent to Ephesus for the elders of the Church. Acts 20:17

In a verse that has been previously quoted, while still speaking to these elders from the Ephesian church, Paul uses *overseers* and also *shepherds* to describe these same elders:

Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the Church of God, which He bought with His own blood.
Acts 20:28

These verses alone should establish that the present use of *bishop* is improper and unscriptural, as well as possibly detrimental and resistant to the restoration of the modern-day apostle to his God-given calling. However, there are more verses to deal with that show that this term is being seriously misused.

Problem 4: Bishops Serve with Deacons

The office of the deacon is mentioned several times in relationship with overseers. This indicates the latter ministry's clear connection to the local church rather than an ecclesiastical authority over multiple churches as mistakenly thought today.

Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi,

together with the overseers and deacons. Philippians 1:1

In this passage, the ministry of *episkopos* is connected with the ministry of the deacon. It is clearly a ministry found in the local church. The word is plural, which indicates that in the local church of Philippi there was more than one *episkopos*. Once again, Scripture contradicts the traditional understanding of this word. Within the traditional understanding of the concept of bishops, there cannot be more than one in a given geographical area. Clearly, the traditional understanding is wrong and must yield to the Word of God.

As we discover from the verse above, there were multiple overseers in one local church in Philippi, as well as multiple deacons. We also note that the qualifications of the overseer and the deacon are listed together in the same chapter in the Book of First Timothy. This again establishes the idea that these ministries are connected and both function in a single local church. The fact that Paul instructs Timothy concerning the qualifications of both the overseer and deacon indicates that Timothy's ministry as a young apostle was to appoint them.

Problem 5: Elders Are Appointed by Apostles Alone

We have established that the term translated *bishop* or *overseer*, and *elder* are equivalent. In the next few verses, we will establish that apostles alone appoint elders. Since this is the case, it becomes increasingly clear that the present-day bishop has unintentionally stolen this role from the apostle. In today's church, it is these unscriptural "bishops" who are setting elders in local churches. This traditional structure is seriously wrong and needs to be corrected. From the pen of Luke, we discover that the apostles alone appoint elders.

Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord in whom they had put their trust. Acts 14:23

From the hand of Paul to Titus we see confirmation of this aspect of apostolic ministry.

The reason I left you in Crete was that you might straighten out what was left unfinished and appoint elders in every town, as I directed you (Titus 1:5).

We need to note that Paul says that Titus should appoint elders *in every town*. In the verse before, Paul and Barnabus were appointing elders *in each church*. This is exactly the same thing. The church was not yet divided by allegiances to particular men, particular doctrines, particular buildings and particular organizations. Denominations, networks and "local churches" that had their own distinct name and identify separate from all the other Christians in a locality did not exist. Obviously the church existed in every town and therefore elders in every town could oversee all the church locally.

For a man to accept the ministry of *episkopos*, or “overseer,” from any source other than the ministry of a functioning apostle is unscriptural, since these are equivalent terms. It is clear that an apostle would never appoint a bishop to usurp his own ministry. He would, however, appoint an overseer to function with other overseers to care for a particular regional local church. Perhaps it would be better for the Church not to use the term *bishop* at all, since it is laden with centuries of misuse. The term *elder* has been misused as well, but it has not been completely corrupted from its actual meaning. All these terms have been stained by authoritarian teaching and practices. We must recover the scriptural understanding of the apostle and the overseer, and for the sake of the Church put away the unscriptural ministry and title of *bishop*.

It is evident from just a simple look at these passages that all or at least the vast majority of those Christian leaders who have accepted a title of *bishop* did not receive it from apostolic ministry and have accepted a role that usurps the role of the apostle. For present-day bishops to acknowledge this error to the churches that respect them will be difficult, but necessary, to make room for apostolic ministry to come forth. Otherwise, the “old wineskin” will not be suitable to hold the “new wine” of the Spirit that will be poured out in the days preceding the coming of the Lord.

In some cases, it will not be difficult for the man of God to dispense with this title and to instruct those who look to him for leadership about the apostolic ministry over a short time. It will be for him a question of humility and love for the truth. In other cases, due to long tradition it may not be possible to do so without serious difficulties and the experience of rejection. In any case, the Lord will grant His servant grace to embrace the truth.

Historical Decline and Recovery of Apostles

Historically, the decline of the apostolic ministry occurred as the unscriptural role of bishops was embraced by the Church. Which came first, the decline of apostles or the rise of bishops is a matter of debate. However, it is not a matter of debate that the Church suffered greatly as a clear decline in its supernatural functioning occurred during that period. By the end of the fourth century, unscriptural bishops were fully in control, and the Church was beginning to embrace the world. It entered a serious moral decline, and the thousand years of the Dark Ages began. For a thousand years the function of bishops did little to bring the Church out of the Dark Ages. There is no doubt that there were godly men who served as bishops; however, many were simply politicians who used religion to further their own ambitions and greed. In fact, it was a break from their unscriptural authority that began the Protestant Reformation and began to bring the Church back into the light of God’s Word. Now, a new Reformation is needed among Evangelicals, Pentecostals, Charismatics and all other Christians. We need to embrace all that God’s Word reveals and to hold back nothing. A “new wineskin” of apostolic strength and Christ-like servanthood will be needed to hold the gracious amounts of “new wine” that the Lord wishes to pour out upon the Church in our day. Let all who arise to

this ministry not become religious authoritarian but will follow Christ to be servants to all. Nothing less will sustain the revival God is bringing forth.

Scriptural Role of the Apostle and Overseers

As we have already established, the actual role of the overseer is the role of the elder, which is generally correctly understood within the modern-day Church. An elder is a subordinate leader within the local church found in a region that functions with other overseers to take care of that church locally. Fledgling churches and overseers should function together initially under the leadership of a church planting apostle. Over a period of time, these churches should outgrow the need for close supervision and be released entirely by the apostle in favor of new fledgling churches he is planting.

Perhaps it would be better to altogether dispense with the term *bishop*. It has been so strongly tied to traditional and historical misuse that its use will continue to perpetuate confusion and make the apostle's role more difficult. Perhaps we simply need to use *elder* or *overseer* to describe this local church ministry to avoid confusion.

To the “Bishop” Who Is Actually an “Apostle”

There are those who presently allow others to call them “bishops” because of their reluctance to embrace their actual correct ministry name of apostle. Perhaps the Church needs to reassure them of our acceptance of what the Word of God reveals about this ministry. If they have the characteristics and call of the apostle, then they should be identified as apostles of the Church without hesitation or fear. There will surely be those who will misunderstand because of traditional teaching, yet to submit to their unscriptural understandings and perpetuate confusion is certainly a worse choice for any man of God who is a “bishop,” but is not an apostle, there is no good alternative but to repent and refuse to usurp the ministry of another. We realistically recognize that only a very few select few bishops will desire and receive the grace to do this.

Those Seeking New Testament Restoration

There are several things that ministries seeking to recover a New Testament pattern of ministry should do immediately to begin change things. They should:

Humble themselves and be teachable. Leaders that believe that they are already operating in New Testament patterns are causing the most confusion. They preach and teach with great sincerity but are often wrong biblically. They do not know what they do not know. They do not understand that their success is an expression of grace and mercy and not because they are right about everything.

Speak accurately. They should use these terms as the New Testament does rather than continuing to cause confusion by traditional speaking. They should not call ministries *offices*. This gives the wrong impression that these serving gifts have appointed authority over people.

Recognize that most ministry today is still functioning out of the traditional Medieval pattern of ministry. Many ministries today are ignorantly operating out of the medieval pattern. It is all that they have known. They have never known another pattern. For instance, if you meet in a named church building on Sunday mornings, if you sit in rows, if you have a message delivered by the same individual at those meetings. If he is called a *pastor*, then it is likely that your group is operating out of a medieval understanding of ministry. Remember that the early church had no buildings. It met in homes. It had no pastors as we know them and only a few fully supported traveling ministries. It had no membership separating believers in a region. Everyone could participate in the meeting as described by First Corinthians Chapter 14.

Seek to Serve not to be Served. There is a great amount of teaching today that seems to be saying that if you serve ministry, then you are serving God. This seems to be reversing what the Lord Jesus Christ taught. He taught that the greatest among His disciples would be the servant of all and demonstrated it by His washing the feet of His disciples. He also lived it daily by serving the multitudes that came to Him. Many today with an authoritarian medieval mindset seem to be creating servants for themselves rather than actually serving others humbly as the Lord did.

Seek true fellowship without domination The Medieval pattern of ministry leads to disunity. It separates the flock into congregations committed to a particular leader or doctrine. Believers and leaders who will not fellowship outside their familiar group have been infected with the partisan spirit that the apostle Paul warned about in the first chapter of First Corinthians. Leaders who seek submission from believers before really seeking to know them and fellowship with them are also infected with the authoritarian medieval spirit. Believers should give themselves permission to fellowship with any believer and with any leader they wish. They should reject any subtle or overt attempt to get them to make an exclusive commitment to one group or one leader. No one has the right to restrict fellowship or to create lines of demarcation between believers. Wise Christians will see themselves as already members of every expression of the Body of Christ in a region without officially joining any expression of particular organizations. Wise Christians will honor and submit to every elder and overseer in their region. Submission will be understood to be a serious consideration to the advice of others without expectation of lock-step obedience. The Lord's guidance will be a first consideration. Wise Christians will not exclusively commit or submit to anyone or any particular group of elders and thereby reject all others. Wise Christians will expect that this relationship of submission will be mutual. In other words, every Christ-like elder will take seriously his need to submit to those who submit to him.

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