

The Bible has set out a limited hierarchy in the structure of the Ecclesia. There is only one head of the One Body, the Lord Jesus Christ. There is also a multiplicity of eldership in each local Ecclesia. This is seen in Philippians 1v1 “Paul and Timotheus the servants of Jesus Christ, to all saints in Christ Jesus which are at Philippi with the bishops and deacons. (many bishops and many deacons in one Ecclesia). There is a general uniform community where every individual is valued and there is no question of superiority or arrogance. It should also be noted that unlike the systems adopted by other religions, there are no offices set over several Ecclesias, but each has their own eldership. Thus the bishop of Rome should be one of many, and is responsible for that Ecclesia at Rome and not others.

The system is very flat. There are not many layers of management. Looking only at the human agency of the Ecclesia and not considering in this short study the Eternal Himself nor the part of the Lord Jesus Christ and the work of the celestial angels, there are apostles, bishops, deacons and everyone else. There are no other offices indicated. The question of the term eldership does not necessarily fully apply as someone can be an elder without having any formal office to conduct. Anyone who is looked to for advice, example or exposition is an elder. Someone who has lived a life in the service of the Truth and has not recently joined the throng of believers in any locality.

Two particular passages should be bourn in mind when looking at office bearers. The entire chapter in 1 Timothy 3 treats on this subject and ends with the definition of the House of God, this includes the terms the **office** of a **bishop** and the **office** of a **deacon**; and then a shorter section in Titus 1 v 6-9.

“If any be blameless, the husband of one wife, having faithful children not accused of riot or unruly. For a bishop must be blameless, as the steward of God, not self-willed, not soon angry, not given to wine, no striker, not given to filthy lucre, but a lover of hospitality, a lover of good men, sober, just, holy temperate, holding fast the faithful word as he hath been taught, that he may by sound doctrine both to exhort and to convince the gainsayers”.

Blameless is not the same as sinless. All have sinned and come short of the glory of God. There is a need for the visible eldership of each Ecclesia to be those who have no outstanding unresolved issues whereby blame can be attributed to the Name of Christ because of our shortcomings. A repentant adulterer is not prohibited from serving because he has repented. However you would not put such in charge of the sisters' classes.

The term the husband of one wife stands in comparison with the term the wife of one man, see 5v9. In that later passage it is saying that the Ecclesia should not take on the responsibility of providing for a widow if she has been married multiple times, as she has several sets of in-laws who could and should shoulder that burden. Ex-husbands because of divorce or whatever means that she has access to plead for assistance from others who had some responsibility towards her in the past. This is not an acceptance that a woman can be married at the same time to several men, which would be the opposite of polygamy. Likewise the term the husband of one wife does not mean that polygamy is tolerated as it is a sin, and anyone who actively participates in such is far

from being blameless. They bring despoise to the Holy Name by such sinful behaviour and are not to be members of the Ecclesia without repentance and the restoration of matrimonial relationships onto a correct basis. It does not mean, as some reason, that they can be members whilst still married to several women but not be office holders.

The necessity to have children who are brought up faithfully is a prerequisite. Every individual has to make their own choices so the subsequent faith of the children when they decide to be baptised or not, and whether they stay in the Ecclesia after they have first joined it, is not the responsibility of the parents but the children. However the standard of behaviour of the children of faithful parents has a minimum which can be accepted, being riotous or unruly is going beyond the minimum required. There needs to be a degree of parental discipline and respect for God and the Bible which should be engendered in our young people, but without the fear of failure or the pressure to conform without personal faith.

All office bearers are stewards. That is they are acting as those who are agents for a higher power, the absent master, whose will they effect in his absence. This idea of stewardship is less utilised in modern society, but it was a well-known concept in previous societies. They are God's stewards, that is they are regarded as being His representatives. If they were to behave badly people would blame the Bible, they would blame God, they would blame Jesus.

There is a need not to put personal opinions forward but to be those who are not self-willed. They need to be calm individuals who are not quickly angered but who never the less will stand up for the principles of the Truth and will not allow the Truth which they represent to be walked over by others. They should be able to handle their drink and not allow the love of wine to rule over them, they need to be those who need not use violence to effect their will so they need not to be strikers of others, they can disciple others by an appeal to the power of the word and the commandments of Christ. Money must not be their motivation. They need therefore to be stable economically so they can help others and not be vulnerable and in need of help themselves. If they cannot support themselves, how can they support others spiritually, as they will continually be distracted by the pressures of supplying their daily bread.

Hospitality should be part of their DNA. They need to be able to host others, not with lavish feasts and abundant luxury but with concern and attention of those who value the companionship of fellow believers in these precious things. They should seek out good company of people of faith and should therefore also avoid the company of those who have other motivations. Bad company spoils the good, a rotten apple left in the barrel will corrupt the rest.

Sober refers not to a lack of alcohol but a lack of frivolity and a seriousness which only the Truth can really bestow on people. They are not afraid of humour and informality but know that there is a time and place for everything. They will seek justice for all, not just themselves and will want to ensure that justice is seen to be done in all their communities. They will have a balance so that they will be relatable to others and not seem to be alien but temperate. Holiness will be attributable to them as they will seek the honour of God and sanctity of His Word.

They will be part of the system, being taught by others, not arrive as individuals who have no appreciation of the traditions and culture of the Ecclesia because they have not been raised on that basis. That does not mean that they have to be born into the system and raised through the Sunday-school, but they should receive instruction from others so that they are taught.

The Word must be paramount in our Ecclesias. What are we if that is not so? Bishops need to be seen to be those who can fulfil two functions. They need to be able to both encourage or exhort the faithful and internally keep everyone together, and they need to be able to resist the false arguments and gainsaying of the adversaries without. A bishop then needs to be a speaking Brother. Doctrine needs to be used in both exhortations and lectures and not so much the recounting of personal experiences or amusing stories.

There are no **apostles** in the sense of the original twelve who Christ appointed to go outside the confines of their own Ecclesias to teach all nations Matthew 28v19,20 which was a specific commission which was fulfilled in the first century, "*which was preached to every creature under heaven*", Colossians 1v23. The responsibility for all is first to their **local** Ecclesia which is the (bad translation should be "a") pillar and ground of the Truth, 1 Timothy 3v15.

Apostles still exist in some form as the disciple Epaphroditus described as a messenger in Philippians 2v25 was actually an apostle (see the Greek). An apostle then is one who is sent forth by an Ecclesia not just by Jesus directly. In a similar way Jesus himself is an apostle, as being one sent forth by God to do a work, see Hebrews 3v1. Jesus was a faithful apostle; apostles sadly could also be unfaithful. Apostles are sent to other Ecclesias and act between the different parts of the One Body. Philippi sent their apostle to Rome, where the great Apostle to the gentiles Paul, resided at that time.

The office of a deacon refers to another type of elder, one of a less public servant, who served behind the scenes. In this way a Sister, Phebe, is described as a servant (deacon) of the Ecclesia at Cenchrea. She served in an official capacity but not as a speaker as that is denied to the fairer sex under the Apostolic commandment 1 Corinthians 14v34. There are ways then that a Sister can officially serve. They are not generally incapable, just under commandment to avoid certain roles.

In 1 Timothy 3v12 the deacons are also required to be the husband of one wife, so the pressure of complicated relationships should not be allowed to distract from the work which a true servant of others needs to perform. If they are to be caught up with too many personal concerns, then they will not be able to handle their spiritual responsibilities in the same way. Those who use the office "*well purchase to themselves a good degree*". This does not mean that money changes hands to acquire such an office, but that through commitment and effort they purchase recognition of their service to the Body of Christ.

It is not wrong to desire to serve but it is wrong to push yourself forward. Let another praise thee, we should not blow our own trumpet. On this way it has been felt that lots (ballots not dice) should be given to show the mind of the Ecclesia towards suitable candidates for any offices. This is seen in the way that **giving forth** their lots, Acts 1v26 stands in contrast to those who **cast** their lots John 19v24.

Those who have not been proved, 1 Timothy 3v10, should be excluded for shouldering the responsibilities of a deacon. There are ways then that can prove individuals are fit for office and these should be utilised. A reputation for reliance and dependability, and the spirituality that is necessary for all office holders needs to be evidenced.

The domestic scene is a good indicator of spirituality. *“For if a man know not how to rule his own house, how shall he take care of the (“a” no definite article used here) church (ecclesia) of God”*.

Outside reputation is important. That does not mean that we need to petition a survey of unbelievers on our members but that we should abstain from every appearance of evil. *“He must have a good report of the that are without”*.

In the book of Revelation the office bearers are described as being the angel of the ecclesia. Angel means messenger. They are servants of their Ecclesias not the boss men who issue orders and take a monetary slice from their fellows. They spend and are spent in service. They are self-financing, there is to be no paid ministry. 1 Corinthians 9v12. The power to take from others should be avoided. The work man is worthy of his meat Matthew 10v10. Taking a meal is different from taking a stipend.

Hopefully these thoughts are useful in considering the subject which is necessary to have some way of approaching. There is an article in our magazine of forty years ago, “Apostolic traditions and ordinances² which also addresses some of these themes which we will post out separately for the modern audience.

A Voice from the Altar

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