

Revelation 1:5-6 (William John Hocking, Editor) 211609

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It is of great importance, in inquiring as to divine order in the church, to carefully distinguish between gifts and offices. It has been well remarked that, while Romanists on the one hand confound ministry and priesthood, Protestants on the other fail to distinguish between the gifts of the Head, and local offices in the church. It should be our aim to rightly divide the word of truth, as the apostle counselled Timothy.

Priesthood is the privilege of all believers since Christ died and rose (Rev. 1:5, 6; 1 Peter 2:5, 9), but every believer is not necessarily a minister. The latter requires special gift from above, and a divine call. Gift, when entrusted to any, is not for the exclusive benefit of any local assembly, but is designed for the perfecting of the saints at large, and for the edifying of the body of Christ. Offices on the contrary are expressly local. Thus, bishops and deacons, wherever placed apostolically, were responsible for the well-being of the saints in their own towns, but had no responsibility beyond those limits. These distinctions the ordinary arrangements of Christendom fail to recognize. We frequently find an evangelist or teacher tied to a local charge, and expected to discharge the functions of an overseer, in addition to the duties attaching to the gift with which the Lord has entrusted him. This is injurious and wrong, and accounts, at least to some extent, for the stunted growth of many of Christ's members. God's order cannot be meddled with, or set aside with impunity. Spiritual loss and barrenness is the inevitable result.

It is undeniable that there were bishops (or elders) in the church in apostolic days. These were but different titles for the same persons; "elders" being the title of dignity, and "bishops" descriptive of their work (oversight). If Titus 1:5, 7 and Acts 20:17, 28 are carefully examined, this will be clearly seen. These were selected by the apostles or their delegates (as Timothy and Titus), in cases where assemblies had been some time established, and some had had opportunity to develop themselves. They were formally appointed by the apostles to watch over the souls of the saints, and to care for the work of God in the places where they lived. Instances of this may be found in Acts 14:21-23. There we have Paul and Barnabas visiting some scenes of former labor, confirming and exhorting the saints, "and when they had ordained them elders in every church, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord, on whom they believed."

The qualifications for eldership are given (Titus 1:5, 9; 1 Tim. 3:1). They are of a moral, not ministerial character. Of course, if such happened to be possessed of special gifts, they would find them of great use in their service, but they had nothing to do with their eldership. Their gifts they received from the Lord in heaven, apart altogether from human agency; their office they received by apostolic appointment, under the direction of the Holy Ghost (Eph. 4:8-11; Acts 20:28). Philip and Stephen, are cases of this kind. They were deacons, but they also possessed gifts; the one being expressly termed an evangelist, the other being apparently both evangelist and teacher (Acts 6:5, 10; 8:5; 21:8). We read also that elders who labored in word and doctrine were to have double honor (1 Tim. 5:17).

The Spirit of God is very strict in His moral requirements from those who desire the work of oversight. Such must be blameless, humble, and well conducted both at home and abroad. Their appetites and their tongues must be well under control, and their households must be ordered according to God. Every person of spiritual discernment will recognize the importance of this. What more incongruous than to see men endeavoring to maintain God's order in the assembly, if that order is not carried out in themselves and in their own homes! They must also have had experience in the ways of God, as a novice, if appointed, would be in danger of being puffed up with pride, and thus falling into the same fault as the devil (1 Tim. 3:6).

Eldership was thus a serious charge. Those who were thus qualified and apostolically appointed were to "take care of the church of God" in their locality. This would involve visiting the sick, counselling the saints, and strengthening and helping them generally. We never read of but one elder or bishop in an assembly; scripture always speaks of them in the plural. If but one were set apart here or there, there might be a tendency to regard the assembly as his, whereas it is the assembly of God, in which such are but servants, privileged to shepherd and feed His saints.

Here a very important question naturally arises. If elders or bishops require apostolic appointment, where do we stand with regard to them now, apostles having ceased? For local care is assuredly as greatly needed today as when the apostles were present on earth.

1 Corinthians 16:15, 16 and 1 Thessalonians 5:12, 13 will answer the difficulty. Through some cause or another, elders had not been formally instituted either in Corinth or Thessalonica, yet the need for spiritual care existed in these places as elsewhere. What do we find therefore? Godly men observing the need, voluntarily took upon themselves the labor and service. Such, though not entitled to be designated elders, were nevertheless to be honored, and their authority was to be recognized by all. This is our resource today. Apostolic appointment cannot be obtained, and we earnestly eschew any imitation of it in the present ruined condition of the church, but it is our privilege and duty to recognize them wherever godly men burden themselves with the local care of the assemblies of God. This is far different from the assumption of ordaining power, than which nothing is more pretentious. On the contrary, it is a lowly recognition of the low state in which the church is found, in which faith can turn alone to the living God.

Deaconship was also a local charge, for which substantially the same qualifications were required as for the office of a bishop. Deacons must themselves be blameless men, and their wives and children must be well-behaved (1 Tim. 3:8-13). They served the assembly in temporal things, as, for example, in the distribution of its bounty to the sick and the needy. This office, not involving any public functions necessarily, might be held by women. Thus we read of Phoebe, servant (or deaconess) of the church at Cenchrea (Rom. 16:1). The modern deacon, appointed to read prayers and homilies "in church" as a kind of preparation for priesthood, is an officer unknown to the word of God. This is but one instance among many in Christendom, where names have been retained, the meaning of which has entirely faded away.

Deacons, unlike elders, were chosen by the assembly before being appointed by the apostles. Thus the seven who served in Jerusalem were chosen by the multitude of the saints (Acts 6:3-5), and later, when certain Gentile assemblies made special collections for their suffering brethren in Judaea, they chose their own messenger to accompany Paul with their offerings (2 Cor. 8:19). The propriety of this is easily understood. What the church gives, it is entitled to have a voice in the disposal of; what the Lord gives, as the ministry of the word, He alone is entitled to control.

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