

The Officers of a New Testament Local Congregation

A Position Paper by Tim Warner



There is a great deal of confusion regarding the government of New Testament congregations. This paper attempts to define the biblical roles and form of government for the local congregation endorsed by the New Testament, to which we adhere.

“Overseer,” “Elder,” “Pastor”

ἐπισκοπος (e-pis-ko-pos), rendered “bishop” in the KJV, means “overseer” or “inspector.” In Paul’s Epistle to the Philippians, “bishops” fill one of only two offices within the local congregation. “...to the saints at Philippi with the bishops and deacons.” Note that both bishops and deacons are plural within one congregation.

The Septuagint uses the term, ἐπισκοπος, for military commanders, (Num. 31:14; 2 Kings 11:15; Neh. 11:14), for supervisors of labor (2 Chron. 34:17; Neh. 11:9), and for overseers of the Temple (Num. 4:16; Neh. 11:22). According to the International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, governors of states conquered by the Greeks were also called “ἐπισκοπος” in Classical Greek.

In the New Testament, “overseer” (ἐπισκοπος), and “elder” (πρεσβυτερος), refer to the same group of leaders. This is established by the fact that those called “elders” (πρεσβυτερος) are also called “overseers” (ἐπισκοπος) in the same passages.

Acts 20:17-18, 28

17 From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called for **the elders** of the church.

18 And when they had come to him, he said to them: ...

28 Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you **overseers**, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.

Titus 1:5-7

5 For this reason I left you in Crete, that you should set in order the things that are lacking, and appoint **elders** in every city as I commanded you —

6 if a man is blameless, the husband of one wife, having faithful children not accused of dissipation or insubordination.

7 For a **bishop** must be blameless,...

1 Peter 5:1-2

1 The **elders** who are among you I exhort, I who am a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that will be revealed:

2 Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as **overseers**, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly;

A closely related noun, ἐπισκοπη (e-pis-ko-pay), appears in 1 Tim. 3:1 and Acts 1:20. The KJV renders it “office of bishop” and “bishoprick.” It clearly refers to the office filled by overseers.

In the Septuagint we find both επισκοπος and επισκοπη in the same verse, Numbers 4:16. Here it illustrates the subtle distinction between them. "Eleazar the son of Aaron the priest is **overseer** (επισκοπος) — the oil of the light, and the incense of composition, and the daily meat – offering and the anointing oil, are his charge; even **the oversight** (επισκοπη) of the whole tabernacle, and all things that are in it in the holy place, in all the works."

In the New Testament, the same subtle distinction between these terms appears in 1 Tim. 3:1-2. "This is a faithful saying: If a man desires the **position of a bishop** (επισκοπη), he desires a good work. A **bishop** (επισκοπος) then must be blameless, ..."

"Pastor" or "Shepherd"

The job description of "overseer" or "elder" was to "shepherd" the flock. Two passages apply all three terms to the same group of men.

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1 The **elders** who are among you I exhort, I who am a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that will be revealed:

2 **Shepherd** the flock of God which is among you, serving as **overseers**, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly;

In both passages above, "shepherd" is a verb, not a noun. Yet the noun form appears in Eph. 4:11, as a name for a distinct office. The logical conclusion is that "elder," "overseer," and "pastor" (shepherd) are interchangeably used of the same group of leaders. The different terminology emphasizes different aspects of the same general category. "Elder" emphasizes experience and maturity necessary to lead. "Overseer" emphasizes the great responsibility associated with the office. While "pastor" (shepherd) emphasizes the way leadership is to be done.

We also learn from Paul that there are different roles within this general category of overseers / elders / pastors.

1 Tim 5:17

17 Let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honor, **especially those** who labor in the word and doctrine.

In this verse, Paul drew a clear distinction between "elders" in general and a sub-group, whose primary responsibility was to teach the Word of God to the congregation. All elders were assumed to "rule" (preside or oversee) the congregation. But the words, "especially those," require that only some elders "labor in the word and doctrine." That is, only some served as teachers of the congregation. That means other elders dealt with other issues. That would no doubt include visiting the sick and handling church oversight matters. Of course, one's "gifts" would come into play in determining what role he would fill as an elder.

That only some of the elders were primarily teachers leads to the conclusion that the "pastor-teachers" in Ephesians 4:11 refer to this sub-category within the general category of elder/overseer. The term "pastor" by itself refers to the role of a "shepherd" that is applied to all elders without distinction in Acts 20 & 1 Pet. 5. Yet, with "teacher" appended to it (pastor-teachers), Paul has zeroed in on this subcategory. "Pastor-teachers" are therefore those elders/overseers whose primary responsibility is to teach the Apostles' doctrine to the congregation. In our congregation, this is the correct designation for what is frequently called the "minister" or "preacher" by others. The term "minister" does not properly apply to this role, because that term is synonymous with "deacon." The Greek word "διακονος" (de-a-con-os) is somewhat indiscriminately translated "servant," "minister," and "deacon" in our English Versions.

"Evangelist"

The evidence from the New Testament supports only two types of offices in the local congregation, that of "elder/overseer/pastor" and "deacon." Some have sought to establish a third category for the "preacher," distinct from the elders. Recognizing that "minister" is not an appropriate term (because whenever the Greek word refers to an office, it means "deacon"), some have taken to using the title, "evangelist" (ευαγγελιστης) to justify this alleged third category. The claimed justification comes from Paul's command to Timothy, who was serving for a time in the congregation at Ephesus.

2 Tim 4:2, 5

2 Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching. ...

*5 But you be watchful in all things, endure afflictions, **do the work of an evangelist**, fulfill your ministry.*

From this passage, some claim that the Timothy, who was clearly a preacher and teacher in Ephesus, was reminded of his title as "evangelist." Yet, a careful reading does not support that conclusion. Had Paul written, "do the work AS an evangelist," it would be clear that Timothy was considered to be an "evangelist," and that "preaching" and "teaching" doctrine to Christians was the role of an "evangelist." However, after encouraging Timothy in his assumed role as a teacher of doctrine, Paul actually wrote, "do the work OF an evangelist." The noun "evangelist" is in the genitive case, meaning, "do the work that belongs to an evangelist." He did not call Timothy an "evangelist." That meaning requires reading an idea into the text that is not there. It is more likely that Paul instructed Timothy to take on an additional responsibility beyond his preaching and teaching doctrine, that of preaching the Gospel to the unsaved.

The word "evangelist" (ευαγγελιστης) means the bearer of good news (the Gospel). It is derived from the word "Gospel" in Greek, "ευαγγελιον." It is the neuter form of the very same root word. "Evangelist" is really a Gospel bearer or preacher. The word itself defines his role, to "evangelize" the lost. In modern lingo, he is a "missionary," one sent by the church to spread the Gospel beyond that local congregation. His primary role is not to teach baptized believers.

We also have one case of a particular man being called an "evangelist." Acts 21:8

*"On the next day we who were Paul's companions departed and came to Caesarea, and entered the house of **Philip the evangelist, who was one of the seven**, and stayed with him."*

Here, Philip is called by the title, "the evangelist." Yet, we are told that he was "one of the seven." That refers to the seven deacons chosen by the Jerusalem congregation to assist the Apostles in ministering to the widows' physical needs (Acts 6:5). Being a deacon, he was not likely the "preacher" of the Jerusalem congregation.

"Deacons" and "Deaconesses"

The office of elder/overseer/pastor was reserved for males who were "the husband of one wife" (1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:6). Women were excluded on the basis of not being permitted to teach or possess authority over the male members (1 Tim. 2:12).

Yet, women were not forbidden from serving in the female version of office of deacon. The term "deacon" is a transliteration of the Greek word "διακονος," a noun in the masculine gender. And when the qualifications for "deacon" are described, they also include "the husband of one wife."

We also have a "deaconess" named in Romans 16:1. Phebe is called a "διακονον" of the congregation of Cenchrea. This is the feminine form of the same root word. If "διακονος" is properly rendered, "deacon," then "διακονον" is properly rendered, "deaconess." Both of these are transliterations. A proper translation into English would be "man servant" and "maid servant." But, the important point is that this title is associated with a particular local church. In addition, Paul informed the Romans in the next verse that she was on official business in Rome for her local church. This strongly suggests that she was entrusted with considerable responsibility.

Furthermore, Paul seems to set down qualifications for deaconesses. In the same passage where he listed the qualifications for deacons, he added this: "*Likewise, women must be reverent, not slanderers, temperate, faithful in all things*" (1 Tim 3:11). Most translations say "their wives." But, this is an unwarranted assumption by translators. The word "their" (showing possession) is not in the Greek text. And the word translated "wives" is "γυνη" the generic word for "women." Given that Phebe was a "deaconess," it seems more likely that Paul was giving qualifications for the female version of deacons.

The Ante Nicene Fathers wrote of both deacons and deaconesses serving the local congregations in the early years after the Apostles. The deacons ministered to the physical needs of men, and the deaconesses to the women. The stated purpose was that both sexes should receive ministry in a discrete manner, and no opportunity would be given the Adversary for improper conduct, or the appearance of such, between the sexes.

Conclusion

When all of the biblical data is weighed, it is quite clear that the local New Testament congregations had only two types of offices, that of elder/overseer/pastor, and that of deacon/deaconess. The role of the former group was to oversee all the affairs of the congregation. Some of these were primarily teachers of the Apostles' doctrine, and others handled other responsibilities. The role of the latter group was to assist the leadership with the temporal needs of the congregation. Evangelists were missionaries who ventured out from the congregation to preach the Gospel to those outside.