

A Treatise on the Eldership

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Does the New Testament prescribe a form of church government? Protestants have commonly answered this question in the negative; and having thus answered, they have proceeded to adopt such forms of government as best suited the tastes and judgment of the various parties into which they are divided. We think that before proceeding thus far, they should have considered the more fundamental question: Does the New Testament authorize any government at all in the Church? If it does not, then every form of church government is a usurpation. It is altogether certain that without divine authority no human being has a right to control the religious conduct of his neighbor, especially to cut off his neighbor from church membership or the privileges pertaining thereto.

But it is not denied that the New Testament authorizes the exercise of government in the church; it is only denied that the *form* of government is prescribed. It is even admitted by many that a certain *form* of government existed in the apostolic age; yet denied that this form was intended to be perpetual.

It is not the purpose of this treatise to fully discuss this question, or to exhibit in detail the New Testament form of church government; but the theme which we have chosen assumes the existence of an eldership in the church, and the development of it will necessarily involve the settlement of the more fundamental question above stated. If it be ascertained that any church government at all is divinely authorized, it must appear as a very singular circumstance if the form of that government is not indicated. Moreover, if we find a form of government in existence in the apostolic churches, we shall demand something above mere human judgment or experience to justify an abandonment of it, or even a modification of it. No less than the same authority which institutes can abolish. What God had instituted he alone may abolish. He may abolish by his word, or he may abolish providentially by finally rendering impossible what had once been instituted but unless it is abolished every divine appointment must stand forever.

I. IS THERE AN OFFICE IN THE CHURCH CALLED THE ELDSHIP?

After the above preliminary statements, we proceed to inquire, Is there an office in the church called the Eldership?

The common English version of the New Testament does not contain the term *eldership*, but the term *presbuterion* in the original should be so translated. This uniformity requires; for the adjective *presbuteros* is uniformly translated *elder*, and the only rendering of *presbuterion*

which harmonizes with this is *eldership*. This term should occur three times in the English Testament, twice having reference to the Jewish Sanhedrin, and once to the eldership in the church. [Lu. 22:66](#); [Acts 22:5](#), [1 Ti. 4:14](#). In this last passage our English version has *presbytery*, which is the Greek word anglicized, and is the exact equivalent of *eldership*. The body so styled, as the term itself indicates, was composed of the individual elders of the church referred to.

But why should we argue a proposition which is not denied? It is indisputable that there was a body of men in the primitive churches called *elders*, and that so many of these as were found in one congregation constituted the *eldership* of that congregation.

Individuals have been found who admit all this, and admit that there should be an eldership in the churches of all ages; who also ascribe to the eldership of modern churches the functions which belonged to those in the primitive age; but who deny that the term eldership designates an *office*, or that elders are properly styled *officers*. They deny, indeed, the existence of office in the church, and would use the term *work* where the term *office* is commonly employed. We regard the distinction as one between words rather than ideas; for one of a body of men, who has any *work* specially assigned to him by the body, is an officer of that body, in the full import of the term. If, then, we shall, in the course of our investigation, ascertain that the elders of the church are charged with the performance of public duties assigned to them by their brethren, we shall thereby know that they are entitled to the name of officers. If, after this, any shall still prefer not to *call* them officers, while recognizing all the functions with which they are charged, we care not to have a war about words with such persons.

II. TITLES OF THE OFFICE.

(1) The Title of “Elder”

The term eldership means *the office of an elder*. This assertion will be proved in proving that an elder is an officer. The termination *ship* appended to the title of an officer, as *secretaryship*, *auditorship*, *governorship*, is indicative of office.

But there are some, who deny that the term elder is ever used in the New Testament in an official sense. They hold that it always means *older person*, and that the eldership of a church consists of the older men of the church. We are now to test the correctness of this assumption, and to determine whether *elder* is ever used as an official title.

It is well known that the term elder is an adjective in the comparative degree, and that its primary meaning is *older*. When used as a substantive, it means an *older person*. The same is true of its Greek representative, *presbuteros*. It is also well known that many words have, in addition to their primary meaning, a technical or official signification. For example, the familiar adjective *general* is sometimes used as the title of a military officer. Major, greater, is the title of another; and *corporal* which means pertaining to the body is the title of still another. So the terms secretary, auditor, judge, mate, professor, and many others, have each an official as well as a primary signification. So it may be with the term elder. Whether it is

so or not is to be determined, as the same question is determined in reference to these other words, by usage. We will now examine its New Testament usage sufficiently to settle this question.

The following statement is made concerning Paul and Barnabas while engaged in their first missionary tour: "When they had *ordained them elders* in every church, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord, on whom they believed." [Acts xiv: 23](#). The term here rendered *ordained* is *cheirotoneo*. It is compounded of *cheir*, the *hand*, and *teino*, *to stretch forth*, and its primary meaning is *to stretch forth the hand*. But from the fact that bodies of men frequently expressed a choice by an elevation of the hand, it acquired the meaning of *to choose* or *to appoint* by an extension of the hand; and finally it came to mean to appoint without reference to the method of appointing. Such is the testimony of scholars, and it is confirmed by the usage of the term. It occurs in only one other place in the New Testament, where it is said of an unnamed brother whom Paul sent to Corinth with Titus, that he "*was chosen* by the churches." [2 Cor. viii: 19](#). How the churches choose him, whether by a show of hands or in some other way, is not determined by this term, nor by the context. Another instance of its use is found in Josephus. He represents Alexander Bala, the Syrian King who claimed jurisdiction over Judea, as writing to Jonathan, the brother of Judas Maccabaeus, these words: "We therefore *do ordain* thee this day high priest of the Jews." Here there was no stretching out the hand, but an appointment to office by a single individual, and through the instrumentality of a letter. Clearer proof of the definition we have given could not be demanded.

Substituting this definition for the term *ordained* in the passage we are considering, we read that Paul and Barnabas "*appointed*" for them elders in every church. These elders, then, were made such by appointment; but Paul and Barnabas certainly did not make *older men by* appointment; neither would the passage make complete sense if it read, "They appointed for them men in every church." To complete the sense, it would be necessary to add the office or position to which the older men were appointed. The considerations show that the term is here used not its primary sense, but in a sense which designates position obtained by appointment. But an appointment puts men into office, and *elder* is therefore the official title conferred by this appointment. The process of appointment will be considered in another part of this treatise.

The same conclusion follows from Paul's statement to Titus: "I left thee in Crete, that thou shouldst set in order the things that are wanting and *ordain elders* in every city." [Ti. 1:5](#). The term here rendered *ordain* is *kathisteemi*, the Greek word most commonly used in both the New Testament and the Greek version of the Old Testament, for appointing to office. It is used to express the appointment of Joseph as governor over Egypt, and of the other officers under him, [Gen. xli: 33-34](#); [Acts vii: 10](#); for the appointment of David as ruler over Israel, [2nd Sam. vi: 21](#); for the appointment of rulers over household servants, [Matt. xxiv: 45](#); of a judge in civil jurisprudence, [Ex. ii: 14](#); [Acts vii: 27](#); and of Jewish high priests, [Heb. v: 1](#); [viii: 3](#).

Now, the fact that this term so frequently expressed the idea of appointment to office does not necessarily prove that it has this meaning in any given passage. Whether it does or not, is

to be determined by the context, and we should always try its primary meaning first. Its primary meaning is *to set* or *place* locally. It is so used twice in the New Testament, [Acts 17:5](#); [Jas. 3:6](#). But Paul could not mean that Titus was to set elders or place elders in every church. There would be no good sense in such a rendering, and therefore, the secondary sense of the term must be adopted. With the universal consent of scholars and critics, we render it *appoint*. Titus, then was to *appoint* elders in every city, and the term elders designates the office to which they were appointed.

We shall now regard it as an established fact that the term elder is sometimes used in the New Testament as an official title. In this fact we find further proof of our first proposition, that there is such an office in the church as the eldership. We shall find, as we proceed, still further confirmation of both these conclusions. In the meantime, we must prescribe a rule by which to distinguish between those instances in which the term elder is used in its primary sense and those in which it has its official sense. The law of the context, the first great law for ascertaining the meaning of ambiguous terms, must be our guide. When the context indicates that a comparison as to age is intended by the writer, we must give the term its primary sense of *elder*; but when the context shows that the persons spoken of sustain an official relation to the church, it must be understood in its official sense. In nearly all instances the distinction is drawn; in a few, the meaning is somewhat uncertain. We shall see and know more of these instances as we proceed further with the discussion.

(2) The Title of “Bishop” and “Overseer”

The second title of this office which we shall consider is expressed by the Greek word *episcopoe*, rendered in the English version once *bishoprick* and once *office of a bishop*. It is derived from the verb *episcopeo*, whose primary meaning is *to look upon*; but in usage it conveys the idea of looking upon with a view to inspection or control. The noun *episcopoe*, therefore, means *inspection* or *oversight*; and from the fact that visiting is often done for the purpose of inspection, it is sometimes rendered *visitation*. The *visitations* of God were sometimes for good and sometimes for evil to the party visited, and this term is used in both cases. See [Lu. 19:44](#); [Is. 10:3](#), *Septuagint*.

We have also, from the same root, the masculine noun *episcopos* which means the man who performs the act designated by *episcopeo*, and is best represented in English by *overseer*. The term *bishop*, by which it is most usually rendered in the common version, is objectionable on two accounts: *first*, it does not correspond in meaning to the original; *second*, it conveys a meaning to the mass of readers not attached to the original word. *Overseer* corresponds to the original, in etymology, and also in current meaning, and it is the only English word which does so. It should, therefore, be adopted into the English version, and into the speech of those who would call bible things by bible names.

Now, it is not claimed for either of these substantives that in its primary sense it refers to an office in the church; for primarily, neither has any allusion to the church. But it is claimed that like the term *elder*, they acquired an appropriated sense, one of them becoming the title of a church officer, and the other the name of his office. The proof of this we will now present; and we beg the reader to remember, lest he grow weary of these apparently useless

inquiries, that we are now discoursing upon this subject as though nothing were known of it, and we must therefore take nothing as granted. We happen also to know that there is practical need for this part of our inquiry.

II. THE TITLES EXPLAINED.

(1) EPISCOPOS (overseer)

The term *episcopos*, *overseer*, is used as the equivalent of *elder* in its official sense. This is clear from the use of the two terms in the [20th chapter of Acts](#). Luke says, that from Miletus Paul sent to Ephesus and called the *elders* of the church. Here, according to a rule already established, *the elders* of the church must mean, not the older men, but those called elders officially. But Paul says to these elders, "Take heed to yourselves, and to all the flock over which the Holy Spirit has made you *overseers*." The elders, then, and the *overseers* in the church at Ephesus were the same persons, and *overseers* is but another title by which they were known. Moreover, they had been made overseers by the Holy Spirit, which implies that by some process dictated by the Holy Spirit, they had been formally placed in that position. This corresponds to the appointment by which we have seen that persons entered the eldership, and is sufficient to establish the presumption that they were made overseers by the same appointment which made them elders. We have further proof of this use of the term in the [epistle to Titus](#). Paul says, "I left thee in Crete than thou shouldst ordain elders in every city, as I had appointed thee; if any be blameless," &c.; and then adds, "For an overseer must be blameless." Now, the fact that an overseer should be blameless, could be no reason why a blameless person must be ordained elder, unless an elder is the same as an overseer. It is the same as if I should say to a literary society of students, Appoint a President of your society, if any be found acquainted with parliamentary rules; for the chairman of such a society should be acquainted with these rules. Now, in this example, if a person knew nothing more of the word chairman than its etymology would indicate, *the man of the chair*, he could not fail to see that I used the term as another title for the President of the society. It is equally clear in the case before us, that Paul uses the term overseer as another title for him who is called elder.

(2) EPISCOPEE (overship)

The term *episcopee* is used to designate the position occupied by the *episcopos* or overseers. This is seen in [1 Timothy 3:1-2](#). Paul says, "If a man desires *episcopee* he desires a good work. An *episcopos*, then, must be blameless," &c. Here it is clear that he who desires *episcopee*, desires to be *episcopos*. If *episcopos* is overseer, then *episcopee* must be the position of an overseer; and what shall we call this position in English? Mr. Green translates it "*a post of oversight*," not a bad expression of the meaning. He renders it in the same way in [Acts 1:20](#). "*His post of oversight* let another take." I prefer the single word *overship*, because it is shorter, and corresponds more closely to the correlative term *overseer*. Whatever be the expression, however, the idea remains the same, and the term designates the office held by an overseer.

It is here objected by some, that we should not call the overseership an *office*, because Paul in this passage expressly calls it *a work*: "If any man desire the overseership, he desires a good work." Undoubtedly, it is a work; and so is every office in either church or State, unless it be a mere sinecure. The fact that it is a work makes it none the less an office. If the President of the United States were to say, "He who desires a foreign mission desires a heavy work," it would not be inferred from the term work that a foreign mission is not an office.

The conclusion thus naturally and necessarily springing from these passages, of Scripture will be confirmed as we proceed to develop the functions of the office. We will find that the elders or overseers of the church are charged with such duties, and entrusted with such authority as makes them officers of the church in the fullest sense of the term.

Before leaving this branch of the subject, we must notice another question which has caused confusion in some minds. It has been assumed that the elders constitute a class out of which the overseers are chosen; the elders being the older men of the church, and the overseers the officers. We have already answered this question by showing that the term elders is used in an official sense to designate the same persons as the overseers. The elders of the church at Ephesus were all embraced in the term overseers; for, as we have seen, *the* elders, not merely a part of them, had been made overseers.

(3) POIMEEN (pastor, shepherd)

The third and last official title which we shall notice is *pastor* or *shepherd*. This term, in the substantive form, is used but once in the New Testament with reference to church officials. It is in the well known passage, [Eph. 4:11](#), where *pastors* are enumerated among the gifts bestowed upon the Church by Christ. The evidence that this term designates the *overseers* or *elders*, is conclusive, and may be briefly stated. The Greek term for shepherd is *poimeen*, and the verb *poimaino* means *to do the work of a shepherd*. Now, he to whom this verb applies is a shepherd, just as he who sows is a sower, he who reaps is a reaper, he who speaks is a speaker, he who sings is a singer, &c., &c. But Paul exhorts the overseers in Ephesus "*to be shepherds* to the church." [Acts 20:28](#); and Peter exhorts the elders of the churches to which he writes, "*Be shepherds* to the flock of God which is among you," and promise that when the "*chief shepherd*" shall appear, they shall receive a crown of glory. They then, were shepherds and Christ, the chief shepherd.

The term *pastor*, the Latin for shepherd, has come into common use from the influence of the Latin version of the Scriptures. There is one all-sufficient reason for preferring our own Anglo-Saxon term *shepherd*. It is found in the fact that *pastor* has become perverted by sectarian usage, and designates in popular phraseology, an entirely different office from the one to whom it is applied in the Scriptures. It has become a synonym for a settled preacher, and is often used for the purpose of distinguishing the preacher from those who are scripturally called the *pastors* of the church. It will perhaps be impossible to recover the term from this abuse, and therefore, it is better to throw it away.

Another good reason for preferring shepherd is, that its primary meaning is familiar to the most illiterate reader, and the metaphor by which the overseer is thus styled is perfectly intelligible to everyone; whereas, the term *pastor* is known to the masses only in its appropriated sense.