

I. SELECTION AND APPOINTMENT

It has long been a question whether church officers should be selected by the congregation at large, or by the Evangelist charged with effecting the organization of the church. There is but little said on the subject in the Scriptures, but those who are willing to be guided by the slightest indications of the will of God in preference to their own judgment, will find sufficient to satisfy them.

We have only one example on record, in which we are distinctly told what part was taken by the congregation, and what by the ordaining officers. This is the case of the seven deacons of the church in Jerusalem. The Apostles called together "the multitude of the disciples," and said, "Look you out among you seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business," [Acts vi: 2, 3](#). The *selection*, then, was made by the multitude, and the appointment by the apostles. The distinction made between these two terms should not be overlooked. The term appoint is sometimes understood as including the selection, but in the style of the apostles it means merely induction into office, and is distinguished from the selection which precedes it.

Now, in the case of the Elders in the churches of Lycaonia and Pisidia, it is said that Paul and Barnabas "ordained them"; or, to express it more accurately, "*appointed* them." [Acts xiv: 23](#). The word here rendered appoint (*cheirotoneo*) is not the one so rendered in [Acts vi: 3](#); but in such a connection its current meaning is about the same. The part performed by the apostles in this case being the same as in the case of the deacons, it is fair to presume that the part performed by the people was also the same, and that Luke fails to mention it because, having previously stated the process of selecting one class of church officers, he could presume that his readers would understand that the same process was observed in the present instance. Indeed, the nature of the case is such that we would of necessity so understand it, unless expressly informed that the process was different. If a traveler, giving an account of the customs of some newly discovered tribe of men, should describe the selection of a certain class of officers of their government, and afterward frequently speak of the selection of other classes of officers, without intimating that the process was different, it would necessarily be inferred that the process was the same, unless, indeed, there should be found something in the context, or in the nature of the case to forbid the inference.

When Titus is told to ordain or appoint Elders in every city, the same term is used, as when the apostles in Jerusalem proposed to appoint the deacons: the process, therefore, is the same, and it takes place after the selection of the officers by the people.

From these premises, we conclude that all church officers were selected by the congregation at large; and this conclusion is confirmed by the earliest uninspired history. Clement of Rome declares it a rule handed down from the apostles, that church officers "should be filled according

to the judgment of approved men, with the consent of the whole community." This would indicate that the judgement of the most approved men in the congregation was given, perhaps in the way of nominations, and that the whole congregation was called upon to express their approval or disapproval. But whether nominations were made in the apostolic age can not be very certainly determined. The only certain fact is that the people elected their officers, and, therefore, whatever mode of procedure in conducting the elections seems most prudent to each individual church, is authorized by the Scriptures.

Next to the selection comes the appointment, or what is commonly called, the ordination of officers. The statements of the Scriptures on this subject are plain, and sufficiently minute. In the case of the deacons, having been chosen, we are told that they were set before the apostles, and, "when they had prayed, that laid their hands on them." They *proposed* to appoint them; what they did was to pray and lay hands on them; praying and laying on hands, then, was the mode of appointing, or, if you please, of ordaining. Fasting also is mentioned in connection with the ordination of the Elders in Lycaonia and Pisidia ([Acts xiv: 23](#)), and it is highly probable that it accompanied, or rather, preceded the service on all such occasions. With these apostolic precedents before them, Titus in Crete, and Timothy in the province of Asia, needed no express instructions as to the process of ordination; neither does the Evangelist of the present day need any more than these precedents furnish. Fasting, prayer, and imposition of hands, conducted with due solemnity, and accompanied by appropriate admonitions and exhortations, constitute the Scriptural mode of induction into office.

Through a misconception of the design and effects of ordination, the superstitious idea has extensively prevailed, that if a man is once ordained to office in a congregation, he need not be re-ordained, if he changes his locality and is elected to the same office in another congregation, that there is something perpetual about the imposition of hands, which renders a repetition of it improper. This idea is precluded when we once understand that, like the oath of office in civil government, it is a mere induction into office and is therefore to be repeated as often as an election to office takes place.

There has been much useless discussion of the question, to what church officer pertains the privilege of laying on hands. The discussion is useless, because the Scriptures furnish unquestionable examples of hands being imposed by apostles, by prophets and by teachers, ([Acts xiii: 1-3](#)), by Elders; ([1 Ti. iv: 14](#)); and by Evangelists, ([1 Ti. v: 22](#); [Ti. i: 5](#)). At the present day, either Elders or Evangelists, or both together, may perform the service, according to the dictates of good sense and the requirement of good order on each occasion.

One more question occurs to us as worthy of a brief notice in conclusion. Paul says of the deacons, "Let these also first be proved; then let them use the office of a deacon, being found blameless." [1 Ti. iii: 10](#). Some understand this to mean that the candidate for the deacon's office shall be put to work in the duties of the office until it is ascertained whether he can perform them well or not, before he is ordained; and that the term *also* in the sentence refers back to the Elders previously mentioned, indicating the same in reference to them. It should be observed, however, that Paul does not say that the proving he speaks of is to precede *ordination*, but to precede *using the office*. It would be reversing Paul's order, therefore, to require the candidate to use the office as a means of proving him. Instead of proving him first, and then letting him use the office, it

would be requiring him to use the office first of all. Evidently this can not be the meaning: but, having prescribed the qualifications by which a candidate for each of the offices in question is to be tested, the apostle states that they must prove themselves before they are allowed to exercise the functions of the office to which they aspire.

II. REGULAR MEETINGS

In a former section of this treatise, we mentioned the necessity of regular and frequent meetings of the Eldership of the church, in order to efficiency in the discharge of their duties. It is impossible that a work, requiring the united wisdom, watchfulness and activity, of a plurality of men, can be successfully accomplished without frequent, and often protracted consultations. The members of a business firm, even if they are engaged in a comparatively small business, find such consultations necessary; and the regularity with which the directors of banks, insurance companies, and corporations of like character, hold their meetings, is very well known. How, then, can it be expected that the Elders of a church, who have the interests of many precious souls under their care, will be able to dispense with such meetings? The thought is preposterous: and consequently, we find that in all churches which are characterized by faithful discipline, such meetings are regularly held. In many of our large city churches, the Elders find it necessary to meet at least once a week, and to often spend several hours together in consultation. It is probable that there is no Eldership, even in very small congregations, who would not find occasion for weekly meetings, if they were fully alive to all the duties of the office: but when less frequent meetings are found sufficient, let them, of course, be adopted.

In these meetings some regular mode of procedure should be adopted, by which all business should be attended to in order, and nothing neglected. Reports will be heard concerning efforts to reclaim the wandering and to check the wayward. Reports, also, of new cases which have arisen, demanding the attention of the Elders. Questions in reference to all the details of the church's work will be settled, and the details of labor distributed according to the ability and adaptedness of each Elder. And lest the combined watchfulness of all the official Board should have allowed some case of delinquency to escape notice, the names on the church book will be called over in regular rotation, and the spiritual condition of each member inquired into. By this means, the Elders will be constantly reminded of duties which might be forgotten, and constantly stimulated to the discharge of duties which might be neglected.

III. WANT OF TIME

There is no class of men who more universally and freely acknowledge a serious neglect of duty, than the Elders of churches. When we remember their position as leaders and exemplars of the disciples, we feel that this is a sad acknowledgment, and we can but mourn over its truthfulness. Who would not gladly furnish a remedy, if it were in his power?

The most common excuse for this neglect of duty is want of time. The Elder has not time to study the Scriptures, and prepare himself to speak to edification on the Lord's day; and he feels sure that he cannot take time to look promptly after persons needing his counsel or reproof. Under this conviction, he gives almost no time to his duties, until the church get into so miserable a condition as to alarm him into some activity, or until some very grievous and

scandalous offence excites the whole community, and public clamor forces attention to the case of a man or woman who might have been saved from disgrace by timely admonition. Sometimes, indeed, this neglect of duty goes on until the Elder becomes perfectly disheartened and disgusted, throws up his office, indulges in bitter complaints, and finally loses all interest in the welfare of the church. The end of that man is the end of the unfaithful steward.

It will be found, upon careful calculation, that the excuse of a want of time is more imaginary than real. For example, the average number of members in country and village churches is about one hundred and the average number of Elders about three. Suppose, now, that each of these three Elders should take sufficient time to see and converse with one person needing admonition or counsel, each week: we would have *one hundred and fifty-six* conversations in one year, more, perhaps, than the necessities of any ordinary congregation would require in order to a most effective state of discipline. And what Elder is there who cannot, if he will, find time, by taking all advantage of incidental meetings, to hold at least one such conversation, on the average, for each week in the year? Surely it is no great sacrifice of time for even the most industrious business man among us. It requires nothing but the will to make it practicable and easy.

CONCLUSION

In the larger congregations, it is desirable to have one Elder wholly given to the work of overseeing, teaching and preaching: and we can easily imagine congregations, if we do not already have them among us, that need the labors of a plurality of such Elders. But even with the labors of one such man, to perform those parts of the duties of the office which require the larger amount of time, the difficulty in reference to time is largely obviated. In no instance, then, is this excuse a sufficient one to justify a tithe of the inefficiency which now so generally characterizes the disciplinary labors of the Eldership.

As regards preparation for public teaching, if our Elders would aim less at showy harangues upon the Lord's day, and more at plain and simple instruction on practical duties, and exhortations to the same, they would find that good preparation for the task would require no more Bible study than ought to characterize every good man, with the addition of such reflection upon Bible themes as would not more than prevent idle moments from running to waste. An economy of time, and a wisely directed use of it is what we need, rather than a greater amount of it.

Finally, the Elders of churches should constantly remember that they are divinely constituted exemplars to the flock, in all the virtues and activities of Christian life: and that one of the methods, and not the least of them, by which they should make their example felt, is to sacrifice some of their time to the service of the Lord. In so doing, they will obey the words of Paul, when he says to the Ephesian Elders, "I have coveted no man's silver, or gold, or apparel. Yea, ye yourselves know, that these hands have ministered unto my necessities, and to them that were with me. I have shewed you all things, how that so laboring ye ought to support the weak, and to remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he said, It is more blessed to give than to receive."

[Acts xx: 35.](#)

I now bring this brief treatise to a close, and send it out among my brethren in the Elders office, as a token of my heartfelt interest in an office which has cost my own heart more anxiety than all other duties which I have been called upon to perform in life. If it shall be of service to any of my fellow-laborers and companions, in tribulation, it will accomplish, to that extent, its mission.