

Part 5

The Meetings of the Assembly and part 4 of Servants in the Body of Christ

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This article serves as the final installment in two series of articles. It is the last article in "The Meetings of the Assembly" series. It also completes the "Servants in the Body of Christ" series. In this article, I want to explain the functions of the elders and servants in the assembly.

In part 4 of "The Meetings of the Assembly" series (<http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/assemblymeetings4.htm>), we saw how we can apply Paul's instructions for holding a meeting of the *ekklēsia* to meetings in our own houses. To have proper order in the assembly, we still also need to understand the functions God can give to people in the *ekklēsia*. We laid the foundation for that understanding in the earlier articles of the "Servants in the Body of Christ" series. In those articles, we learned that, despite mistranslations in some Bibles, the Greek of the New Testament never speaks of anyone as holding an office. A special class of people called a "clergy" is an unbiblical, manmade tradition. What we find in the Bible are not an exalted clergy but humble brothers who serve one another. The words "deacon" and "minister" are two English words that transliterate and translate respectively the same Greek words, words that are better translated simply as "servants." The Bible doesn't teach three different roles called "ministers," "deacons," and "servants" in God's assembly, but one role called "servants."

We also learned that everyone can serve and that one way the men can serve is by speaking in the assembly. Yet, although all can serve and all men can speak, the Bible also calls certain men "bishops" and "deacons" (better translated as "overseers" and "servants") and says that they and their wives must meet certain qualifications. Scriptures also talk about "elders," "teachers," "shepherds," "pastors," "stewards," "evangelists," and all of those with the gifts expressed in 1 Corinthians 12:28: "God has set some in the assembly: first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracle workers, then gifts of healings, helps, governments, and various kinds of languages" (1 Corinthians 12:28). Thus, although all may serve and all men may speak, some saints may be particularly gifted in certain areas, and "bishops" and "deacons" must meet certain qualifications.

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Servants

All brothers and sisters in the *ekklēsia* can serve. The most common word in the New Testament for someone who serves is *diakonos*. This is the word from which many Bibles transliterate the word "deacon." But *diakonos* simply means "servant," and I believe it is best to translate it as "servant" rather than use "deacon" so that we don't lose sight of its humble meaning.

Besides all brethren being able to serve, some men meet certain qualifications that make them especially fit for the role of servant. These qualifications are found in 1 Timothy 3:8-13. I give a full exposition of these verses in "Ministers and Deacons, or Just Servants?" (<http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/servants2.htm>). Men who meet these qualifications (and their wives must also meet qualifications—see 1 Timothy 3:11) can be counted on to put the interests of others first, be strong in the faith, and to have led such upright lives that they have a good reputation with outsiders. We might say that they are men who can be relied on to serve where they are needed, complete a project without having to be micromanaged, and trusted to not misuse funds or blab confidentialities. Because the assembly recognizes that these men meet these qualifications, they can look upon them as the special servants of the *ekklēsia* and turn to them when a need arises.

Elders

Just as "servants" can mean all who serve but also has the special meaning of those who meet certain criteria that qualify them to be recognized as servants of the assembly, so "elders" also has two meanings. In its basic meaning, "elders" refers to older people. But it also is used of older men who meet the qualifications of an "overseer" found in 1 Timothy 3:1-7. Instead of "overseer," many versions of the Bible use the word "bishop." "Bishop" is from a Latin word, which in turn is a transliteration of the Greek word *episkopos*, which means "overseer." "Bishop" is confusing to modern readers because most don't know what it means and they associate it with a clerical office in the institutional churches. "Overseer" is a good translation that shows it to be a function of an elder who oversees or moderates the meetings of the assembly in much the same way as the speaker in the House of Commons of a Parliament. He also watches over the *ekklēsia* as a shepherd watches over his flock. Below is a literal translation and some parenthetical comments for 1 Timothy 3:1-7:

:1 **"Trustworthy** [*pistos*] **is the word** [*logos*—OR saying], **If anyone aspires** [*oregetai*—lit. "reaches out to"] **to act as overseer** [*episkopēs*—someone who watches over, a superintendent; an overseer—that is, If anyone aspires to that which belongs to being an overseer, in other words, the work of being an overseer as is next pointed out], **he desires** [*epithumei*—lit. "he has set his passions upon"] **a good work."**

:2 **"It is necessary, then, for the overseer to be without cause for arrest** [*anepilēmpton*—lit. "unable to be seized upon." Any Christian might be arrested for being a Christian, but Paul means that he must be living so that no one would think to charge him with an actual crime. Like a political candidate, he must be vetted.], **a man** [*andra*—OR husband] **of one woman** [*gunaikos*—OR wife], **sober** [*nēphalion*—sober as literally not drunk; temperate], **sound minded** [*sōphrona*], **well-arranged** [*kosmion*—it is hard to know if this means neat in his appearance or orderly/appropriate in his manners], **a lover of strangers** [*philoxenon*—OR hospitable], **instructive** [*didaktikon*—OR instructed, OR teachable];"

:3 **"not around the wine** [*mē paroinon*—the implication being, always going back to the wine, not able to leave it], **not a striker** [*mē plēktēn*—that is, doesn't hit people; not necessarily associated with fighting], **not profiting through shameful means** [*aischrokerdē*—lit. "shameful gaining]; **but equitable** [*epieikē*—lit. "acting upon what is like"; thus equitable or fair], **not a fighter** [*amachon*—either not a brawler or not being contentious], **not loving money** [*aphilarguron*—lit. "not loving silver], "

:4 **"one leading** [*proistamenon*—lit. "standing in front of"; OR presiding over OR guarding] **his own family** [*oikou*—OR house] **well, having his children** [*tekna*] **in submission** [*hupotagēi*—or subjection or subordination] **with all dignity** [*semnotētos*—that which makes one worthy of honor; this refers to him, not the children; his children submit to him because he is worthy of it, not because he beats them into submission]; "

:5 **"(for if one does not know how to lead his own family, how will he take care of the matters of** [*epimelēsetai*—the word used for the Samaritan taking care of the beaten man in Luke 10:34] **the called out assembly of God?);"**

:6 **"Not a neophyte** [*neophuton*—lit. "newly planted; but the old meaning of the word was literally a "new puff"—note how this fits the rest of the sentence], **that not being puffed up** [*tuphōtheis*] **he should fall into judgment** [*krima*] **of the devil** [*diabolou*—or perhaps the slanderer, that is, giving anyone the occasion to judge]."

:7 **"But it is necessary for him also to have a good testimony** [*marturian*—witness] **from the outsiders** [*exōthen*], **that he**

not fall into scorning [*oneidismōn*], and the snare [*pagida*—a type of snare or trap] of the devil [as previous verse]."

As these verses explain, then, someone could desire to be an overseer, but he had to meet these criteria. But how do we know that overseers and those recognized by the assembly as elders were the same people? Because Paul wrote the following to Titus:

I left you in Crete for this reason, that you would set in order the things that were lacking, and appoint elders in every city, as I directed you; if anyone is blameless, the husband of one wife, having children who believe, who are not accused of loose or unruly behavior. For the overseer must be blameless, as God's steward; not self-pleasing, not easily angered, not given to wine, not violent, not greedy for dishonest gain; but given to hospitality, as a lover of good, sober minded, fair, holy, self-controlled; holding to the faithful word which is according to the teaching, that he may be able to exhort in the sound doctrine, and to convict those who contradict him.

Titus 1:5-9

Notice that Paul interchangeably uses the words "elder," "overseer," and "steward." These refer to the same people with the same qualifications. Pastors are also the same people as "elders," "overseers," and "stewards." The word "pastors" in some translations of Ephesians 4:11 is from the Greek word *poimēn*. *Poimēn* means "shepherd." Now read what Peter writes in 1 Peter 5:1-4:

I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder, and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and who will also share in the glory that will be revealed. Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, exercising the oversight, not under compulsion, but voluntarily, not for dishonest gain, but willingly; neither as lording it over those entrusted to you, but making yourselves examples to the flock. When the chief Shepherd is revealed, you will receive the crown of glory that doesn't fade away.

Shepherding (or pastoring; pastor and pasture come from the same Latin word) the flock of God is one of the functions of an elder. It is the same as "exercising the oversight" or "overseeing" (*episkopeō*); that is, being an overseer. It is to be done willingly and in a way that does not lord it over the flock.

"Dishonest gain" is not the best translation for the Greek word *aischrokerdōs*. "Filthy lucre" (King James Version) also does not convey Peter's intent. The *NET Bible* puts it, "not for shameful profit but eagerly," and the *Holman Christian Standard Bible* says, "not for the money but eagerly." Peter means that elders should not be serving for the money's sake; that serving for the money is a base motive.

Can those who serve the assembly receive money? Yes, Paul makes this clear (1 Corinthians 9:4-19). In 1 Timothy 5:17-18, Paul shows us that elders are both to "preside" (*proistēmi*—"preside"—see the notes on 1 Timothy 3:4 above, it is the overseeing/shepherding function of an elder; "rule" is not a good translation here, especially considering Matthew 20:25-28 and Luke 22:25-27) and teach. If they do this well, they should be counted worth of "double honor" [*diplēs timēs*]. *Diplēs* or "double" does not have to literally mean twice as much, but may simply mean "more"; *timēs* can mean "honor" but can also refer to physical sustenance, likely including money. "Honorarium" might be a good translation, and its definition fits the idea that the elders were not serving for a salary: "honorarium: a payment for a service (as making a speech) on which custom or propriety forbids a price to be set" (*Merriam-Webster's 11th Collegiate Dictionary*).

Elders must not serve as a way of making a living. Pastors receiving set salaries, negotiating their salaries, and even leaving their congregations to go where they will receive better pay are setting themselves up to be accused of being hirelings who are in it for the money and not shepherds who truly care for their flocks (John 10:12-13). Speaking of those the assembly is to turn from, Paul specifically describes them as those who "don't serve our Lord, Jesus Christ, but their own belly; and by their smooth and flattering speech, they deceive the hearts of the innocent" (Romans 16:18). Brethren, there are many such preachers today! Paul made clear that he would serve whether he received anything in return or not (1 Corinthians 9:15-18; 2 Thessalonians 3:8). He supported himself, and others, through making tents (Acts 18:3; 1 Corinthians 4:12).

Pastoring/shepherding/overseeing and teaching are functions of an elder. Elders following Scriptural guidelines are not employees of their assemblies. Employees are hirelings who can let their dependency on their paychecks tempt them to say or do only what pleases their employers. Elders must be independent of such an unhealthy relationship. On the other hand, biblical elders do not dominate, lord it over, or run their assemblies; nor do they give sermons or preach

each week the way institutional church pastors do. If at all possible, an assembly should have more than one elder. Notice that "elders" is in the plural in these verses: Acts 11:30; 15:2, 4, 6, 22, 23; 16:4; 20:17; 21:18; 1 Timothy 5:17; James 5:14; and 1 Peter 5:1-3.

In Acts 20:28, Paul, speaking to the elders from Ephesus, says, "Then take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit placed you as overseers, to shepherd the assembly of God which He purchased through His own blood" (Acts 20:28, *Literal Translation of the Holy Bible*). The Holy Spirit has placed the elders as overseers to shepherd or pastor (*poimainō*) the assembly or *ekklēsia* of God. He goes on to say why: "For I know this, that after my departure grievous wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and out of you yourselves will rise up men speaking perverted things, in order to draw away the disciples after themselves" (verses 29-30, *LITV*). Elders are not the only men who can speak in assemblies, but, as overseers, they have the responsibility to guard the flock by questioning anything said that they think might be doctrinally unsound. Read Romans 16:17. Paul addresses this to the brethren, but the wording suggests that it is the overseers he has in mind as those who must primarily take up his orders to "sight" or "look out for" (*skopeō*—this is half of the compound word, *episkopeō* or "overseer"; it is a primary function of the overseer) those they believe are leading the flock astray and turn away from them. Of course, the authority and the standard of doctrine come from no man, but from God and "the word of his grace" (Acts 20:32), the Bible.

Therefore, even if an elder were to go astray—and we just read that Paul thought this was very possible—those in the assembly who know the Scriptures should withdraw from him. Thus, every member of the assembly has the obligation to know the Bible as well as possible.

Overseers should also be watchful that the meetings proceed decently and in order (1 Corinthians 14:40). And, yes, they also speak, laboring in the Word, carefully teaching the assembly to insure that the flock is well fed spiritually (1 Timothy 5:17; Titus 1:9) and, thus, less liable to stray.

The Bible mentions other functions that saints had within the *ekklēsia* in the first century, but not all continue today. Prophets, as we might expect, prophesied, and prophecy is a gift that ceased (1 Corinthians 13:8) when all prophecies had been given and canonized in Scriptures. Other roles such as miracles or powers, healings, helps, and guidance (1 Corinthians 12:28) functioned largely outside of the meetings of the

ekklēsia, and, thus are outside of the scope of this article. Even evangelists and apostles were not normal functions of saints in local assemblies. Perhaps I will discuss these another time, but I won't go off the track onto that subject here.

I hope the articles in these two series have helped you to understand the differences between institutional church meetings and biblical meetings of the *ekklēsia* and understand the true function of the servants in the assembly. I also hope that they will help you to establish and conduct meetings of the *ekklēsia* should you desire.