

15 How Is The Church Governed?

We have already noted that Jesus is the head of the church — everything is to be done according to His directions — but for the day to day ordering of the church's affairs He has appointed officers to rule under His authority, apart from any civil power. Two, and only two, ongoing offices within the church are mentioned in the New Testament: the office of elder and the office of deacon.

What Do Elders Do?

Elders, sometimes called presbyters or bishops, are responsible for the spiritual oversight of the church. The word bishop is a descriptive term that means overseer or guardian. They are responsible for the spiritual welfare of those in the congregation over which they have been appointed. To help us understand the elder's responsibility the New Testament compares him to a shepherd.

“The elders who are among you I exhort: ...Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock; and when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that does not fade away.”

1 Peter 5:1 – 4

Elders are responsible to feed, guard and discipline the flock. Their ministry is exercised chiefly through teaching, for they do not exercise any authority of their own: their authority is established on the basis of the teaching of God's Word. Nevertheless they are to be honoured and obeyed.

“Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you.”

Hebrews 13:17

Whilst all elders within a church have equal standing and responsibility all elders need not necessarily do the same thing. Duties may be distributed and shared among the elders in a congregation according to their gifts and availability.

“Let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honour, especially those who labour in the word and doctrine.”

1 Timothy 5:17

Question: Should elders ever be called to account for their conduct and the fulfilment of their responsibilities? If so, who should they be accountable to and in what way? You may wish to consider the words of 1 Timothy 5:17 – 22.

What Do Deacons Do?

The word deacon means minister or servant. Most would agree that the first recorded appointment of deacons is in Acts 6:1 – 6 where seven men are appointed to deal with administrative matters in order to free the apostles to concentrate on prayer and teaching.

From this and other New Testament passages it seems that the deacons' primary responsibility is to attend to administrative matters.¹

Question: In the modern context what responsibilities ought rightly to fall to the deacons within a church?

How Are Elders and Deacons Appointed?

As there is no reference in the New Testament to the appointment of either one deacon or one elder in any church we believe that more than one person should be appointed to each office.

“...appoint elders in every city as I commanded you.”

Titus 1:5

“So when they (Paul and Barnabas) had appointed elders in every church, and prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.”

Acts 14:23

Both elders and deacons are appointed by the Lord Jesus Christ.

“Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers.”

Acts 20:28

It is not so much the church's responsibility to choose them as to recognise them. In 1 Timothy 3, and in Titus 1, the Bible lists clearly the qualities that should look for in those being considered for office.

Question: In practical terms, how do you think a church should go about appointing elders and deacons?

Memory Verses

☺ 1 Peter 5:1 – 4

¹ Some would add that deacons have a special responsibility for evangelism. They base this on the fact that both Stephen and Philip, whose names are among those of the seven appointed in Acts 6, are designated as evangelists.