Rethinking the Governance Structure at Bethlehem Baptist Church

A Biblical Examination of Key Terms

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After many months of Biblical study and prayer we are persuaded that the time has come for a serious rethinking of the governance structure at Bethlehem. To provide the basis for this rethinking we have gathered here some of the results of our study. Our hope is that many with concern for the Biblical fidelity of our governance structure will devote the time and effort necessary to study these matters so that you can enter the congregational discussions with insight and wisdom.

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1. Biblical Principles of Local Church governance

1.1. That the effort will be made to conform the structure and procedures and spirit of church governance as closely as possible to Biblical guidelines, with a constant eye to promoting the glory of God and the advancement of faith (2 Tim 3:16-17; 1 Cor. 10:31; Phil. 1:25).

1.2. That the ministry of the church is primarily the work of the members in the activity of worship toward God, nurture toward each other, and witness toward the world. Internal structures for church governance are NOT the main ministry of the church, but the necessary equipping and mobilizing of the saints for the work of ministry (Eph. 4:11-12).

1.3. That governance structures should be lean and efficient to this end, not aiming to include as many people as possible in office-holding, but to free and fit as many people as possible for ministry. (Implied in the preceding principle.)

1.4. That Christ is the head of the church, and spiritually all his disciples are on a level ground before him, each having direct access to him and responsibility to intercede for the good of all as a community of priests (Eph. 4:15; Mt. 23:8-11; 1 Tim. 2:5; Rev. 1:6; Gal. 6:1-2; Heb. 3:13).
1.5. That, not inconsistent with this equality, God has ordained the existence of officers in the church, some of whom are charged under Christ with the leadership of the church (1 Tim. 5:17; 1 Thess. 5:12; Heb. 13:7,17; Acts 20:28).

1.6. That, under Christ and his word, the final court of appeal in the local church in deciding matters of disagreement is the congregation itself. (This is implied, first, in the fact that the leaders are not to lead by coercion, but by persuasion and free consent [1 Peter 5:3]; second, in the fact that elders may be censured [1 Tim. 5:19]; and third, in the fact that in Matthew 18:15-20 the church is the final court of appeal in matters of discipline).

1.7. That the local congregation should therefore call and approve its own leaders. (Implied in the preceding principle.)

1.8. That the leaders of the church must be people who are spiritually mature and exemplary, gifted for the ministry given to them, and have a sense of divine urging, and are in harmony with the duly established leadership of the church. (1 Timothy 3:1-13; Titus 1:5-9; Rom. 12:6-8; Acts 20:28; Phil. 2:2)

1.9. That spiritual qualifications never be sacrificed to technical expertise. For example, deacons or trustees or financial and property administrators should be men or women with hearts for God even more importantly than they have heads for finance, and best of all, both. (Implied in the preceding principle.)

1.10. That the selection process provide for the necessary assessment of possible leaders by a group able to discern the qualifications mentioned in #8; and that the process provide for the final approval by the congregation of all officers. (Implied in principles 6 and 7.)

1.11. That terms of active service not be dictated by the desire to include as many different people as possible in leadership (see #3 above), but by the careful balance between the need, on the one hand, to have the most qualified leaders and, on the other hand, to guard against burn out and stagnation.

2. Baptist Church Government Illustrated from Historic Baptist Confessions.

The purpose of this historical survey is to show that from their earliest beginnings Baptists have held to the view that the two ongoing church offices presented in the New Testament are elders and deacons, and that only in more modern developments has the eldership largely disappeared.

2.1 A Short Confession of Faith in Twenty Articles, by John Smyth, 1609

Article 16:

The ministers of the church are, not only bishops (episcopos), to whom the power is given of dispensing both the word and the sacraments, but also deacons, men and widows, who attend to the affairs of the poor and sick brethren.

2.2 A Declaration of Faith of English People Remaining at Amsterdam, 1611

Article 20:

That the Officers of every Church or congregation are either Elders, who by their office do especially feed the flock concerning their souls, Acts 20:28, 1 Peter 5:2,3. or
Deacons Men, and Women who by their office relieve the necessities of the poor and impotent brethren concerning their bodies, Acts 6:1-4.

2.3 Propositions and Conclusions Concerning the Christian Religion, 1612-1614

Proposition 76:

That Christ hath set in His outward church two sorts of ministers: viz., some who are called pastors, teachers or elders, who administer in the word and sacraments, and others who are called Deacons, men and women: whose ministry is to serve tables and wash the saints' feet (Acts 6:2-4; Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:2,3,8,11; and chap.5).

2.4 The London Confession, 1644

Article 36:

That being thus joined, every Church has power given them from Christ for their better well-being, to choose to themselves meet persons into the office of Pastors, Teachers ["Pastors" and "Teachers" are omitted in later editions.] , Elders, Deacons, being qualified according to the Word, as those which Christ has appointed in his Testament, for the feeding, governing serving, and building up of his Church, and that none other have power to impose them, either these or any other.

2.5 Second London Confession, 1677, 1688

Article 26, paragraph 8:

A particular Church gathered, and completely Organized, according to the mind of Christ, consists of Officers, and Members; And the Officers appointed by Christ to be chosen and set apart by the Church (so called and gathered) for the peculiar Administration of Ordinances, and Execution of power, or Duty which he entrusts them with, or calls them to, to be continued to the end of the World, are Bishops or Elders and Deacons.

2.6 Articles of the Baptist Bible Union of America, 1923

Article 13:

We believe that a church of Christ is a congregation of baptized believers. . . that its officers of ordination are pastors, elders and deacons, whose qualifications, claims and duties are clearly defined in the Scriptures.

2.7 Statement of Faith of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1925, 1963

Article 6:

This church is an autonomous body, operating through democratic processes under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. In such a congregation members are equally responsible. Its Scriptural officers are pastors and deacons.

2.8 Swedish Baptist Confession of Faith, 1861

Article 9:
We believe that a true Christian church is a union of believing and baptized Christians, who have covenanted to strive to keep all that Christ has commanded, to sustain public worship, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit to choose among themselves shepherds or overseers and deacons, to administer baptism and the Lord's supper. . .

2.9 Confession of Faith and Ecclesiastical Principles of the Evangelical Association of French-Speaking Baptist Churches

Part 2, Article 2:

In addition to pastors or elder, the local church may have other responsible servants, for example deacons and deaconesses whose role it is to assist the pastors or elders in their ministry, by assuming especial responsibility for everything that relates to the material interests of the congregation.

2.10 A Comment on Tradition

Of course our only infallible rule for faith and practice is not tradition, either old or new, but rather, the Word of God. Nevertheless, we believe that humility and wisdom commend the careful consideration of what our fathers in the faith have taught and practiced. We are not the sole possessors of truth. And we are very prone to be blind at the very points perhaps where they saw clearly. The least we can say from this historical survey of Baptist Confessions is that it is false to say that the eldership is unbaptistic. On the contrary, the eldership is more baptistic than its absence, and its disappearance is a modern phenomenon that parallels other unbiblical developments in doctrine that make its disappearance questionable at best.

Note: The story of the presence and then gradual disappearance of multiple elders from the Congregational churches of New England in the 17th and 18th century is told briefly by Iain Murray in Jonathan Edwards: A New Biography (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1987), pp.344-6.

But in the end, the issue is whether the Bible itself teaches a form of church governance including elders and deacons as the two abiding officers of the church. So we turn to the Scriptures.


The texts which follow are all the references to Christian elders in the New Testament. What we will see below, however, is that the office is mentioned more often than these few references imply. It is mentioned under other names. This remains to be shown in section 4 below.

Acts 11:29-30

And in the proportion that any of the disciples had means, each of them determined to send a contribution for the relief of the brethren living in Judea. (30) And this they did, sending it in charge of Barnabas and Saul to the elders.

Acts 14:23

And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting, they committed them to the Lord in whom they believed.
Acts 15:1-6

Some men came down from Judea and began teaching the brethren, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." (2) And when Paul and Barnabas had great dissension and debate with them, the brethren determined that Paul and Barnabas and some others of them should go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders concerning this issue. (3) Therefore, being sent on their way by the church, they were passing through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and were bringing great joy to all the brethren. (4) When they arrived at Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them. (5) But some of the sect of the Pharisees who had believed stood up, saying, "It is necessary to circumcise them and to direct them to observe the Law of Moses." (6) The apostles and the elders came together to look into this matter.

Acts 15:22-23

Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them to send to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas—Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren, (23) and they sent this letter by them, "The apostles and the brethren who are elders, to the brethren in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia who are from the Gentiles, greetings."

Acts 16:4

Now while they were passing through the cities, they were delivering the decrees which had been decided upon by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem, for them to observe.

Acts 20:17

And from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called to him the elders of the church.

Acts 21:17-18

After we arrived in Jerusalem, the brethren received us gladly. (18) And the following day Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present. (19) After he had greeted them, he began to relate one by one the things which God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry.

1 Timothy 4:14

Do not neglect the spiritual gift within you, which was bestowed on you through prophetic utterance with the laying on of hands by the presbytery.

1 Timothy 5:17

Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.

1 Timothy 5:19

Do not receive an accusation against an elder except on the basis of two or three witnesses.
Titus 1:5

This is why I left you in Crete, that you might amend what was defective, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you.

James 5:14

Is any among you sick? Let him call the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord.

1 Peter 5:1

So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ as well as a partaker in the glory that is to be revealed.

1 Peter 5:5

You younger men, likewise, be subject to your elders; and all of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, for God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble.

2 John 1:1

The elder to the chosen lady and her children, whom I love in truth; and not only I, but also all who know the truth,

3 John 1:1

The elder to the beloved Gaius, whom I love in truth.

4. Other Names for Elders

4.1. Bishop/Overseer

The English term "bishop" means overseer and is sometimes used to translate the Greek word episcopos which means "one who over (eπi) sees (scopos)."

There are at least four reasons to consider this term (bishop/overseer) as equivalent to elder in the New Testament church:

4.1.1. Compare Titus 1:5 with 1:7 where bishop/overseer and elder are apparently interchangeable terms. Paul begins by saying that Titus should appoint elders (presbuterous) in every town (v. 5). Then he gives some qualifications that they must meet (v. 6), and continues without a break in v. 7 by saying, "For a bishop (episkopon), as God's steward must be blameless." Virtually all commentators agree that the same office is in view in these two terms: "elder" describing the man with reference to his dignity and standing (older); "bishop" describing the man with reference to his function and duty (oversight).

4.1.2. In Acts 20:17 Paul calls the "elders" to come down from Ephesus. ("And from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called to him the elders of the church.") Then he says to them in verse 28 that God has made them "guardians" (="overseers/bishops"; episkopous) among the flock. ("Take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, in which
the Holy Spirit has made you guardians, to feed the church of the Lord." So the "elders" are the "bishops/overseers" in Ephesus.

4.1.3. In 1 Timothy 3:1 Paul says, "If any one aspires to the office of bishop/overseer, he desires a noble task." Then he gives the qualifications for the overseer/bishop in verses 2-7. Unlike the deacons, the overseer must be "able to teach" (v. 2), and in v. 5 he is said to be one whose management of his own household fits him to care for God's church. These two functions are ascribed to elders in the fifth chapter of this same book (1 Timothy 5:17)—teaching and governing. So it is very likely that in Paul's mind the bishops/overseers of 1 Timothy 3:1-7 are the same as the elders of 5:17.

4.1.4. In Philippians 1:1 Paul writes, "To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the bishops and deacons." These then seem to be the two offices of the church just as in 1 Timothy 3:1-13 the qualifications only for these two are given. But Paul appointed "elders" in all the churches (Acts 14:23), and so it is very likely that the elders of the church at Philippi were the bishops/overseers referred to in Philippians 1:1.

We conclude that the office of bishop/overseer is the same as the office of elder in the New Testament. It is listed beside the office of deacon (Philippians 1:1; 1 Timothy 3:1-13) in such a way as to show that these two were the main offices by which the ongoing life of the church was to be managed.

4.2. Pastor

The term "pastor" (poimen) occurs in the New Testament only once (Eph. 4:11). But there is a verb (poimainein "to shepherd, or feed") closely related to the noun "pastor" which helps us discover how the role of pastor was related to the role of elder and bishop.

4.2.1. Ephesians 4:11 treats pastors and teachers as one group and thus suggests that the chief role of the pastor is feeding the flock through teaching, a role clearly assigned to bishops/overseers in 1 Timothy 3:2 and to elders in Titus 1:9. This suggests that the pastor is another name for elder and overseer.

4.2.2. In Acts 20:28 the elders of Ephesus are encouraged in their "pastoral," that is, shepherding task, thus showing that Paul saw the elders as the shepherds or pastors.

4.2.3. In 1 Peter 5:1-2 the elders are told to "tend the flock of God" that is in their charge. In other words, Peter saw the elders essentially as pastors or shepherds.

4.3. Conclusion

The New Testament only refers to the office of pastor one time (Ephesians 4:11). It is a functional description of the role of elder stressing the care and feeding of the church as God's flock, just as "bishop/overseer" is a functional description of the role of elder stressing the governing or oversight of the church. We may conclude therefore that "pastor" and "elder" and "bishop/overseer" refer in the New Testament to the same office. This office stands alongside "deacon" in Phil. 1:1 and 1 Tim. 3:1-13 in such a way as to show that the two abiding officers instituted by the New Testament are elder and deacon. We will treat the function of these two offices in turn.

5. The Function of Elders
The responsibilities of elders are summed up under two heads: governing and teaching.

5.1. Governing

1 Timothy 5:17

Let the elders who rule (proestotes) well be considered worthy of double honor...

1 Timothy 3:4-5

He must manage (proistamenon) his own household well, keeping his children submissive and respectful in every way; for if a man does not know how to manage (prostenai) his own household, how can he care for God's church?

Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:2

The duty of elders to "oversee" or "supervise" the flock implies a governing function.

1 Thessalonians 5:12

But we beseech you, brethren, to respect those who labor among you and are over you (proistamenous) in the Lord and admonish you...

(No reference to "elders" but the function of the leaders is governing and the natural assumption is that the leaders are elders that Paul had appointed according to Acts 14:23.)

Hebrews 13:17

Obey your leaders and submit to them; for they are keeping watch over your souls, as men who will have to give account.

Obedience and submission implies a role of leadership and governance. Again, the reference is probably to the elders, though the leaders are not described.

5.2. Teaching

Ephesians 4:11

Pastors and teachers are pictured as one office, so that the pastor (whom we have identified as an elder) has the responsibility of teaching.

1 Timothy 3:2

The overseer must be "able to teach." And we have seen that the overseer and elder are the same office. This qualification is not included in the list of qualifications for deacons.

1 Timothy 5:17

Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.

Note that all have to be able to teach; but only some "labor," that is, they devote more time and
energy to it, perhaps earning their living by it. Each elder is vested with the right to teach and exercise authority in the church and so must have the qualifications for it.

Titus 1:9

He must hold firm to the sure word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to confute those who contradict it.

Note: Not all elders need to be able to do public preaching. The requirement is not for a preaching gift, but for a solid grasp of doctrine and ability to spot and correct errors and explain Biblical truth plainly.

5.3. Conclusion

The function of elders may be summed up under two heads: teaching and governing. They are the doctrinal guardians of the flock and the overseers of the life of the church responsible to God for the feeding and care and ministry of the people.

We have seen from Philippians 1:1 and 1 Timothy 3:1-13 that deacons served alongside the elders. These two are mentioned together in a way that suggests their unique official and ongoing role in the churches. We turn now to examine the role of "deacon."

6. What did deacons do?

6.1. The word "deacon" comes from the Greek word diakonos. It usually has the general meaning "servant" in a broad range of contexts. For example:

6.1.1. The servants at the wedding who carried the water containers (John 2:5,9).

His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you."

6.1.2. Christ is called servant to the circumcision (Romans 15:8).

Christ became a servant to the circumcision to show God's truthfulness.

6.1.3. Paul calls himself a servant (=minister) of the new covenant (2 Corinthians 3:6),

God has qualified us to be ministers of a new covenant.

. . .and of the Gospel (Colossians 1:23),

Do not shift from the hope of the Gospel. . . of which I Paul became a minister.

. . .and of the church (Colossians 1:24).

I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church, of which I became a minister.

See also 1 Corinthians 3:5.

6.1.4. Tychicus is called a faithful servant in the Lord (Ephesians 6:21; Colossians 4:7).
Tychicus the beloved brother and faithful minister of the Lord will tell you everything.

6.1.5. Timothy is called God's servant (1 Thessalonians 3:2).

We sent Timothy, our brother and God's servant in the Gospel of Christ.

6.16. The disciples are told that if they would be great they must be servants (Matthew 20:26).

Whoever would be great among you must be your servant.

6.2 The Greek noun that describes what a diakonos does is diakonia and has meanings just as broad:

6.2.1. Martha is concerned with too much serving (Luke 10:40).

6.2.2. The widows of the Hellenists were being overlooked in the daily "distribution" (Acts 6:1).

6.2.3. But three verses later (Acts 6:4) Luke refers to the task of the apostles as the "ministry" of the word (see Acts 1:17,25).

6.2.4. The raising of money for the poor saint was called a "ministry" (Acts 11:29; 12:25; Romans 15:31; 2 Corinthians 8:4; 9:1, 12, 13).

6.2.5. Paul calls his own assignment from the Lord a "ministry" (Acts 20:24 21:19; Romans 11:13; 2 Corinthians 4:1; 5:18).

6.2.6. It is listed in the gifts between prophecy and teaching in Romans 12:7. And "various ministries" is listed between "various gifts" and "various workings" in 1 Corinthians 12:5.

6.2.7. The old covenant is called a ministry of death and condemnation as compared to the new covenant which called a ministry of the Spirit (2 Corinthians 3:7,8,9).

6.2.8. Pastor/teachers are to equip the saints to do the work of the ministry (Ephesians 4:12).

6.2.9. Angels are sent for ministry to saints (Hebrews 1:4).

6.3 The verb form of this Greek word is diakoneo. It can also have the broad general meaning of "serve".

6.3.1. Jesus came to serve not be served (Matthew 20:28).

6.3.2. Therefore he taught that a good leader is one who serves (Luke 22:26).

6.3.3. Jesus said that if anyone serves him the Father would honor him (John 12:26).

6.3.4. In Acts 19:22 Timothy and Erastus are described as those who serve Paul.

6.4 But there is a strong tendency of this verb (diakoneo) to refer to the kind of serving that involves very practical acts of supplying material needs, and literally table-service.
6.4.1. Angels came to serve Jesus in the wilderness, i.e., to tend to his needs (Matthew 4:11).

6.4.2. Peter's mother-in-law rose from her sick bed to serve her guests (Matthew 8:15).

6.4.3. The women who followed Jesus served out of their own pockets (Matthew 27:55; Luke 8:3).

6.4.4. Martha served from the kitchen (Luke 10:40; John 12:2).

6.4.5. Paul's carrying money to Jerusalem is doing service (Romans 15:25; 2 Corinthians 8:19).

6.4.6. The serving of Onesiphorus is described as often refreshing Paul in connection with his not being ashamed of Paul's chains, which I take to mean that he visited him in prison (2 Timothy 1:16-18). Thus Paul wants to keep Onesimus, the converted slave, with him so he can serve him in prison (Philemon 13).

6.4.7. The saints of Hebrews are described as serving the saints in love (6:10) and later they are described as visiting saints in prison (10:32-34).

6.4.8. In 1 Peter 4:10-11 speaking and serving are treated separately as though there may have been a word ministry (perhaps the teaching of elders) and a non-word-serving ministry (perhaps the service of deacons).

6.4.9. Matthew 25:44 may be the best summary in the New Testament of the kinds of activities done by one who "serves".

"Then they also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see thee hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not serve thee?"

6.5. Summary: What Did Deacons Do?

The basic meaning of the diakon- word group is apparently practical, active, helping with respect to the basic necessities of life.

From Matthew 25:44 we could include dire needs arising from hunger, thirst, alienation, nakedness, sickness, imprisonment. That would imply that the basic notion of "serving," in the sense of being a deacon, is to help meet needs for

- food,
- water,
- welcome, acceptance and hospitality,
- clothing,
- health,
- and whatever needs arise from emergencies and unusual pressures and stress (like imprisonment).

Probably the term is applied to ministries of the word and apostleship and Christ's own ministry to show that they are to be done humbly and in compassion and for the benefit of others. But when Jesus says in Luke 22:26 that the leader should become as one who serves (as he did!) he does not mean that there are no differences between a leader and a non-leader. He means that the lowliness that is natural for a table waiter should also characterize those in positions of
leadership.

So even though the highest offices (e.g., apostle) are called "ministry" or "service," this does not mean that there is no office in the church with a special focus on practical and more material needs.

It appears that the deacons in 1 Timothy 3:8-13 and Philippians 1:1 were that kind of officers.

7. Were women deacons?

Probably yes. There are four observations that incline us to think that this office was held by both men and women.

1. The Greek word for deacon can be masculine or feminine in the same form. So the word does not settle the issue.
2. In the middle of the qualifications for deacons in 1 Timothy 3:8-13 Paul says, "The women likewise must be serious, no slanderers, but temperate, faithful in all things." This could be the wives of the deacons, but could also be the women deacons. The latter is suggested by the fact that no reference to women is made in 3:1-7. Since women were not candidates for the eldership in the New Testament (1 Timothy 2:12-13) because of its authoritative function in teaching and oversight, the absence of the reference to women in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 would be expected. But this confirms the probability that the reference to women in 3:11 is to women deacons, not merely to wives of deacons.
3. The deacons were distinguished from the elders in that they were not the governing body in the church nor were they charged with the duty of authoritative teaching. So the role of deacon seems not to involve anything that Paul taught (in 1 Timothy 2:12 or anywhere else) is inappropriate for women to perform in the church.
4. In Romans Phoebe is very probably called a deacon. "I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon(ess) of the church at Cenchreae, that you may receive her in the Lord as befits the saints, and help her in whatever she may require from you, for she has been a helper of many and of myself as well."

It appears then that the role of deacon is of such a nature that nothing stands in the way of women's full participation in it. Within the deaconate itself the way the men and women relate to each other would be guided by the sense of appropriateness growing out of the Biblical teaching of male and female complementarity.

8. Conclusion

We have seen that God has ordained the existence of officers in the church, some of whom are charged under Christ with the leadership of the church (1 Tim. 5:17; 1 Thess. 5:12; Heb. 13:7,17; Acts 20:28). These leaders are called of God but recognized and confirmed by the congregation, and are responsible under God to the congregation. Thus the congregation has a relationship to its leaders both of commission and submission. They affirm God's call and gifts in a person's life and commission that person into the role of Biblical leadership. But they also voluntarily support and submit to those leaders (Heb. 13:17).

There do not appear to be explicit rules in the New Testament regarding which decisions the whole congregation shall vote on as a body. This would therefore be worked out in a congregationally approved agreement reflecting the need for free and efficient leadership on the one hand and accountability to the congregation on the other.
We have also concluded that the leaders of the church be people who are spiritually mature and exemplary, gifted for the ministry given to them, and have a sense of divine urging, and are in harmony with the duly established leadership of the church (1 Timothy 3:1-13; Titus 1:5-9; Rom. 12:6-8; Acts 20:28; Phil. 2:2).

The New Testament assumes the existence of two offices for the ongoing life of the church: Deacons and Elders (Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:1-13).

From our study it would seem that the deacon office exists to assist the leadership of the church by relieving the elders of distractions and pressures that would divert them from the ministry of the word and prayer and the general, visionary oversight of the church.

Thus it appears that deacons would care for the building and grounds; supply the communion and baptismal needs, as well as all other food and fellowship materials; administer a fund for the manifold material needs of the people and be ready to step in during crises of all kinds; handle the greeting and welcoming ministries; and provide practical assistance in job-hunting, housing matters, legal-aid, child-care, etc. In general, they would be ready to assist the elders of the church in any "service" that would support and promote the ministry of the word.

The function of elders may be summed up under two heads: Teaching and Governing. They are the doctrinal guardians of the flock and the overseers of the life of the church responsible to God for the feeding and care and ministry of the people. Both offices take their cue from the Lord: "Let the leader be as one who serves" (Luke 22:26).

With regard to the time-honored office of "pastor," the New Testament only refers to the office by this name one time (Ephesians 4:11). The term appears to be a functional description of the role of "elder," stressing the care and feeding of the church as God's flock, just as "bishop" or "overseer" is a functional description of the role of elder, stressing the governing or oversight of the church.

This would imply that what we usually call "the pastor" of the church is properly one of several elders. Together they are charged with the teaching and oversight of the church. Within the council (probably a better word than "board") of elders, differing roles will be performed so that very likely one will be the "preaching elder" while not excluding others from that responsibility. The governance on the council of elders would be established by the elders themselves and this order would then determine how they made their presentations to the congregation.

9. Our Concern with Biblical Church Governance

On the basis of what we have seen, it is fitting that we seriously reexamine our governance structure at Bethlehem, which includes a Council of Deacons as the ruling board but defines no role in the church as that of elder.

The reasons for concern and for reexamination are at least these five:

9.1. We could be structured in a way more closely conforming to the normal New Testament pattern ("Paul appointed elders in all the churches," Acts 14:23).

9.2. We need to clarify the role of our deacons. Are they elders in the New Testament sense, or are they deacons? Right now they seem to be a hybrid as the "governing" board and yet with the name "deacons." And who are the "staff" in the New Testament understanding of things? Are they the "elders"? If so, how do they fit into the governing structure of the church? There is much
confusion that keeps deacons, committees, boards, and staff from finding themselves and their roles in the New Testament.

9.3. We need to clarify the role of women in relation to the diaconate. Why are there deaconesses? How do they relate to the deacons? Could it be that by investing the deacons with "elder" roles at Bethlehem, we have isolated women from the very role (deacon) where they should flourish?

9.4. We need to provide more thorough and consistent care for members with special needs and more consistent discipline for delinquent members. That this is not done as well as it should be is owing partly to the confusion of roles. Who is responsible, Biblically, for this church-wide care of 1,000 people and for following through on disciplinary procedures?

9.5. We need to develop an ongoing leadership team (elders) where the theological distinctives, the philosophy of ministry and the vision of the future can be rooted more durably than in the paid "staff." The church should not be dependent on a few paid staff as the guardians of the vision. The very mentality that staff are temporary while the people are permanent is nurtured by the absence of an enduring body of elders, both paid and non-paid, who serve as those most responsible under God to lead the church in savoring, instilling, and spreading the vision of God that gives eternal joy.

Appendix

Biblical Qualifications for Church Officers

Qualifications of Elders (1 Timothy 3:1-7)

3:1 "The saying is sure: If any one aspires to the office of bishop, he desires a noble task."

Aspiration ( oregetai/ epithumei )

At least one way for a man to attain the role of elder/bishop was to aspire to it. In fact, since it is the duty of elders to do their work with gladness and not under constraint or for love of money (1 Peter 5:1-3), this should be thought of as one of the elders' qualifications. This need not exclude the possibility that a man may be sought out and urged to become an elder. But no pressure should be used that would result in an unwilling, half-hearted service.

3:2 "Therefore it is necessary for the bishop to be irreproachable."

Irreproachability ( anepilempton)

Elsewhere in the New Testament the word is used only in 5:7 (where widows are to be without reproach by putting their hope in God and not living luxuriously or sumptuously or self-indulgently) and 6:14 (where Timothy is to keep the commandment irreproachable till Jesus comes).

The word seems to be a general word for living in a way that gives no cause for others to think badly of the church or the faith or the Lord. This tells us nothing about the sort of thing that would bring reproach on the church or the Lord. But, coming at the head of the list, it puts a tremendous emphasis on what a person's reputation is. The focus here is not a person's relationship to the Lord but how others see him. It seems therefore right from the outset that the public nature of the office is in view with
its peculiar demands.

3:2 ". . . one woman's husband. . ."

One Woman's Husband (mias gunaikas andras)

The word order emphasizes the word "one". So it is not likely that Paul meant to say that the bishops have to be married. There are words for married he could have used. The word order would probably have put "husband" in the prominent place if that were his intention. Moreover, Paul was not married (1 Corinthians 9:5; 7:7) and he thought singleness was an excellent way to be freer for ministry (1 Cor. 7:32).

In verse 4 Paul gets to the issue of how well a man manages his household. So the point here is probably not the man's competence as a husband. The point probably, coming right after irreproachable, is one of notoriety. What is this man's reputation with regard to whether he has had one wife or not. It appears that the public standard will be high.

Does this standard mean that an elder/bishop

1. may not be a polygamist?
2. may not remarry after death of his first spouse?
3. may not be remarried after a divorce?

The main argument against #1 is the use of the parallel phrase in 1 Timothy 5:9 in reference to widows whom the church was enrolling in a welfare and service order. She must be "one man's wife" (henos andros gune). Since polyandry (a woman having several husbands at once) was simply not a practice, this very probably means that the woman had not divorced and remarried.

Moreover the phrase in 5:9 surely did not mean that the widow was excluded from the order if she had remarried when her first husband died. For in 5:14 the younger widows were encouraged to remarry, and it is unlikely that, having said this, Paul would then later exclude them from the widows' order because they had followed his advice.

So #2 is not likely either, especially in view of Paul's complete endorsement of remarrying after the death of a spouse (Romans 7:3; 1 Cor. 7:39).

Therefore, the most likely meaning for the standard of "one woman's husband" is that the eldership should be composed of men who have never been remarried after divorce.

As of May 2, 1989 Bethlehem's Council of Deacons approved "A STATEMENT ON DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE" (which is available in the church office). This statement affirms on page 10, paragraph 8 that "Persons remarried after divorce will forego positions of official leadership at Bethlehem which correspond to the role of elders or deacons (1 Timothy 3:2,12).

The STATEMENT ON DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE does not take the official position that all remarriage after divorce is wrong. The STATEMENT is written such a way as to acknowledge the differences of interpretation that exist among us who are totally committed to living Biblically.
Someone may ask why a man can have been a drunkard or a murderer and yet be forgiven and cleansed and become an elder, but be excluded from the eldership because of remarriage. Paul does not answer this question, but our sense is this: The standards for official public leadership are such that the eldership should symbolize as closely as possible the ideal of personal, family, and community life.

A helpful analogy might be that in the Old Testament priests were not allowed to serve in the tabernacle if they had a handicap (Lev. 21:16-24). This would seem unfair if we only thought in terms of individual rights. But if we think also from the standpoint of the image of God being portrayed and the corporate significance of symbolic standards, we can perhaps see the value in the limitation.

Paul's aim in restricting the eldership and deaconate to those who have not been remarried after divorce seems to be that the elders and deacons be "above reproach" not only in that they are presently free from any reputation of willful or persistent sin, but also that their marriage and home life be symbolic standards for what God wills.

3:2 "...temperate..."

Temperate (*nephalion*)

This word is used two other times in the New Testament—in 3:11 of the women (wives of?) deacons; and in Titus 2:2 about older men in general.

It is odd that it is used here even though in verse 3 the bishops must not be addicted to wine (*me paroinon*). Perhaps here the point is more general—namely, that his temperance extends over other things besides wine. Or perhaps the repetition comes because in verse 3f there begins a list of things which the bishop is NOT supposed to be, and Paul felt obliged to include the problem of wine in the negative list as well as the positive.

The standard here is one of self-control and mastery of his appetites. Wine would surely not be the only drink or food that a person can misuse.

3:2 "... sensible ...

Sensible, prudent, reasonable (*sophrona*)

The word is used only here and Titus 1:8 of bishops, and 2:2 of older men, and 2:5 of younger women.

It is related to *sophroneo* which means to be of a sound mind —like the demoniac after he was healed (Mk. 5:15). The basic idea seems to be having good judgment, which implies seeing things as they really are, knowing yourself well, and understanding people and how they respond. We might say "being in touch with your feelings" or being in touch with reality so that there are no great gaps between what you see in yourself and what others do.

3:2 "... dignified ...

Respectable, honorable (*kosmios*)

The idea seems to be one of not offending against propriety. A person who comports
himself in situations so as not to step on toes unnecessarily.

3:2 "... hospitable . . ."

Hospitable *(philoxenon)*

One who loves strangers, that is who is given to being kind to newcomers and makes them feel at home. A person whose home is open for ministry and who does not shrink back from having guests. Not a secretive person.

3:2 "... an apt teacher. . ."

Skilled in teaching *(didaktikon)*

This need not mean that the person is real good in front of a group, since not all elders devote all their time to formal teaching or preaching (1 Tim. 5:17). Rather as Titus 1:9 says, "He must hold firm to the sure word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to confute those who contradict it."

In other words he must know Biblical doctrine well and be able to explain it to people. He must be astute enough theologically that he can spot serious error and show a person why it is wrong and harmful.

3:3 "... no drunkard. . ."

Not addicted to wine *(me paroinon)*

The general qualification here would be like the one above under temperance, namely, self-control. Not addicted to anything harmful or debilitating or worldly. Freedom from enslavements should be so highly prized that no bondage is yielded to.

3:3 "... not violent. . ."

Not pugnacious or belligerent *(me plekten)*

The point here is that the temper should be under control. He must not be given to quarreling or fighting. There should be a conciliatory bent. His feelings should not be worn on the sleeve. He should not carry resentments or be hyper-critical.

3:3 "... but gentle. . ."

Gentle *(epieke)*

This is the opposite of pugnacious or belligerent. He should not be harsh or mean-spirited. He should be inclined to tenderness and resort to toughness only when the circumstances commend this form of love. His words should not be acid or divisive but helpful and encouraging.

3:3 "... not quarrelsome. . ."

Peacable *(amachon)*

This seems almost identical with "not pugnacious or belligerent." In fact the last three seem to go together as a unit that stress peacemaking rather than factiousness or
troublemaking. This would have great implications about the way he uses his tongue.

3:3 ". . . not loving money . . ."

Not a lover of money (*aphilarguron*)

He should be putting the kingdom first in all he does. His lifestyle should not reflect a love of luxury. He should be generous giver. He should not be anxious about his financial future. He should not be so money-oriented that ministry decisions revolve around this issue.

3:4-5 "He must manage his own household well, keeping his children submissive and respectful in every way; for if a man does not know how to manage his own household, how can he care for God's church?"

Leader of a well-ordered household (*kalos proistamenon*)

The home is a proving ground for ministry. He should have submissive children. This does not mean perfect, but it does mean well-disciplined, so that they do not blatantly and regularly disregard the instructions of their parents. The children should revere the father (*meta pases semnotetos*). He should be a loving and responsible spiritual leader in the home. His wife should be respected and tenderly loved. Their relationship should be openly admirable.

3:6 "He must not be a recent convert, or he may be puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil."

A mature believer, not a new convert (*me neophuton*)

The condemnation of the devil seems to be the condemnation that the devil is under because of his being puffed up. So the new believer, given too much responsibility too soon, may easily swell with pride. The implication is that part of Christian seasoning is a humbling process and a growing protection against pride. We should see evidences in his life that humility is a fixed virtue and not easily overturned.

3:7 "moreover he must be well thought of by outsiders, or he may fall into reproach and the snare of the devil."

This is similar to "irreproachability" in verse 2. Only here it is made explicit that the outside unbelieving world is in view. This doesn't mean the world sets the standards, since Jesus himself was rejected by some. What it seems to mean is that a Christian leader should at least meet the standards of the world for decency and respectability, for the standards of the church should be higher.

The snare of the devil is referred to in 2 Tim. 2:26. It seems to involve deception and sin since to be rescued from it is to repent and come to a knowledge of the truth.

How does not being well thought of by outsiders cause you to fall into reproach and the snare of the devil?

Could it be that the reproaches of the world would cause a person to try to hide his faults in the church and thus fall into lying or duplicity?

Qualifications of Elders (Continued from Titus 1:5-9)
1:6 "If any man is blameless..."

Blamelessness (anegkletos)

This is virtually the same as "irreproachable." The idea is that no ongoing blame attaches to a man. If he does wrong he makes it right.

1:6 "...the husband of one wife..."

(see above, One woman's husband)

1:6 "...and his children believers not open to the charge of being profligate or insubordinate."

Honest and orderly children (pista, me in kategoria asotias e anupotakta)

The meaning is probably the same as 1 Tim. 3:4-5 and the well-ordered house. There the children are to be en hupotage meta pases semnotatetos, "in subjection with all reverence."

Here the focus is not just on the relationship of the children to the father but on their behavior in general. They are not to be guilty of the accusation of "wild living" or uncontrolled behavior. And they are not to be "insubordinate".

Does pista mean believing (with RSV) or "faithful" in the sense of honest and trustworthy? In favor of the latter would be the use of the word in 1 Tim. 3:11 where women (deaconesses or wives of deacons) are to be pistas en pasin, faithful in all things. Other places in the pastorals where the word seems to have this meaning are 1 Tim. 1:12, 15; 3:1; 4:9; 2 Tim. 2:11; 2:13; Tit. 1:9; 3:8.

So the idea seems to be children who are well bred, orderly, generally obedient, responsible, and reliable.

1:7 "...blameless..."

See above on Tit. 1:6, Blamelessness

1:7 "...not arrogant..."

Humility (me authade)

This is the assumption behind his not being a new believer, lest he be puffed up. He should be lowly in his demeanor, speaking much of himself or his achievements. He should count others better than himself and be quick to serve. He should sincerely give God the credit and honor for any accomplishments.

1:7 "...not quick-tempered..."

See above on 1 Tim. 3:3

1:7 "...not a drunkard..."

See above on 1 Tim. 3:3

1:7 "...not violent..."
See above on 1 Tim. 3:3

1:7 "...not greedy for gain..."

See above on 1 Tim. 3:3

1:8 "...hospitable..."

See above on 1 Tim. 3:2

1:8 "...a lover of goodness..."

Lover of goodness (philagothon)

He should love to see good done and love to be involved in doing good. This is more than doing good. This is a bent and love to see it done. A kind of expansive person.

1:8 "... master of himself..."

See above on 1 Tim. 3:2

1:8 "... upright..."

Justice (dikaion)

He should care about whether people are treated fairly and should want to see justice in the world at all levels.

1:8 "... holy..."

Devout, holy (hosion)

He should be a person of devotion to Christ with a life of prayer and meditation. He should love worship and have a deep personal relationship with the Lord.

1:8 "... self-controlled..."

Self-controlled (egkrate)

The focus here is especially on sexual self-control. He should not be in the grip of lust. He should not toy with pornography. He should be utterly faithful to his wife.

1:9 "He must hold firm to the sure word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to confute those who contradict it."

See above on 1 Tim. 3:2

Here the stress is laid on the doctrinal proficiency of the elders.

1. First is stressed his firm hold on the truth. This refers to the subjective relation he bears to the truth: is it loved (2 Thess. 2:10)? Is the person solid and unshakable in his grasp of the truth? Has the truth taken hold of him? The opposite would be a person who is never quite sure of where he stands, or a person who thinks that doctrinal definition is generally unimportant, or a person who has his learning mainly second hand from books and teachers and not from the Bible itself, so that his hold is
weak.

2. Second is stressed the nature of the word he holds—it is sure and accords with the (apostolic) teaching. This would mean a good grasp of Biblical truth, especially the doctrine of the apostles. The Bible must be the foundation of doctrinal knowledge, not other books, though they are very helpful and inspirational.

3. Third is stressed the positive role of teaching this healthy doctrine to others. A person who says, I know what it means but I can't explain it so others can understand it would probably not make a suitable elder. The church is in great need of being led by men who not only know but can explain Biblical doctrine. They are responsible for the spread of the truth in the church and from the church.

4. Finally is stressed the negative role of confuting doctrinal error. So the elders must be fairly incisive observers of the thought-world of the day. They need to be able to spot the encroachments of secular principles and assumptions. And they need to be able to correct opponents and straying saints (2 Tim 2: 24-26; James 5:19-20).

General comments.

These lists in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9 are not intended to be exhaustive. We can tell that from the fact that they are not the same. Titus mentions piety (hosion) and justice (dikaion) and sexual self-control (egkrate), but 1 Timothy does not mention these in particular. On the other hand 1 Timothy mentions that the elder must not be a new convert (neophuton), and that he must be respectable (kosmion) which Titus does not mention specifically.

Neither mentions specifically prayer. Neither forbids the elders explicitly from being robbers or liars or gossips etc. The point is that the lists are not exhaustive. Paul takes numerous virtues for granted and gives these as examples. There may be other expectations implied in the ones listed. We should follow these and let them be the guide for what others we assume.

Qualifications of Deacons (1 Timothy 3:8-13)

3:8 "Deacons likewise must be serious. . ."

Serious, earnest, honorable (semnous)

The idea of serious by itself seems inadequate. This would be an unsatisfactory translation of Phil. 4:8: Think on these things. . . whatever is true, whatever is honorable. . ." Serious is morally neutral. But this word isn't.

The person should not be flippant, but earnest about life.

3:8 "... not double-tongued. . ."

Genuine, authentic (me dilogous)

Double-tongued implies saying one thing to be true here and another thing to be true there according to what people would think. So it implies a lack of love for truth and a fear of human disapproval and a general instability.

3:8 "... not addicted to much wine. . ."

Temperate (me oino pollo prosechontas)
Prosechontas implies to concern oneself with or to give attention to or to turn one's mind toward. So there should be a freedom from drink, and presumably from all substances that would be harmful if taken too freely.

The picture is of a person under control, not carried along 1) by the opinions of others (genuine, authentic) or 2) by his appetites (temperate) or 3) by levity (serious, honorable).

3:8 "... not greedy for gain..."

Content with simplicity (*me aischrokerdeis*)

This word is used in Tit. 1:7 of elders and in adverb form of elders in 1 Pet. 5:2. It corresponds to *aphilargon* (not a lover of money) in 1 Tim. 3:3.

It seems to be a fourth dimension of freedom (see "temperate" above for the first three), freedom from the pull of money. Other motives should drive him. There should be a contentment in God and a heavenly mindedness.

3:9 "Having the mystery of the faith in a clean conscience."

Deep convictions concerning faith

The issue of conscience does not appear to be the general issue as in 1:5; 4:2; 2 Tim. 1:3; Tit. 1:15.

But 1:19 is a very close connection: "holding faith and a good conscience."

It seems that the conscience bears directly in the faith "faith in good conscience". This inclines me to think that the issue is the sincerity of the faith. Do the deacons really have faith rooted in their hearts or are there sneaking doubts? Is their conscience clear when they make a public profession of their faith?

3:10 "And let them also be tested first. . ."

Tested (*dokimazesthosan*)

The test is not specified, but it is to precede the work as deacons. The test would be two-fold: the life they have lived and the assessment of it by those who know them and by some appropriate body of the church.

This would surely apply to all the leaders including elders and deacons.

**Topic:** Church Government

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