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Words for children: church, elders, pastor, bishop

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The Church (7) Church Leadership--Elders & Deacons

Introduction:

We have been examining the Holy Scriptures regarding the nature of the church of Jesus Christ. We have considered the word, church, in its less-used, broader sense, that is, the universal church. We spent more time examining its more common sense, even the local church. We have seen that the local churches of the New Testament were independent, self-governing churches. The local churches of the New Testament era, therefore, were characterized by what is known as congregational polity--the Lord has entrusted each and every local church with the capability and responsibility to govern itself in fulfilling the mission that He has entrusted to her. This independence and autonomous governance of the churches is shown in the authority of the local church to receive, discipline, and exclude its members, the authority to elect its own leaders, the sending out of missionaries to the mission field, and the authority to appoint delegates to represent it before other churches. Each local church governed itself corporately. The church would publicly pray, publicly deliberate, publicly decide on the actions the church would take, then the local church would act as a single entity, or in conjunction with the actions of other local churches. In this way the local church conducted the work of Jesus Christ in the world.

To this point, however, we have not addressed the manner in which the Lord has directed the local church to govern itself. We will do so today. Let us turn to Philippians 1 and read the opening greeting of the apostle Paul to this local church at Philippi.

Paul and Timothy, bondservants of Jesus Christ, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. (Phil. 1:1f)

When the apostle wrote to this church, he addressed “the saints.” The saints were the church members, who were regarded as regenerate, along with its leaders, which are here identified as “bishops” and “deacons.” When we speak of the “saints” as regenerate church members, it is because upon their repentance from sin and profession of faith in Jesus Christ as their Lord, that the church thereafter treated and regarded them as having been regenerated by the Spirit of God, that is, that they had been born again. They are called “saints” for that is how the Scriptures identifies them. Saints are “holy ones”, that is what the word, “saints”, means. When the Scriptures calls Christians “saints”, it is setting forth the spiritual reality that they are positionally sanctified, or set apart by God for God.

We spoke about this not long ago, when we were in our study of Colossians 3:12. It reads, “Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, *holy* and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.” The Greek word translated “holy” is the same word translated “saints” here in Philippians 1:1f.

Now most of the time when we speak of being “holy”, we are speaking of being morally pure and living righteously. But the word actually conveys the idea of being “separated from” or “set apart.” We are to be separated from the fallen world in our attitudes and actions; we are to be holy. This process of growing in holiness is what is commonly described as *practical holiness*; tis work of grace that God performs in every one of His people is what is called sanctification. But the Scriptures also speak of believers being *positional holiness* before God. Everything that belongs to God is *set apart* by Him for Him. We read in the Old Testament that the tabernacle, the articles of furniture in the tabernacle, the utensils used in the tabernacle, the priests themselves who ministered in the tabernacle, were all sanctified for that purpose. They were set apart for God and His worship. In the same way God sanctifies every Christian upon his or her conversion through the gospel. Each and every believer is one who has been

singled out by God from the human race. All who belong to Jesus Christ have been sanctified. We have been separated, set apart, sanctified in the mind of God from all others. We who are in Christ stand in a covenant relationship with God having been chosen and set apart from the world as a unique people. In the mind and purpose of God we are separate (sanctified) from the fallen world and He has glorious and vastly different designs between them and us whom He has not sanctified. We might describe this as *positional* sanctification. We are sanctified in this sense in that we have been singled out and set apart because God has designs for us that are different from all others.

This positional sanctification was a work of grace on our behalf. Our *positional sanctification occurred once for all time* for each of us at the time of salvation, or, perhaps more specifically, when Christ Jesus purchased His people on His cross. We were purchased by the blood of Jesus Christ and set apart as the unique people of God. **Hebrews 10:14** reads, “For by one offering He has perfected for ever them that are sanctified.” This was a work of grace that was accomplished on our behalf apart from us, apart from our work or effort. This was a work of grace that Christ performed on behalf of each of His people. Because God regards us as holy, this brings both privilege and responsibility to us. We are to become holy because God has declared us to be holy. Once people become members of the local church, we assume them to be “saints”, holy ones of God. We have high regard for them, for the Lord regards them very highly as “saints” who are in Jesus Christ.

And so, when the apostle Paul addressed this church at Philippi, he first mentioned all the church members, calling them “saints.” This underscores the doctrine of the local church that we addressed in the past few weeks. Every local church should strive to have its membership comprised of regenerated people only, those who have been born again by the Spirit of God.

But aside from addressing the church members collectively, the apostle also addressed the leadership of the church, here identified as “bishops” and “deacons.” The New Testament only knows of these two offices of leadership in the local church.

We normally think of the term, “bishop”, in the manner in which it is used in those denominations that have a hierarchy of leaders that are apart from and above the local church. Denominations in this high church order believe that bishops possess the power of full priesthood. They are regarded as having authority over the churches and the clergy of churches. The New Testament never uses the term, “bishop” in this way.

Others of us may know of the term bishop from the context of many African American Methodist or Pentecostal churches. A man called me recently due to the radio program in Maine. He said that his father was “Bishop So-and-so.” I did not understand him at first. I asked if he was telling me that his father was a Catholic priest. He said, “No, but his father was an elder in a Pentecostal church.” They refer to their pastors as bishops. Rather than referring to me as Pastor Larson, they would call me Bishop Larson. Actually these Pentecostals actually use the word consistent with the New Testament usage of the word. The bishops of the local church are the elders of the local church.

Virtually all Baptist churches have as officers, *pastors* and *deacons*. We believe that these are the only two offices that are found in the churches of the New Testament. But what of the other terms used in the New Testament for church leaders? What are they and to what do they refer? Actually there are three different words used in the New Testament to describe this office in the local church. There is this word, *bishop*, but also *elder*, and *pastor*. Let us consider these terms and the nuance of each.

I. Three terms for the office of elder in the local church

1. “Bishop”

We find this term here in Philippians 1:1, but it is also in 1 Timothy 3:1 and 2, which reads:

This is a faithful saying: If a man desires the position of a *bishop*, he desires a good work. A *bishop* then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, temperate, sober-minded, of good behavior, hospitable, able to teach. (NKJV)

“Bishop” is the translation of the Greek term, *episkopas* (ἐπίσκοπος). Another English word that is derived from this Greek word is “Episcopal.” The verbal form of the word carries the idea to “look at”, “inspect”, “examine”, or “watch over.” The noun refers to the office of an “overseer” in the church. Baptists understand this term to refer to the function of a pastor and elder within a local church. The pastor/elder has the responsibility to oversee the governance of the local church. Here in 1 Timothy 3:1 and 2 Paul used the term in the context of Timothy correcting the church order in that local church. Interestingly, the English Standard Version (ESV) translates the word as *overseer*. Whereas the NKJV translates the verse this way: “This is a faithful saying: If a man desires the position of a *bishop*, he desires a good work,” this is how the ESV translates this verse: “The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of *overseer*, he desires a noble task.” The ESV never uses the English word, bishop, in its translation.

The word, *episkopas* (ἐπίσκοπος), is also found in the Epistle of Paul to Titus:

For this reason I left you in Crete, that you should set in order the things that are lacking, and appoint elders in every city as I commanded you-- ⁶if a man is blameless, the husband of one wife, having faithful children not accused of dissipation or insubordination. ⁷For a *bishop* must be blameless, as a steward of God, not self-willed, not quick-tempered, not given to wine, not violent, not greedy for money, ⁸but hospitable, a lover of what is good, sober-minded, just, holy, self-controlled, ⁹holding fast the faithful word as he has been taught, that he may be able, by sound doctrine, both to exhort and convict those who contradict. (Titus 1:5-9).

The Greek word, *episkopas* (ἐπίσκοπος), is used in contexts in which it refers to other than local church elders. For example, it is used in Acts 1:20 to refer to the office of apostle that Judas Iscariot had vacated through his death.

“For it is written in the book of Psalms: ‘Let his dwelling place be desolate, and let no one live in it’; and, ‘Let another take his *office*.’”

Here, the Greek word, which is elsewhere translated “bishop”, is translated as “office.”

The word is also used in Acts 20 in which the apostle Paul was speaking to the elders of the church at Ephesus:

“Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you *overseers*, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.” (Acts 20:28)

The word is applied to our Lord Jesus as the One who is watching over His people. Peter wrote,

“For you were like sheep going astray, but have now returned to the Shepherd and *Overseer* of your souls.” (1 Peter 2:25)

The word, “Overseer”, is the translation of the word, *episkopas*.

The verbal form of the word is used in one place, Hebrews 12:15.

“Therefore strengthen the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees, ¹³and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be dislocated, but rather be healed. ¹⁴Pursue peace

with all people, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord: ¹⁵*looking carefully* lest anyone fall short of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up cause trouble, and by this many become defiled; ¹⁶lest there be any fornicator or profane person like Esau, who for one morsel of food sold his birthright.

In this sense each of us is to be as a “bishop.” We are to be watching over ourselves and over one another, assuring ourselves that we are not be deceived or defiled by sin.

The word, bishop, as it is applied to the office of the elder or pastor in the church, speaks of his responsibility to watch over, to protect, and to guard the people of God.

2. “Elder”

We also see the term “elder” in the New Testament in reference to leaders of local churches. This is a common term for the office of the bishop or pastor. “Elder” is the translation of the Greek word, *presbuteros* (πρεσβύτερος). We get the word “presbytery”, or Presbyterian, from this word. It is a masculine word that describes an older, mature, or experienced man. It carries the idea of a mature man who is able to wisely lead a church in the will of God. The term, elder, is found in a number of places in the Bible, both in the Old and New Testaments. Elders ruled Jewish synagogues. When the New Testament churches were begun their leadership was patterned after that of the synagogue.

The word, elder, or elders, is used frequently in the New Testament. The singular word, elder, is used in 1 Timothy 5:19, 1 Peter 5:1, 2 John 1, and in 3 John 1. The plural form, elders, used frequently in many places in Acts, including 11:30; 14:23; 15:2, 4, 6, 22f; 16:4; 20:17; 21:18; 24:1; and 25:15. It is also used in the epistles, including 1 Tim. 4:14, 5:17; Titus 1:5; James 5:14; and 1 Peter 5:1, 5.

The office of the elder speaks of one who leads or rules in the church of God. We will say more about the nature of the elders’ leadership later.

The third term is that of...

3. “Pastor”

The word “pastor” is the translation of the Greek word, *poimena* (ποιμένα). It speaks of the church leader as a *shepherd*. Actually, the word, pastor, even though we use it commonly for the office of the pastor, is found only once as a noun in the New Testament, and there it is used in the plural form. We read of it in Ephesians 4:11-15 a portion of one of Paul’s long sentences:

¹¹And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some *pastors* and teachers, ¹²for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, ¹³till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; ¹⁴that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting, ¹⁵but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head-- Christ-- (Eph 4:11-15)

It is commonly said that the terms, “pastors and teachers” should be understood as one office, that of the pastor-teacher.¹

We read in 1 Peter 5 that elders are given the responsibility to shepherd (pastor) the flock of God until the Chief Shepherd, the Lord Jesus, returns (1 Pet. 5:1-4). The word pastor speaks of the function of

¹ Although this is a common interpretation, I am not fully convinced. The two words, “pastors” and “teachers” are joined with the conjunction “and”, which would seem to suggest separate terms, not a hyphenated single office. But I would need to research this further before making a definite assertion.

the elder or bishop within the local church. The pastor is the one who “shepherds” his flock, the local church. The word in the verb form, which would describe the pastoral work of shepherding, is found in a few places in the New Testament. Consider these references:

“Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to *shepherd* the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.” (Acts 20:28)

Here the apostle Paul was instructing the elders of the church at Ephesus to perform their ministry of shepherding the church.

We read of the instruction that the apostle Peter gave to elders in 1 Peter 5:

The elders who are among you I exhort, I who am a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that will be revealed: ²*Shepherd* the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; ³nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock; ⁴and when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that does not fade away. (1 Pet. 5:1-4)

Here the word for pastor in its verb form is shepherd. This describes the work of the elder; he pastors his flock.

These three words, pastor, elder, and bishop, are interchangeable terms in the New Testament. Each word describes the single office of the minister or the pastor of the church. Let us look at three passages in which we can see that they are synonymous terms.

(1) Titus 1:5-7,

For this reason I left you in Crete, that you should set in order the things that are lacking, and appoint *elders* (Greek-*presbuteros*) in every city as I commanded you. If a man is blameless, the husband of one wife, having faithful children not accused of dissipation or insubordination. For a *bishop* (Greek-*episkopos*) must be blameless, as a steward of God, not self-willed, not quick-tempered, not given to wine, not violent, not greedy for money, but hospitable, a lover of what is good, sober-minded, just, holy, self-controlled, holding fast the faithful word as he has been taught, that he may be able, by sound doctrine, both to exhort and convict those who contradict.

Paul through his apostolic authority gave Titus the responsibility and authority to establish churches in Crete. He was to appoint elders in every church. Notice there were to be a plurality of elders in every church. We see the use of both terms, elder and bishop, used for the same position. They are interchangeable. An elder is the same as a bishop. The elder is the description of his office in the church. Bishop describes his responsibility as a ruler/guardian, an overseer of the church.

(2) Acts 20:17-28

From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called for the *elders* (Greek-the plural form of *presbuteros*) of the church. And when they had come to him, he said to them: “You know, from the first day that I came to Asia, in what manner I always lived among you, serving the Lord with all humility, with many tears and trials which happened to me by the plotting of the Jews; and how I kept back nothing that was helpful, but proclaimed it to you, and taught you publicly and from house to house, testifying to Jews, and also to Greeks, repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ. And see, now I go bound in the spirit to Jerusalem, not knowing the things that will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies in every city, saying that chains and tribulations await me. But none of these things move me; nor do I count my life dear to myself, so that I may finish my

race with joy, and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God. And indeed, now I know that you all, among whom I have gone preaching the kingdom of God, will see my face no more. Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all men. For I have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God. Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you *overseers* (Greek- plural of *episkopas*), to *shepherd* (Greek-the verb form of *poimena*) the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.

All three terms are used in this passage to describe the same men. They are *elders* of the church; which is the title of their office. They were made *overseers* (*bishops*), which is their overarching job description. They were to *pastor* the flock. This speaks of their function, the nature of their work. They serve the church as spiritual shepherds over the flock.

(3) 1 Peter 5:1-4

The *elders* (Greek-the plural form of *presbuteros*) who are among you I exhort, I who am a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that will be revealed: *Shepherd* (or, *pastor*) (Greek-the verb form of *poimena*) the flock of God which is among you, serving as *overseers* (or, *bishops*) (Greek- plural of *episkopas*), not be constraint 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.

We see all three terms used here for one office. Elders are to pastor/shepherd the flock, serving as overseers to the church.

We see from the Scriptures that a pastor is an elder is a bishop. All three terms are used for one office within the setting of the local church. There is no example or command in the Holy Scriptures to make a man “bishop”, in that he has an elevated office over other ministers or churches. The Bible does not speak of a hierarchy of rulers above the local church. Bishops and cardinals, as commonly referred to today in many denominations, have no biblical warrant. Those are offices that have arisen through church history and continue due to tradition, not biblical mandate. Biblically speaking, it would be right to refer to a pastor as a bishop. If we are to remain biblical, it is not right to refer to a man not serving as a pastor of a local church as a bishop.

Let us affirm that...

II. The manner of pastoral leadership in the local church.

Some Baptists, primarily Reformed Baptists, agree with the Presbyterians and the Congregationalists that the New Testament teaches of two types of elders that are to serve in the church. There are those elders that are “*teaching elders*”, they both lead the church and teach the church the Word of God. There is also the need for “*ruling elders*” who, while they lead the church and are capable of teaching, generally do not do so. They assist primarily in providing leadership for the congregation.

The distinction of two kinds of elders is based largely upon 1 Timothy 5:17. This reads, “*Let the elders who rule well be counted of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and doctrine.*” It seems that there are two types of elders. All elders rule, but some of the elders labor in the realm of teaching the word and doctrine. The church is led by the board of elders that have been voted upon by the congregation.

I believe that there is wisdom in a plurality of elders within the leadership of a local church. There is safety in numbers. There is depth of wisdom available that no single man can achieve. There is

accountability and encouragement to be found in a group. There is the ability to shape and direct the church from the advantage of men with different gifts and experiences.

The manner in which the elder provides leadership to the local church is prescribed in the Holy Scriptures. The Lord Jesus made it very clear that leaders in His churches are not to lead in the same manner as those leaders of the world in their various roles. We read of this in Matthew

²⁵But Jesus called them to Himself and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them. ²⁶Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. ²⁷And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave—²⁸just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.”

The apostle Peter warned elders that their leadership was to be characterized by teaching the Word of God while providing a godly example to the flock. He forbid a leadership style in which the pastor dictated, or lording it over his flock. We have read it before, but in this matter it bears repeating:

The elders who are among you I exhort, I who am a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that will be revealed: Shepherd (that is, pastor) flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not be constraint 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.

Here is a good description of spiritual leadership as set forth in the New Testament:

So the spiritual rulers under Christ have no coercive power over the persons or property of those under their authority. A well marked distinction between their authority and that which is exercised by civil rulers, is drawn from these words of Christ: “Ye know that the princes of the gentiles exercise dominion over them, and they that are great exercise authority upon them. But it shall not be among you: but whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister; and whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant.” Another peculiarity of their rule is that they cannot govern at their own will. This would be to act as lords over God’s heritage. Such power, if exercised by them, is usurpation, and does not legitimately belong to their office. The only rule which they have a right to apply is that of God’s word; and the only obedience which they have a right to exact, is voluntary. The civil ruler is armed with the sword, and coerces obedience. Zion’s King has put no carnal weapons in the hands of church rulers, and all coercion is inconsistent with the nature of authority entrusted to them. No submission to the Lord is acceptable but that which is voluntary; and the same kind of submission which the ancient Christians rendered to the Lord, they rendered to their spiritual rulers: --“They first gave their own selves unto the Lord and unto us by the will of God” (2 Cor. 8:5).²

III. The personal, divine call to the public ministry of the Word of God

One of the most important matters regarding the nature of spiritual leadership in the local church is to recognize a divine, personal, individual call to the public ministry of the Word of God. We might pose the question in this way: how does the *pastor* relate to the plurality of *elders* serving in a local church? Some churches see the pastor as a separate office, but he is one of the teaching elders as well. Other churches have concluded that there is no distinct, single office of pastor. They argue that each church should just have a board of elders ruling and teaching the local church. Here is the main concern: To

² J. L. Dagg, *Manual of Theology, Second Part, A Treatise on Church Order* (Gano Books, 1990, orig. 1858), pp. 264f.

assume that there is no office of the pastor is to deny a specific calling and equipping to the pastoral ministry that is clearly set forward in Scripture. Where virtually any man may serve as an elder, if he aspires to do so and meets the qualifications, a pastor or minister is uniquely called and gifted for his office.

I recall once being interviewed by a church in White River Junction, Vermont. A board of elders led the church. As I spoke with what appeared to be the strongest willed elder among them, it became apparent that they did not want a pastor. They desired a man to be called to their church to be called “pastor” to satisfy some of the congregation, but the man they wanted would share the pulpit with the other elders. Their “pastor” would preach only once or twice every 12 weeks. I knew they would not be pleased with me nor I with them.

This is the main issue: there are churches in which the plurality of elders is viewed as equal in calling and authority. But they also believe that any godly, mature man in the church who would like to become an elder, is as qualified and is as “called” as any other man who has aspired to the public ministry of the Word. In other words, they deny a personal, divine, calling of God to the ministry. But that there is a divine call may be demonstrated from the Scriptures and has certainly been affirmed by the great men of the faith through church history.

Let us look at a several passages of Scripture that speak to this matter, then we will close. Let us turn in the Word of God and read **Ephesians 4:4-16**.

⁴There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; ⁵one Lord, one faith, one baptism; ⁶one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all. ⁷But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ’s gift. ⁸Therefore He says: “When He ascended on high, He led captivity captive, and gave gifts to men.” ⁹(Now this, “He ascended”-- what does it mean but that He also first descended into the lower parts of the earth? ¹⁰He who descended is also the One who ascended far above all the heavens, that He might fill all things.) ¹¹And *He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers*, ¹²for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, ¹³till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; ¹⁴that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting, ¹⁵but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head-- Christ-- ¹⁶from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love.

The Apostle Paul declared that when the Lord Jesus had ascended into heaven and was seated on God’s throne over the kingdom of God, the risen Lord Jesus gave to His church gifted men that would facilitate bringing His people to realize their glorious destiny. He quotes **Psalm 68:18** as a prophecy of the enthroned Lord Jesus who bestows gifts to His people. **Ephesians 4:8** reads, “Therefore He says,

When He ascended on high,
He led captivity captive,
And gave gifts to men.”

The risen Lord has given gifts to men. In turn He has given these men to His church. As Paul stated, “He Himself gave the apostles, and (gave) the prophets, and (gave) the evangelists, and (gave) the pastor-teachers.”³ He gave these gifted men to the church in order for the equipping of the people in the church

³ This is my translation of the Greek text, which I am not claiming to be better, only a little bit clearer, perhaps. The expression “pastors and teachers” should best be understood not as two offices, but one. The note in The New Reformation Study Bible also makes this assertion: “The two words go together to refer to a single set of individuals

for Christian ministry, for maturing the body through teaching sound doctrine, protecting the church from error and errant teachers, enabling and directing the people of the church to live for one another and with one another in love, functioning as the body of Christ in the world.

Now the point we wish to stress is this: *the Lord Jesus has gifted certain men to serve as the primary teachers of His Word to His church.* Jesus Christ gave each of these offices of the church--apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastor-teachers—in order to proclaim His Word to His church. Our Lord inspired His *apostles* to be witnesses of both what they saw and heard our Lord teach and do. Our Lord had called and enabled *prophets* to understand and interpret unique and special circumstances and predict specific events in the early church as it was newly established in the world. Apostles and prophets of Christ were unique to the early church and the Lord used these gifted men to establish His church in the world.⁴ As Paul wrote earlier in the epistle,

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, *built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets*, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. (Eph. 2:19-21)

But whereas the apostles and prophets served a temporary function in the church (yet abiding influence), the Lord continues the on-going expansion and maturing of His church through the gifts to His church of evangelists and pastor-teachers. The Lord uses *evangelists* (chiefly) *to enlarge* His church; the Lord uses *pastor-teachers* (chiefly) *to mature* His church.

By setting forth the understanding of the passage we have just considered, we can make several assertions and posit several questions. But the one that we will emphasize today is this: **There is a personal, individual, and divine call to the public ministry of the Word in the church of Jesus Christ.**

The Lord Himself calls and equips men to minister His Word to His people. Indeed, all believers may serve the Lord in teaching one another the Word of God as the Lord enables them. But the Lord calls some men specifically and uniquely to lead His churches through the proclamation and administration of the Word of God. There is a divine call to the ministry of the Word of God that God extends to specific men whom He has chosen. We might cite **John Newton** in this regard:

None but the He who made the world can make a Minister of the Gospel... If a young man has capacity, culture and application may make him a scholar, a philosopher, or an orator; but a true Minister must have certain principles, motives, feelings, and aims, which no industry or endeavors of men can either acquire or communicate. They must be given from above, or they cannot be received.⁵

Not all believe this to be true. They assert, “There is no special call to the ministry.” Some believe that all elders of a church have equal authority and that any elder, therefore, every elder has, or should have, the divine sanction to proclaim the Word of God to the church on a regular basis. Now it is true that every elder as a matter of basic qualification should have the aptitude to teach (cf. 1 Tim. 3:2; 2 Tim. 2:24). But not all are called to serve as the leading pastor-teacher in the church. Our Presbyterian friends

who both shepherd and instruct God’s flock” [The New Reformation Study Bible (Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1995), p. 1866.]

⁴ The Lord also used women to whom He gave the gift of prophecy (cf. Acts 2:17; 21:8f). This did not violate the principle that women should not teach men (cf. 1 Tim. 2:12), because women with the gift of prophecy were wholly passive in their proclamation; it was the Lord speaking His word directly through them.

⁵ Quoted in Charles Bridges, *The Christian Ministry* (The Banner of Truth Trust, 1991, orig. 1830), p. 24.

⁵ Ibid. p. 93.

acknowledge this distinction in that they recognize two classes of elders--teaching elders and ruling elders. I believe that we hold this distinction between elders also, although we do not use the categories of "teaching elders" and ruling elders"; we understand a plurality of elders lead the church, but the senior pastor has the principle responsibility to proclaim the Word of God to the congregation. By doing so, the Lord uses him to give leadership and direction to the body.

Great weakness results in the church and great error can occur in the church when the church looks to a man in its pulpit, whom God has not called and gifted in the manner described in Ephesians 4. Again, although many may have the aptitude to teach, the Lord has promised to bless the man and his ministry whom He has called and equipped for this office.

There is a necessity of being *sent by God* to stand in the pulpit week after week. Paul wrote in **Romans 10:13ff.**

¹³For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. ¹⁴How then will they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in Him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? ¹⁵***And how are they to preach unless they are sent?*** As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!"

Now it is true that God can "send" any Christian to speak the Gospel to an unbeliever and the Lord may use that messenger to proclaim the message that He will bless to the conversion of that lost person. But Paul seems to be speaking of a special calling of God on a man's life. He is God's messenger sent by God to His people to proclaim good news to them.

We are to pray that the Lord would call and send God-gifted, God-blessed men in order to further His work in the world. We read of this direct instruction to pray toward this end in the words of our Lord Jesus. We read in Matthew 9:36ff these words,

But when He saw the multitudes, He was moved with compassion for them, because they were weary and scattered, like sheep having no shepherd. Then He said to His disciples, "The harvest truly is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Therefore pray the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest." (Matt. 9:36-38)

May the Lord help us understand and take to heart these important matters. And I pray that our Blessed Lord would "send" many young men into the field of ministry to gather a great harvest of souls in our days and in days to come.

Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing,
that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. (Rom. 15:13)
