

## Appointing Elders And Deacons

'When Paul and Barnabas had appointed and ordained elders for them in each church with prayer and fasting, they committed them to the Lord in Whom they believed' (Acts 14:23).

Paul wrote to Titus, "For this reason I left you behind in Crete... that you might appoint elders and set them over the churches in every city, as I directed you" (Titus 1:5).

In the early church, elders and deacons were appointed by missionaries. What about the second generation of elders? What about the modern-day elders? The Bible says little about them, so who appoints them? There are major differences between the way the early church did things, compared to the way the modern church does. The modern way is not necessarily wrong; just different. We'll have a look at a few of those differences.

Starting with ancient elders; they were first mentioned soon after Jacob died (Genesis 50:7), and were a Senate of the people in Moses time (Exodus 3:16) and that continued through all the vicissitudes of the Hebrew history. The elders are frequently mentioned in the New Testament as acting in co-ordination with the (1) chief priests (Matthew 21:23); (2) the chief priests and scribes (Matthew 16:21) and (3) with the whole Sanhedrin council (Matthew 26:57 & 59). The elders had great authority in the synagogues in Jesus day.

In the New Testament Christian church, the eldership continued as ministers and overseers (Acts 20:17). The elders ran the early churches but it was the missionaries (apostles) who were the 'heads' after Jesus. The missionaries like Paul were the ones who taught, rebuked and went from church to church. In fact, the early church relied strongly on letters written by the apostles; some those letters becoming the New Testament. The early churches did not have one head pastor like the churches do today. In Ephesians 5:23, Paul makes it clear that Jesus is the Head of the church, and the elders had the responsibility of overseeing the running of the assemblies. The role of elders has changed considerably and in the present church, elders are usually assistants to the one head pastor.

Appointing elders and deacons in the modern church, is usually done by the self-appointed pastor who is often the founder of a particular church. However, the Lord gives us specific directions as to how elders should conduct themselves. They need to: be above reproach; have only one wife (polygamy was still being phased out amongst Christians 2,000 years ago); have self-control; be dignified and disciplined; be hospitable; must be a capable and qualified teacher (of the Word); must not drink alcohol; must be gentle; must not be quarrelsome; must not be greedy; must have well behaved children who show him respect; must not be a new convert and he must have a good reputation (1 Timothy 3:1 to 7).

The elders had great responsibilities within their own particular church. 'Is anyone among you sick? He should call the church elders and they should pray over him, anointing him with oil in the Lord's name. And the prayer of faith will save him who is sick, and the Lord will restore him, and if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven' (James 5:14 & 15). 'I warn and counsel the elders among you, as a fellow elder and as an eyewitness of the suffering of Jesus, as a sharer in the glory that is to be revealed: Tend the flock of God; that is your responsibility. Not by coercion but willingly; not dishonourably motivated by the advantages belonging to the office but eagerly and cheerfully. Not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock' (1 Peter 5:1 to 3).

Clearly, the elders in these two passages of scripture paint a picture of church leaders with enormous responsibility. Peter warned the elders to tend the flock. In today's churches, the elder must be in submission to the one head pastor. The early church had a council of elders, not just one head pastor. In both Acts 14:23 and Titus 1:5, the apostles appointed elders (plural) in each new church, not just one leader. Having just one head pastor in a modern church is accepted as the norm. It would be hard for the modern church to actually allow Jesus to be the Head; because they don't really know how. We can't imagine having roving missionaries (apostles) doing the teaching, a

council of elders running the church, deacons as their assistants, and never having one single head pastor making all the important decisions. That would be alien to modern Christians.

What about the deacons? The word deacon means a servant of the Lord or an assistant to the elders. As we have just read, an elder was once the overseer of a church in co-operation with a council of elders, so the deacon was an assistant; second in charge after the elders; in the same role an assistant pastor has in our day. Nobody in the early churches set off and started a new church, appointed and registered themselves as pastors, then appointed elders and deacons like they do today. The missionaries (apostles) started the churches then they appointed the church leadership with prayer and fasting. Paul lists a clear order of leadership for the early church which the modern church has done away with. 'God has appointed some in the church for His own use: first, apostles (special messengers; missionaries); second, prophets (inspired preachers); third, teachers; then miracle workers; then those with the ability to heal the sick; helpers; administrators' (1 Corinthians 12:28). Instead of deacons being second in charge, as they used to be, they have been demoted down to fifth in line as 'helpers' instead of leaders.

We need to know how the deacons have to conduct themselves. 'They must be worthy of respect; sincere; not given to drinking alcohol; not greedy; must be honest; must possess faith with a clear conscience; must be above reproach; must have one wife and be able to manage their households. Those who perform well as deacons acquire a good standing for themselves and also gain much confidence in the faith which is founded in Jesus' (1 Timothy 3:8 to 13). We can see that both the elders and the deacons had specific roles to play within the early church. They each had to have one wife – so all of the elders and deacons were men.

The early missionaries were called apostles. Very few people today would accept the mantle of 'Apostle' yet they were active in the early church. The word apostle means; 'One sent forth (appointed) to act for and on the authority of the sender'. Jesus was called an Apostle in Hebrews 3:2. 'See how faithful He (Jesus) was to Him (God the Father) Who appointed Him (Jesus, as Apostle and High Priest)'. Matthew 10:2 names the twelve apostles chosen by divine appointment by Jesus. In Acts 1:25 & 26 we read that Matthias, Judas Iscariot's replacement was chosen by 'lots'. A 'lot' was a piece of wood with numbers on it, placed into a receptacle which was then shaken. The person who drew the highest number won the 'lot' which is exactly what we do with our dice. That is where we get our word 'lottery'. Can we imagine choosing a church leader by throwing dice? That is what happened when they chose Matthias. In Romans 16:7, Paul calls Andronicus and Junias apostles, and they were held in high esteem, but the Bible does not tell us how they were appointed. In 2 Timothy 1:11, Paul writes that he was appointed to be an apostle and a teacher. How he was appointed can be found in Acts 9:3 to 19.

In Philippians 1:1 and 1 Timothy 3:1, Paul mentions other overseers in the churches as being called bishops (superintendents). In reality, bishops are no holier than any other Christian, even though in some main-stream churches they wear pretty robes and look very pious. They are merely acting out a religious role, but they are no more special to God than anyone else, nor do they have any higher authority in the Kingdom of God.

If we wanted to follow the example of the early church, then a strong, stable church would need to send out missionaries to start a new church, and by prayer and fasting, the 'mother' church would need to appoint the leadership of the new church. That is what the early church did, but what about the second generation leadership, when the church has been grounded for many years? The originally appointed leadership may have needed to retire. The remaining church leadership would then need to look at men who fit the description laid out in 1 Timothy 3:1 to 15 and 1 Peter 5:1 to 3 then by prayer and fasting, carefully select the new elders, deacons, administrators and anyone else the church needs.

The early churches assembled in houses, but we need to remember the history; some of their houses were very big; more than capable of holding many people at once, so they usually did not need to have a hall to meet in. Some modern homes are tiny in comparison, according to some

archaeological finds. There are many changes that would need to be made in our modern churches, if we were to genuinely emulate the New Testament church. In the meantime, the Lord is amazingly flexible about issues like this, and can work in our lives just as He did back in the ancient days. What does it matter how the work is being done, as long as His job is being done? As long as the Gospel is being preached and people are being saved, then the modern church is succeeding.

Amen and God bless you.

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