

ELDERS AND DEACONS

When we read in the New Testament about “elders” we should realize that this was not a new thing for the Jewish/Christian community. In fact, the concept of elders is really an Old Testament phenomenon. All the cities and villages of the Jews in the Old Testament had elders.

So then, who were these men? What was their role in society? How did they come to be “elders?” These are questions which are important for us to answer if we are to correctly understand the origin and function of this tradition which was carried over into the New Testament.

First of all we must realize one essential thing about the elders in the Old Testament. They were old. That’s right. There was never any such thing as a 20 year old “elder.” This would be a contradiction of meaning. You no doubt already know the meaning of the word “elder.” It means old.

This age factor in someone who is considered an elder is essential because it speaks of experience. One thing people acquire by living for many years is experience. This comes from having years of contact and interaction with different kinds of people who act and react in a great variety of ways. This experience includes dealing with various situations, many diverse individuals and the numerous questions which arise in their lives. There is absolutely no substitute for this longterm experience!

The elders of the Old Testament were men who were known for their character. Since many towns and villages in those days were small, these men were known by practically everyone. These men were known from their youth. The inhabitants of that community knew their

parents, they knew about their upbringing and their conduct from a young age; they knew their wife, their children, and their behavior throughout their lives.

When these men were honest, faithful, wise, dependable, just, and were not vulnerable to corruption with bribes, favors, etc., then the population of that town began to look to these men when they needed to decide certain questions.

When certain financial or social issues arose, they would get these elders together to decide what was just and good in any given situation, who was in the right and who was in the wrong. In short, they functioned somewhat like the judges of the Old Testament.

For example, let us suppose that a citizen entered into an agreement with someone else about the purchase of some land. Perhaps one of the two parties did not fulfill their part of the contract. Then the two parties would summon the elders together to hear both sides of the question and try to fairly and justly decide the issue. No doubt, their understanding of the Law of God would enter into their deliberations.

You see, in the days before the kings, there were no court systems in Israel. There was no local or national government. God had instituted a theocracy, a government which was accomplished by God ruling directly over His people.

So when the populace needed guidance and or some kind of judicial decision, they sought out the elders. Although the judges were also available, they seem to have been few in number (only one was alive at any one time) and could not have been available for every little question. Since access to the judges was limited by distance and time, it was the elders of each town and village who were looked to decide any number of questions.

An example of such a thing is found in the book of Ruth, where we find Boaz calling a few of the elders together to be witnesses between himself and a relative concerning the inheritance belonging to Elimelech. These men were called to be witnesses that everything was

being done correctly, transparently and according to the law of Moses. In this case, they did not make any decisions, but were called as faithful witnesses.

Please notice here that the elders of the Old Testament did not organize anything. They did not “run the city.” They did no central planning, they did not raise or receive any taxes, organize schools or the local infrastructure or control anyone’s life. Their role seems to be much more passive than active. They were available to serve the populace but did not dominate or orchestrate the lives of the others.

Also notice that these men were not elected. They were not chosen, appointed, “ordained,” or officially placed as elders. They were elders simply because of their life and experience. The community naturally and automatically recognized them because of their virtues, experience and wisdom. They had no special titles, salaries, positions of authority, fancy uniforms to make them stand out or any other such worldly trappings. They simply were who they were.

THE NEW TESTAMENT TRADITION

This “tradition” of elders was continued in the New Testament, except here these men were not known to the secular communities but to the spiritual communities – the churches, or the “gatherings of the called-out ones.” Their function had much more to do with spiritual things than with earthly decisions.

This tradition was not, as far as we know, something instituted by the Lord through His teaching. It seems that He made no mention of it to His disciples. Yet it appears that the early brothers continued this Old Testament practice.

It is important to understand that the function of elders in the New Testament is essentially the same as that of the Old. There are very many similarities and parallels between these two “groups” of elders. However, there are a few aspects of this spiritual service which required different treatment.

It seems that in the New Testament times, the cities where the churches first took root were much larger than the Old Testament towns and villages. Therefore, most of the inhabitants were unknown to each other. Consequently, the converts to Christ did not have the advantage of knowing the lives and histories of the others. They and their families had not lived in close proximity for most, if not all, of their lives.

In those days, there were many new converts. Since many of these new believers did not know all the other members of the body of Christ, they could not know to whom to look for guidance and counsel. Therefore, Paul thought it was necessary for these “elders” to be pointed out so that the new believers could recognize them.

Of course, those with some spiritual growth would be able to discern such mature individuals. They could spiritually recognize those who were being used by God to give godly counsel and advice. Such more mature believers would have no need for someone to point out such “elders” – those whose lives exhibited the character and wisdom of Christ.

But the numerous new believers would not have such discernment. They would have no history of knowing the others’ lives since they were thrust together, not by physical proximity and living together for many years, but by coming to know Jesus. Being young Christians, they would not have the spiritual sensitivity to recognize those who were more mature.

Since young converts are easily impressed and misled by ambitious, gifted individuals, they could readily be misled, not being able to recognize those with the age, experience and spiritual maturity which God could use to give counsel and advice.

No doubt it was for this reason that Paul sensed a need for those men who were full of wisdom, experience and maturity to be “pointed out” so that the other believers could know who they were or “recognize” them. This was for the benefit of the larger group. Anyone who wanted counsel, help or wise instruction, needed to know where to go. They

needed to know who was trustworthy, in intimate communion with God and able to direct them in His ways.

This is just what we read about in the book of Acts. In Acts 14:23 we read: “And when they [Paul and Bar-Nabas] had pointed out for them the older, more spiritually mature brothers in every gathering of the called-out ones and had prayed with fasting, they entrusted them to the Lord on whom they had believed” (FLNT).

This word translated “pointed out” in Greek is CHEIROTONEO. This literally means “to stretch out the hand” and so can be translated “to point out.” W. E. VINE in his *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* says the following about this Greek word: “Not a formal ecclesiastical ordination is in view, but the ‘appointment,’ for the recognition of the churches, of those who had already been raised up and qualified by the Holy Spirit, and had given evidence of this in their life and service.”

Of course in the city of Jerusalem, there was no need for anyone to point out those who had walked with Jesus personally. They were well known. But in the other cities, things were not so obvious.

As with the Old Testament, so with the New, the elders of the churches were never elected. Furthermore, contrary to what some translations of the scriptures seem to say, they were not chosen or “ordained.” They were simply pointed out.

THE PROOF OF SPIRITUAL MATURITY

To be an “elder” requires maturity – both physical and spiritual maturity. It requires the development of godly character along with a large dose of wisdom and experience. These qualities can only come with age and intimacy with Jesus. The “proof” of such characteristics is seen through the lives and families of such men.

In 1 Timothy 3:1-6 Paul gives us a list of virtues which demonstrate that someone could be considered an elder, or “watchman” as it is translated in this passage.

We read: “This saying is true: ‘If a man wishes to serve as a watchman, he desires *to do* a valuable service.’ The watchman, therefore, must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, not a heavy drinker, self-controlled, exhibiting good behavior, given to hospitality, able to teach, peaceable, not quick to strike someone else [including his wife], but gentle, not someone who likes to argue, not someone greedy for money, someone who administers his own household well and has children who are obedient and who respect him (for if a man doesn’t know how to administer his own household, how can he care for the called-out ones of God?), not a young person or recent convert so that he doesn’t begin to think highly of himself and so fall into judgment, just as the devil did” (FLNT).

These qualities cannot be gained through appointment. They are not automatically given to someone because they were elected or chosen to serve in this way. A person’s life can only be governed by and saturated with such virtues through a life of intimacy with, and submission to, God. Such a life cannot be and, in fact, never is the result of any religious appointment, but is the fruit of the life of Jesus growing up in that person.

In his letter to Titus, chapter 1:5-9, Paul includes a similar list. “I left you in Crete to do this favor for me: that you would additionally correct the things that were lacking and point out the older, more *spiritually* mature brothers in every city, as I instructed you. *Such men are ones who are blameless, the husband of one wife, having children who believe, men who are not accused of behaving like the unsaved or of being disobedient to God.*

“For the watchman must be blameless as God’s steward; not self-willed, not quick to get angry, not quarrelsome, not someone who strikes others [including his wife], not greedy for money; but given to hospitality, a promoter of virtue, discrete, just, holy, self-controlled; holding faithfully to the word which is according to the *correct* teaching, so that he may be able to encourage others by teaching, and to reprove those who contradict *the truth*” (FLNT).

From these verses, clearly indicating men of spiritual maturity and experience, we can understand Paul's heart. He was very concerned for the well-being of the new converts. His heart yearned for the brothers and sisters to be able to grow up in Christ and attain all that God had for them.

To aid in this process, he thought it necessary for the brothers with wisdom and maturity to be pointed out to them. In this way, they could know to whom to look for advice and know whose lives were godly examples for them to follow.

Here the word translated "pointed out" actually means "to set down" or "to place." Perhaps here Paul was again remembering the Old Testament pattern. Since the elders of the Old Testament were actually old, it seems that they often did not work much anymore or not employed full-time. They had lived most their life and were, to a greater or lesser extent, "retired."

Since they were not occupied with full-time work, their habit was to gather at the gate of their city where there was a place for them to sit. From this vantage point, they could observe the lives of the inhabitants, converse with each other, and be available for those who wished to seek their counsel.

Here I am providing some verses which demonstrate that this "sitting at the gate of the city" was indeed the habit of these elders. "...then his father and his mother shall take hold of him and bring him out to the elders of his city, to the gate of his city" (Deut 21:19 NKJV). "...then the father and mother of the young woman shall take and bring out the evidence of the young woman's virginity to the elders of the city at the gate" (Deut 22:15 NKJV). "But if the man does not want to take his brother's wife, then let his brother's wife go up to the gate to the elders..." (Deut 25:7 NKJV).

"And when he flees to one of those cities, and stands at the entrance of the gate of the city, and declares his case in the hearing of the elders of that city..." (Josh 20:4 NKJV). "And all the people who were at the gate,

and the elders, said, 'We are witnesses. The Lord make the woman who is coming to your house like Rachel and Leah, the two who built the house of Israel; and may you prosper in Ephrathah and be famous in Bethlehem'" (Ruth 4:11 NKJV). "The elders have ceased *gathering at the gate*, and the young men from their music" (Lam 5:14 NKJV).

Through these verses we see that the sitting place by the gate was the elder's "place." So, when Paul tells Timothy to "place" elders, he was likely referring to this habit of the Old Testament elders.

This then was another example of how Paul thought it necessary to indicate to the new believers of the early churches which men had been raised up by God, demonstrating through their godly character, wisdom and experience that they were reliable individuals from whom others could receive advice and counsel.

HOW ELDERS FUNCTION

We have spoken already about the role of elders in giving counsel and advice. But the scriptures indicate that there were other functions of these men also. In the verse we already quoted from 1 Timothy 3, these men are called "watchmen." The Greek word here is EPISKOPES which means "to watch over" or to function as a "watchman."

What do these watchmen do? They observe, they watch. Similarly to the elders of the Old Testament who sat at the gate and observed the conduct and daily lives of the inhabitants, the New Testament watchman is an observer.

Since these men have spiritual maturity, they also have the normal desire of a mature person to care for the younger ones. When they notice that someone is getting into trouble – for example, that they were heading in a dangerous direction or that they were about to make a serious mistake – then they have a responsibility before God to speak to that person. A watchman is someone who watches over some property for someone else or even a city and warns the inhabitants of impending trouble.

This then is another function of a New Testament elder. He watches over the property of Jesus. He takes care of those who belong to God. He cares for them by giving them godly counsel and advice. He teaches them what he has learned about spiritual things. He warns them when they are in danger. He loves them as his own children because he knows they are loved by the Father, just as he himself is.

Although the New Testament watchmen have the responsibility to speak to someone who is erring or in danger, they have no right to try to enforce what they say. They have no authority to try to force anyone else to follow their advice or direction.

AUTHORITY OVER OTHERS PROHIBITED

The New Testament elders were not and are never given “authority” from God over other believers. This is a mistaken idea which many Christians have. Jesus never gave authority to His disciples over each other. In fact, Jesus prohibited such authority! He actually forbade His disciples to exercise any authority over the others.

Although this may come as a surprise to you, His teaching about this subject is very clear. Let us read together from Matthew 20:25-28: “But Jesus called them to him and said, ‘You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them and their great ones exercise authority over them. It must never be like this among you! But whoever wants to become great among you will be your servant, and whoever wants to be first among you will be your slave. In the same way, the Son of man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many’” (FLNT).

In Luke 22:25,26 Jesus further clarifies this teaching. “So he said to them, ‘The kings of the Gentiles have dominion over them and those exercising authority over them are called “Benefactors.” But you may not do so! Instead, he who is “great” among you, let him become as a newborn child and he who is an outstanding example *in the spiritual life*, let him be as a servant’” (FLNT).

Here Jesus uses the word “benefactor.” A benefactor is someone who does something for your benefit. What they are doing is good for you. Yet, here Jesus teaches us that even when it seems beneficial for one believer to exercise authority over another believer, it is prohibited. It is not His way. Therefore, it is not permitted for any elder or watchman to exercise authority over someone else.

Shortly before Jesus’ ascension into heaven He stated: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me” (Mt 28:18). Wow! This must really mean “all” since besides heaven and earth we don’t know of any other location. What He didn’t say was that He was parcelling out a little bit of this authority to each of us to use in His absence. Reading through to the end of this passage, we see that He hasn’t needed to give us any of this authority because He is not “absent.” He is still with us. The Authority Himself is with us until the consummation of the age (Mt 28:20).

Although Jesus did give His followers authority over the demons, He did not give any to us to use on our brothers and sisters. Setting aside the question of positional, secular and governmental authorities on this earth which is indeed delegated by God, among His people He is the sole authority. He has reserved this authority for Himself.

Some New Testament translations use the word “authority” in the case of Paul in 2 Corinthians 10:8 where we read: “For even if I should boast somewhat more about our authority, which the Lord gave us...” (NKJV), as if he had been given some authority himself. However, this translation cannot be correct since it contradicts the clear teachings of Jesus. This word translated “authority” can be and, no doubt should be, better translated as “capacity” or “ability” to harmonize better with what Jesus clearly taught. Paul therefore was given “capacity” or “ability” but not “authority.”

Therefore, although the watchman has a responsibility to speak when God needs him to warn someone who is erring, he has no authority, either in himself or from God, to try to force that person to do what he has said.

SHEPHERDS

Another word which we find used in the New Testament as a task for those who are carrying out the obligations of mature brothers is to “shepherd.” The Greek word used here is POIMEN which signifies a herdsman. What does this mean to us in the Christian context?

A shepherd of that time in history led his sheep. That meant he walked in front of them. They followed him because they knew him and trusted him. They had experience of his care and faithfulness toward them.

These shepherds never drove their sheep. Driving sheep is difficult without the aid of dogs, but leading them is easy if they are familiar with the shepherd. For example, Jesus said: “My sheep hear {or know} my voice, I know them, and they follow me” (Jn 10:27). Speaking about the “Good Shepherd” He says: “...he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When his sheep leave the fold, he *leads them by* going out in front of *them*. And the sheep follow him because they recognize his voice” (Jn 10:3,4 FLNT).

This is the way Jesus leads us. He never forces us to do something. He never pushes or shoves. He never demands that we do something which is against our will. He does not have to use “dogs” to drive us, which in this case would be human authority figures. In fact, He never violates our will in any way. Since it was God who gave us free will, He never, ever does anything which would violate it.

In the same way, leadership in the New Testament is never by the use of positional authority, but instead by example. Leadership is never exercised by force, coercion, demand or insistence. It is a “leadership” which has no control or authority over others. Instead, it is the example seen in the life of the “leaders” as they walk out in front of the others in the spiritual walk.

In fact, the Greek word which is translated as “over you” in 1 Thessalonians 5:12 is PROISTEMI which means, according to W. E. Vine in his Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words: “literally, ‘to stand before’ hence, ‘to lead, attend to’ (indicating care and diligence).”

Another word translated “rule over you” in Hebrews 13:7 referring to elders is HEGEOMAI which, according to Strong’s definitions, means “to go before, lead the way.”

Paul, one of those who had the most profound revelations concerning Jesus’ body, confirms this when he says: “Not that we have any dominion over your faith, but we are helpers of your joy. For you stand by faith *yourselves*” (2 Cor 1:24 FLNT).

Confirming this Peter says: “The older, *spiritually* mature brothers among you I exhort ...care for the flock of God which is among you, looking after them not because you have to, but willingly. Don’t *do this* as a way to make money but with a good attitude, not by exercising *any* control over the others but by becoming examples to the flock” (1 Pet 5:1-3 FLNT).

As mentioned before, another important function of such an elder is to lead the others to good pastures and clean water. Since a truly spiritually mature brother is walking in intimacy with Jesus, he knows where such good nutrition and drink is. It is in God. So he leads the others into an ever increasing relationship with Jesus so that they can eat and drink of Him too.

NOT ORGANIZERS

Just as in the Old Testament, so in the New, the elders were never responsible for organizing the life of the believers. They were not programming church meetings. They did not schedule times for prayer or teaching. They were not responsible for orchestrating the various activities of the brothers and sisters.

Now this may come as a surprise to some readers. In today’s “churches,” the elders, or the pastor, does all of these things. He is the one in charge of running the church. But in the New Testament, we don’t find even one example of such organizing on the part of the elders. That’s right. We cannot find one verse in the New Testament which shows the apostles, “pastors,” or elders organizing the activities of the brethren. It seems they scheduled nothing.

This should be very instructive for us. Many Christians claim to be “Bible believing” or to be following the scriptures. Yet most Christian groups are organized and run by a man or group of men. However, this has no biblical basis. It is an activity which has no scripture to support it. Although it is a most common and universally accepted practice, it does not seem to be scriptural.

For example, we see that in the book of Acts the believers were meeting “from house to house.” Who was organizing this? Was it Peter saying, “On Mondays, this group will meet at John’s house and on Tuesday, this other group will meet at Stephen’s house.”

Do we read about James (or anyone else for that matter) dictating that on Thursday there will be meetings for fasting and prayer? No. No such thing was ever decided, orchestrated or programmed by the apostles. Instead, these things were led by the Holy Spirit.

You see, God has a different plan. He has a new idea for how to govern His people. It is called a “theocracy.” It is the government of God Himself. His plan is that Jesus would organize, schedule and “run” the church. In contrast to the unbiblical idea of humans running things, this teaching about Jesus being the organizer is very clear in the scriptures.

We read: “...Christ is the head of the church” (Eph 5:23 NKJV). Also we are taught: “And He is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things He may have the preeminence” (Col 1:18 NKJV). Furthermore we see that God the Father “...gave Him to be head over all *things* to the church” (Eph 1:22 NKJV).

What does being the “head” mean? This word is used to describe something similar to a human body. In our body, our head runs everything. All our words, decisions, movements, etc. are governed by our head. No other member of our body is ever qualified to direct this complex organism. Although certain members, such as nerves, may transmit directions from the head, it is always our head which controls everything.

In the same way Jesus is meant to be the head of His body which is called "the church." He is the one whom the Father has put in charge of EVERYTHING. No one else is capable of or called to run anything. Did you notice that He is the head over "all things?" (Eph 1:22). Nothing was left out for man to take care of. When Jesus is directing every movement of His people, they move in a glorious harmony, accomplishing His will.

Yet it seems that men have a problem here. How could Jesus possibly "run the church?" He's invisible. He doesn't speak audibly (very often) or send emails. He's not on "WhatsApp" or Twitter. How then could He possibly organize and direct all the activities of His church.

Here we encounter one of the greatest deficiencies of today's church. Very few believers are intimate with Jesus. Very few know Him well and therefore know how to follow Him. In spite of the verses which we already cited about His sheep knowing His voice and being able to follow Him, very few today have this experience. Since they have very little spiritual growth because of little intimacy with Jesus, they are unable to follow His leadership in a great variety of situations. Therefore, they begin to rely on men.

Since they don't know how to hear from, trust in and follow an invisible Lord, they take the easy way out and look to human leadership. They put men in the place of God and let them run things. Instead of recognizing their lack of intimacy with Jesus and doing what is necessary to fix this serious problem, they hide the problem by substituting men in the place of their Lord. Since almost everyone else does this also, they see little problem in continuing the practice.

Yet the result is the loss of divine leadership. It is the absence of the "theocracy" which God has wanted from the beginning. The consequence is religious organizations which have the "form of godliness" but lack the content of the presence of God. Therefore, they have little, if any, supernatural power.

Today we have human beings leading the church in the place of Jesus. These men and women may mean well, but they just can't do the job. They are incapable of substituting for Jesus.

Since they don't see into men's hearts, since they are not omnipresent, since they cannot solve people's inmost needs, since they cannot orchestrate the lives of all the members in the same way that Jesus can, they end up only producing a very pathetic, poor imitation – a human organization instead of a divinely led organism which is full of the life of God.

The idea of men heading up or running the body of Christ is as absurd as having an ant trying to substitute for your brain. It is just not possible. The results can never be anything like God intended.

Why is the church today so weak? Why are the attendees not being transformed into the image of Christ? Why is victory over sin so rare or even non-existent? Part of the answer is because we have human leadership instead of divine. We have men taking the place of God. We have the "ants" trying to be the brain. It just doesn't work and never will.

What we so desperately need is for every believer to get in touch with Jesus themselves. We need a profound repentance for sins which will restore our relationship with God. In this way we can learn to know Him and follow Him.

TRUE LEADERSHIP

Jesus is capable of leading His church, His people. He is well qualified and able. He does this in many ways. First of all, He speaks to and leads each one individually. This is of the greatest importance. Just as every member of a human body is connected to and directed by the head of the body, so every member of Christ must be in touch with and guided by Jesus. Without such intimacy and obedience on the part of every member, the church can never function normally or well.

However, there are always spiritual children in our midst. There will always be some who are immature and, therefore, don't hear Jesus as well as they should or as they will later on. When such believers need clarification, when they have some doubts or fears, when their faith is still small, from time to time they will need some counsel. They will need older, mature brothers to help them. They will need food and care. This then is the function of the elders.

Such mature brothers will never just tell someone what to do or not to do. Instead, they will help the seeking believers discern what God is already saying to them. They will serve these other brothers or sisters by aiding them in sorting through the many thoughts, feelings, impulses, etc. which are filling them and tease out the voice of the Lord.

These mature brothers, instead of substituting for God by giving their own advice and opinions, will help these others discern what God is already saying to them.

Furthermore, more mature Christians can be used by God to speak to the rest. This can be in the form of teaching, preaching, a prophetic word or even just a thought or suggestion. Since Jesus is invisible, He often uses members of His body as conduits through which He expresses Himself and His will.

Although the more mature members of Jesus' body are used more frequently by Him to transmit His will, they never become that authority themselves. They are merely channels through which Jesus makes His authority known.

So we see that "eldership" is not a position of authority in the church. It is not an "office" to which someone is elected or appointed. (It should be pointed out here that the word "office" used in the King James Version in 1 Timothy 3, verses 1,10,13 represents no word in the original Greek. Here the translators have created an "office" out of thin air due to their own concepts and religious training. The true meaning of the phrase here is "to serve.")

Instead, elders are simply the more mature men among any group of believers who serve the others with their wisdom and experience with Jesus. They are never organizers or dominators but merely servants through whom the Spirit of God flows from time to time.

DEACONS

“Deacon” is a word used to describe some believers in the New Testament. This word “deacon” is not really a translation of a Greek word but a transliteration. This transliteration was achieved by taking a Greek word and simply inventing an English word which sounds similar. Dictionary.com translates “transliteration” like this: “to change (letters, words, etc.) into corresponding characters of another alphabet or language.”

The real translation of the Greek word DIAKONOS is, according to Strong: “One who executes the commands of another, especially of a master. A servant, or attendant.” It can also mean “slave.” The root word comes from DIAKO, which means to run errands.

How then did such individuals come to exist in the early church? It is true that while Jesus walked on this earth, He never instructed us to have such a thing as deacons. This function among believers came about because of a specific need. Some brothers felt that their widows were being neglected. When food was distributed, their widows were not getting their share. So they complained to the apostles.

However, the “twelve” did not want to be burdened with this task so they asked the brothers to select some others to take care of this necessary service of caring for widows. In this case seven men were selected. This leads us to the conclusion that such “servants,” as they should be called, were selected to take care of some special needs among the brethren.

As with the elders, so with the servants, this was not a position of authority. These men had none of their “own” authority and exercised no control over anyone else. Exactly the opposite was true. They were carrying out, for the benefit of the others, a very lowly kind of service.

What being a “deacon” in the church today has come to mean – that of someone having a title and a position of authority – is completely foreign to the thoughts conveyed to us through the scriptures. Somehow, perhaps by importing a Greek word to use as a title instead of actually translating the word into English, we now have a tradition of “deacons” in our midst which is not in harmony with the thoughts of God.

The question of whether such individuals are even necessary today would probably depend upon the special needs of any particular group. Although it seems that the New Testament churches continued this practice, there is nothing in the teachings of Jesus which demands that any and all gatherings of believers have such servants.

In the case of caring for widows, in many cultures this is not a present need. I vividly remember a brother coming to me asking me to help him find a biblical widow to whom he could give some money. After reading James 1:27, he felt that he should be aiding such widows. But, according to 1 Timothy chapter 5, all the widows he knew were disqualified.

After applying all the restrictions which Paul cited for discerning who is or is not a genuine widow whom the church should support, he couldn't find even one. Since I was about to travel to Romania, he thought perhaps I could find one there.

Today, in most parts of our world, the need for which these men were selected no longer exists. There are very few widows in the “west” who can pass through Paul's screening test. Therefore, there is no present need for any group of men to be selected to serve them.

As already stated, whether it is necessary for any group of believers to specially select brothers to take care of a pressing need, would depend upon the situation, the culture, and the leading of the Holy Spirit. If and when such persons are selected, it is not to run a part of the church but to perform a lowly service for the others under the direction of Jesus.

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