

Offices, Titles, and Functions

God has manifested himself and functioned as Spirit in all ages and especially in his formation and direction of the earthly kingdom of Israel. Isaiah foretold the coming in the “latter days” of his spiritual kingdom into which all nations would flow (Isa. 2:1-4). Joel also foretold that God would empower all flesh/nations by pouring out himself upon them in the “last days” (Joel 2:28-33). John the Baptist came preparing the way for the spiritual king, announcing that his kingdom was at hand, and declaring that they would be baptized with God’s holy Spirit (Mark 1:1-8). Thus would begin the “last days” of the kingdom of Israel and the initiation of the Spiritual kingdom, a period of about forty years.

Jesus would be leaving them soon with promise to return at the last day of redemptive history in about forty years. (The Bible records redemptive history, not a history of this material universe.) What form of organization did Jesus set up to implement this transition from earthly to spiritual? None. There would be no offices or titles -- only empowered functions. Jesus made it clear that there would be no rulers among them. He taught them, *“You know that those who are supposed to rule over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of man also came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many”* (Mark 10:42-45; see context and Luke 22:24-27; 1 Peter 5:1-4).). The “offices” would be functions of servitude.

But he was not to leave his apostles as desolate orphans. This interim period would be overseen and facilitated by God himself manifested in spiritual gifts. On the night of his betrayal, in preparing the apostles for his leaving by way of the cross, he assured them of some things the Spirit would do to and through them. “He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you” (John 24:26). As the “Spirit of truth,” he would bear witness to Jesus (15:26). He would “convince the world of sin and of righteousness” (16:8). He would guide them into all truth, declare to them things that are to come, and glorify Jesus (16:13-14). Being addressed to the apostles, these promises were not extended to you and me.

In the points being recalled here, I am assuming that you are familiar with them; so I am not expanding this essay by argumentation. I have touched on many of these points with you in previous articles.

After Jesus was raised and just before his ascension, he told his apostles to wait in Jerusalem for the baptism with the Holy Spirit, and then their mission would begin. On Pentecost that outpouring was visibly and audibly dramatic and undeniable. By God’s working in and through them, the gospel was preached and 3000 obeyed the terms announced by Peter, thus receiving forgiveness of their sins and forming the community

of the saved. They comprised God's "ekklesia," those called out into God's congregation or assembly. They were not called out into a structured system of organized religion but they became a community of believers united to serve God in Christ.

Paul introduces 1 Corinthians 12 with, "*Now concerning spiritual gifts, brethren, I do not want you to be uninformed.*" He then explains more in detail, "*Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of working, but it is the same God who inspires them all in every one. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the ability to distinguish between spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are inspired by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills*" (12:4-11). Please note that these are not assignments of offices of authority in an organization, nor are they just involving titles, but they are all functions. They are all assignments to be performed for the common good.

After using the functioning of various parts of a body as an illustration, he emphasized that these gifts were functional. In those formative times for the spiritual kingdom, the Spirit empowered and directed through those gifts. "*And he appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, then healers, helpers, administrators, speakers in various kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret? But earnestly desire the higher gifts*" (v. 27-30). He then urged that all these gifts given in the infant church to be used for edification or building it up (Ch. 14). Those gifts were for temporary functions to sustain them to the end, the day of the revealing of Christ (1:4-10). Those functions would cease, however, when the childhood, imperfect, immature, incomplete stage developed into manhood, perfection, maturity, completion signaled by the "parousia" of Christ (13:8-13).

Having outgrown its childhood, what system of authority and organization would remain for the mature community of Christ? None, except for the rule of the "more excellent way" of love which Paul pointed to in Chapter 13. If believers cannot function guided by love, they are not likely to function in submission to authoritative officers.

All cooperative activities are voluntary rather than by regimentation. A community of believers has no parish boundaries or essential pattern of operation but a group may organize its functions for expediency. A very small church may need the minimum of organizing of its work. The larger the group, the more expedient it may become to appoint persons to certain functions for efficiency. That was the case in Jerusalem when seven men were chosen for a certain work. We have no reason to conclude that they

became officers with authority in a permanent board of deacons/servants. They had a job to do and they did it.

We read of elders in the early church in Jerusalem but no mention is made of their selection. Respected heads of families were recognized as elders by Jews long before Christ. Some of those men were converted and retained that status of respect in Jerusalem; so it seems. We read of no appointment of elders until many years later. Out among the Gentiles who were not familiar with this Jewish culture, Paul and Barnabas appointed men of that description.

Timothy and Titus were not brought up in Judean culture, so Paul saw fit after many years to write to them a general description of men of faith, respect, and leadership which we have termed “qualifications of elders.” Neither the traditional Jewish elder nor those described by Paul filled a office of authority. The word “office” is used in some texts in some versions, but the word basically means a “work” -- a function.

Appointment to an office cannot make a man a spiritual shepherd/pastor, a leader, a teacher, a counsellor, a person capable of lovingly supervising and serving people. Persons having those qualities were recognized, identified, and approved by the community for those functions within the congregation. These men had already proven themselves in all these functions before their appointment; so they were not assigned to a new function but were only recognized with congregational approval.

The historic church developed a hierarchy with authoritative titles and offices like that of a deacon. To accommodate that official concept, translators have chosen to keep that anglicized Greek word in our versions. But “deacon” means servant or minister. All disciples are servants/ministers of God but not necessarily as persons appointed to serve the congregation in a specific function. They are assigned specific works to do, not to be on an authoritative board of deacons. They perform no work that others cannot do except that they are assigned by the congregation. While they serve in those specific capacities, they are servants/ministers but, when their task is completed, their appointment is fulfilled.

Because it has been imprinted in us so indelibly, it is difficult to disabuse our minds of the authoritarian concepts of offices and titles in our voluntary associations in communities of believers. What I am writing here is not intended to downplay the great work that these dedicated men do, though that may seem true. I am reminded of the time I listed the “deacons” of the church in the bulletin as “Servants of the Congregation.” The next week an elder got on my case for belittling our deacons! Office, title, or function?

To the two or three of you who may still be with me -- sorry, but I will probably lose you now as I point out some inconsistencies.

Elders (presbyters, shepherds, pastors, bishops, overseers) tend, feed, and oversee the flock. They counsel persons with individual needs. They must pass the “elder qualification” examination to qualify for their appointment. Then they hire a thirty year old unmarried man, or married with no children, to tend, feed, oversee, and counsel the congregation. He becomes a surrogate elder, pastor, shepherd, etc. but we refuse to call him an elder or pastor. He does their work but cannot be one! Office, title, or function?

Until it became common for women to work outside the home, and possibly it still prevails today, a majority of the functions of elders and deacons was done by women. They did more teaching, hospital visitation, checking on shutins, encouraging absentees, contacting of visitors, door knocking, evangelism by home studies and correspondence courses, counseling, benevolence, and leadership in general. They often did much of the deacon/servant organizational function relating to various programs such as classes, VBS, supplies, communion preparation, keeping the treasury, the care of the building, and maintaining the office. Yet because they were not “qualified” to do these works of elders and deacons, no one dared suggest that they were elders and deacons! They do the function of elders and deacons but cannot be one! Office, title, or function?

Elders and Deacons are not holy orders within the church for males. They are expedients to accomplish corporate function. The designations have become warped, loaded, and confusing in out common usage. For instance, we speak of elders but who calls them pastors or bishops? We speak of deacons without thinking of them as ministers or servants. We speak of “the minister” but do not call him a deacon, servant, or pastor.

Translated titles take on a sacredness by common usage so that some would recoil at the suggestion that “overseer” might be translated as “supervisor” or those who “tend the flock” as “superintendents,” or those who lead as “mentors.” Our patternistic mindset hinders our thinking in terms of expedient appointments for function instead of offices. All appointees could be identified by function rather than title without reference to gender or traditional elder / deacon distinction.. Some may serve in more than one area of work. These would all be supervised by appointed coordinators. All persons chosen to serve the congregation, from nursery care to lawn mowing, would be included under their appropriate designations. All would be servants of the congregation.

All these persons would be appointed in view of their faith, character, and ability. The over-riding question: Are we appointing them to an office, a title, or a function?

[For additional thoughts, see FR 41; Patriarchs: Past and Present.]

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