

ARE THE TERMS ELDERS, BISHOPS, DEACONS, EVANGELISTS AND OTHERS USED INTERCHANGEABLY IN THE NEW TESTAMENT?

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In Ephesians 4:8–11, I Corinthians 12:6–8, and Romans 12:6–8 the Apostle Paul speaks of the many gifts which the ascended Lord gave unto the *εκκλησια*, the *Una Sancta*. According to Ephesians 4 He gave some apostles, and some prophets, and some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers. And according to I Cor. 12 God did not set only apostles, prophets, and teachers in the Church, but also workers of miracles, healers, helpers, administrators, and speakers in, and interpreters of, various kinds of tongues. Again according to Romans 12 there were not only those who had the gift of prophecy, but also those who had the gift of *διακονια*, of service or ministry, of teaching, of exhorting, of giving or imparting, of ruling or managing, and of showing mercy. It is evident from these lists that the apostle wants to call attention to the great diversities of notable gifts, services, and operations distributed in and to the Church, which cover all the main lines of activity in the Church, teaching, wonder-working, administration, speaking in tongues. The Apostle does not only speak of gifts distributed to certain functionaries, but also of functionaries as gifts given to the Church and to every single member in the Church. Functions and functionaries are spoken of in one and the same list without any transition from the one group to the other. The very fact that such abstract and concrete terms could thus be used goes to show that there was not yet an organization of administrative offices within the Church. There were no officials in the ecclesiastical sense, no classes of officials each dealing with definite functions. As a result the Apostle in correcting the errors into which the Corinthians had fallen, does not tell any officials to take action, but addresses the congregation as a whole.

It is true that in I Cor. 11:28 the Apostle gives precedence to the three functionaries, apostles, prophets, and teachers, saying first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers, and after that miracles, finally ending up with diversities of tongues. There we do not merely have an order of enumeration, but one of dignity. There were leading men in the congregations, first of all the Twelve Apostles and the Apostle Paul, then the prophets, Barnabas, for instance, whom Luke lists under the heading of prophets and teachers (Acts 13:1), and Judas and Silas, “chief men among the brethren,” “being prophets also themselves” (15:22, 32), who were sent with Paul and Barnabas to Antioch. They had the gift of prophesying, which Paul encourages all Christians to acquire, namely to speak unto men unto edification and exhortation and comfort (I Cor. 14:1, 3). In short, the prophets as the second group of leading men in the congregations, were men “who exhorted the brethren with many words, and confirmed them” (Acts 15:32), who, in other words, were thoroughly versed in the Word and were able to set forth authoritatively the Lord’s will from that Word.

The third group, the *διδασκαλοι*, are mentioned in I Cor. 12:28 as ranking next with the apostles and prophets, also distinguished by the possession of a charisma. At all times the *διδασκαλοι* as teachers were and are indispensable in the Church. In Ephesians 4:11 they apparently are identical with the *ποιμενες*, since both terms are headed by one and the same article: *τους δε ποιμενες και διδασκαλους*. As the *ποιμην*, the shepherd of the sheep (Hebr. 13:20), was responsible for the life and growth of the congregation, *διδασκεν*, teaching, was one of his main functions and therefore an essential part of the shepherding of a *ποιμνιον*, a flock, a congregation. These *ποιμενες και διδασκαλοι*, pastors and teachers, may have differed from the apostles, and evangelists of Eph. 4:11 in that early period of the Christian Church in that they already ministered to settled congregations. The *ευαγγελισται*, the evangelists, on the other hand, listed immediately after the prophets in Eph. 4:11, are undoubtedly the missionaries of the Early Church. As such they spread the Word taught by the

apostles and prophets among the Gentile nations. Philip, who worked in Samaria and along the coast up to Caesarea (Acts 8:40), is a good example of an evangelist. Timothy, likewise, who was admonished by Paul II Tim. 4:5 to “do the work of an evangelist” and to make full proof of his ministry, i.e. fully to carry out his *διακονια*, his service. In Romans 12:8 Paul lists four other functionaries: First, he that exhorts (*παρακαλον*), thus adding admonition to prophecy, ministry, and teaching; secondly, he that imparts (*μεταδιδους*), thus adding almsgiving to the aforementioned gifts of the Church; thirdly, he that rules, i.e. he that takes the lead (*προισταμενος*) or presides in a congregation, in a church council, in a committee performing some task, thus adding management to the many gifts of a congregation; finally, he that shows mercy, i.e. he who extends mercy (*ελεον*) to anyone in distress, thus ending up with works of charity to be performed in all cheerfulness.

The various names for these nine functions in the Church serve to show that as the members of a body have not the same functions—the Authorized Version translated “have not the same office” (Rom. 12:4)—thus the members of the body of Christ have different functions according to the grace which is given them (12:6). While there is the same Spirit, the same Lord, the same God, i.e. the one Triune God, still there are diversities of gifts, and diversities of services, and diversities of operations (I Cor. 12:4, 5). On the one hand these gifts and functions were widely diffused, were not restricted to just a few. On the other hand they were not exclusive, but were in the possession of many. Not only the prophets and evangelists transmitted the Gospel revelation received from the Apostles, but pastors and teachers did likewise. And not only pastors and teachers taught, but Apostles and prophets did likewise. Although not all members of Christ’s body were Apostles, not all were prophets and teachers, still there was abundant grace for each member, so that all had gifts for more than one sphere of activity within the Church, and some, as for instance the Apostles, for all spheres. In I Tim. 2:7 the Apostle calls himself a preacher (*κηρυξ*), an apostle (*στολτολος*), and a teacher (*διδασκαλος*). Barnabas, together with others including Saul, is spoken of as a prophet and teacher (Acts 13:1) and alone with Paul as an apostle (14:14). Andronicus and Junias, kinsmen and fellow-prisoners of the Apostle Paul, are designated as men of note or mark (*επισημος*) among the apostles (Romans 16:7), *berühmte Apostel* as Luther puts it. As little as we may assume that the same name, as for instance, “apostles” always has the same meaning, thus we may not assume that in all cases the difference of names means a difference of gifts or functions. *Διακονια*, service, may be identified with *αντιλημψις*, ministration, help. Most likely the *προισταμενοι*, the rulers, were not different from those who had the gift of *κυβερνησις*, of governing, and perhaps even not different from the *ποιμενες*, the pastors. Since all these terms were not official designations, the names and titles could readily overlap, could be used interchangeably and synonymously. Therefore we have a good reason to ask whether apostles and prophets in Ephesians 3:5 and prophets and teachers in Acts 13:1 are not used synonymously. The apparent reason for this question is that they are all subsumed under the one heading, *διακονια*, all the apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers having been given by the ascended Lord to the work of the *διακονια*, for the perfecting of saints. Even the earliest converts in Achaia, the household of Stephanas, Achaia’s firstfruit, “addicted,” i.e. appointed themselves (*εταχαν αέ ουτους*) to the *διακονια*, the ministry of the saints (I Cor. 16:15, 16). There is in all these references no trace of formally constituted church offices. What we do see, in the light of the Scriptures, is the body of Christ, the members of which are active in the widespread work of the *διακονια*.

This picture seems to change, however, when the Apostle Paul in Philippians 1:1 not only addresses and greets all the members of the congregation, as he is want to do, but also extends greetings to the *επισκοποι* and *διακονοι*. It was somewhat surprising all along that in Paul’s three lists in Ephesians, Corinthians, and Romans neither the terms *επισκοποι* nor *διακονοι* appeared, not to mention *πρεσβυτεροι*. Certainly, the *επισκοποι* can be sought and found in the terms *προισταμενοι*, rulers or leaders, and in the *κυβερνησεις*, governments or wise counsels. And the *διακονοι* can be identified with the *αντιλημψεις*, the abilities for rendering helpful service, as

we may expect it of *διακονοι*, servants. Such being the case, we are justified to conclude that these two new terms, *επισκοποι*, overseers, and *διακονοι*, servants, also denote functions or functionaries and are on a level with the many terms which we have encountered in Paul's three lists. This can truly be said of the *διακονοι*. A *διακονος* was a servant who waited on guests at a table (John 2:5, 9) or who was the servant of a king (Mt. 12:26). As a follower of Christ he is the *δαικονος* of his Lord (John 12:26), one who serves (*διακονη*) Him. At the same time he is a *παντων διακονος* a servant of all (Mk. 9:35; cf. 10:43; Mt. 20:26; 23:11). As such he has dedicated himself to the *διακονια*. Thus the Apostle speaks of himself and of the other apostles as *διακονια Χριστου* (II Cor. 11:23) and as *θεου διακονοι* (6:4), ministers of Christ and ministers of God, fully given to the *διακονια*, the service, the ministry, to which they had been called. No less was Timothy "a good *διακονος* of Jesus Christ" (I Tim. 4:6) and a *διακονος* of God as a fellow-laborer in the Gospel (I Thess. 3:1–3). Epaphras as a *συνδουλος*, a fellow-servant of the Apostle, was a faithful *διακονος*, a faithful minister of Christ (Col. 1:7; 4:12). The same can be said of Tychicus, Eph. 6:21 and Col. 4:7. As *διακονοι* of Christ, Paul and his colaborers were also *διακονοι* of the Church or of the congregation (*εκκλησιας*). Paul and Apollo, for instance, were *διακονοι* of the congregation at Corinth (I Cor. 3:5; cf. Col. 1:25), where the one planted and the other watered, God giving the increase. Had the Apostle desired to have given us a complete catalogue of names of the functionaries in the Church, the term *διακονος* would certainly have been among them.

No less does the term *επισκοπος* denote functions of the one who is endowed by the Spirit, namely the functions of taking oversight. These functions according to I Tim. 3:4, 5 and Tit. 1:9 were those of *προιστασθαι*, already listed Rom. 12:8, namely the function of ruling, presiding, and keeping discipline, of *επιμελεισθαι*, of taking forethought for the Church of God, of *παρακαλειν εν τη διδασκαλια*, of encouraging with teaching, of *ελεγχειν*, convicting those who gainsay. The Apostle Paul sums up all these functions in Acts 20:28, where he exhorts the elders of Ephesus as *επισκοποι* to shepherd the Church of God, *ποιμαινειν* being the function of the *επισκοποι*. Peter in the second chapter of his First Epistle in verse 25 closes his exhortation by saying: For ye were as sheep going astray; but are now returned unto the *ένα και επισκοπον των ψυχων υμων*, to the shepherd and overseer of your souls. The *επισκοποι* are the *ποιμενες* of Eph. 4:11 and their activity consists in *επισκοπειν* and *ποιμαινειν*.

We shall do well to note in passing what these two words, *επισκοπειν* and *ποιμαινειν*, have in common. *Επισκοπειν* occurs but twice in the New Testament and does not only have the meaning of overseeing, but also that of looking after, caring for. Thus it is used in Hebrews 12:15, where the author admonishes his readers "to look diligently" (*επισκοπουντες*) "lest any man fail of the grace of God." As a shepherd looks after his sheep, thus Christians are to exercise continuous oversight over each other, are to look after one another, in order to care for one another. Christ the shepherd and overseer of our souls does this in the fullest sense of the word. Christ is the one who knows our souls, our secret thoughts. But He also looks after our souls, He restores our soul and is therefore the true shepherd. Here in I Pet. 2:25, *ποιμην* and *επισκοπος* are used synonymously and the one explains the other.

Besides *διακονος* and *επισκοπος* there is a third name in the New Testament, *πρεσβυτερος*, which is always used in close connection with *επισκοπος*. Etymologically, *πρεσβυτερος* simply stands for one who is well advanced in age, an elder. The Apostles often use it merely to distinguish between old and young members of

the congregation. In Titus 2:2 the members of the congregation are classified according to their age as aged men (*πρεσβυτας*), aged women, young women, and young men, and the qualifications of the aged men are, that they are to be sober, grave, discreet, sound in faith, in love, in endurance, qualifications which one may expect of Christian elders because of the duration of their church membership and of their Christian experience. In I Tim. 5 the Apostle is again referring to elders, to the younger men, the older women, the younger women, and does not want Timothy to rebuke an elder sharply, but to exhort him, as a father (verse 1), i.e. he is not to dishonor a man in his old age and to treat him with disrespect, but is to “honor the face of the old man” (Lev. 19:32)

But as the Apostles do not only speak of the *διακονοι* and *επισκοποι* as mere functionaries, thus they also do not use the word *πρεσβυτερος* merely as a term for an elder among the various age groups in the congregations. On the contrary, they use all three terms including *πρεσβυτερος* as official designations, referring to men who have been appointed to certain offices. Are these official terms, we now ask, used interchangeably or do they already designate a rank in the ministry of the Church which prevents them from being used thus?

In discussing these three terms as official designations we shall retrace our steps by beginning with the term *πρεσβυτερος*. In Acts 11:29 the first mention is made of *πρεσβυτεροι*, namely those of Judea, to whom relief was sent by the hands of Barnabas and Saul (v. 30). Again we meet with all the elders of Jerusalem, Acts 21:18, as they were assembled with James and Paul in the home of the former. A *πρεσβυτεριον*, a body of elders, is mentioned in I Tim. 4:14. The members of this *πρεσβυτεριον*, most likely of Ephesus, inducted Timothy into office by the laying on of hands. These presbyters were not members of a *πρεσβυτεριον* merely because of their advanced age, but because of their appointment.

Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey by vote of the congregation (*χειροτονησαντες*) appointed certain elders in every congregation (Acts 14:23). The choice of these elders was narrowed to a very few men, and, as some conclude, to Jews alone, since they alone were versed enough in the Old Testament to be able to teach. Titus was to appoint (*καθιστηναι*)—not “ordain” as our Authorized Version translated—presbyters in every city (Tit. 1:5) and Timothy is warned not to lay hands suddenly on any man (I Tim. 5:22), but to let the presbyters as also the deacons first be proved (3:10), then to let them serve. This appointment of elders justifies us to regard the term *πρεσβυτερος* as an official title. The term *πρεσβυτερος* conveys the dignity of the office to us. The Apostles also made use of this title. Peter addressing the elders in chapter five of his First Epistle speaks of himself as *συμπρεσβυτερος*, as a fellow-elder, while John in his Second and Third Epistle designates himself as *πρεσβυτερος*, the Elder. As apostolic elders they exercised oversight over many flocks, called by their Lord to feed His sheep. The common or congregational elders exercised such oversight over the one flock that had called them. As their fellow-elder Peter admonishes them “to feed the flock of God and to exercise oversight” (I Peter 5:1ff) and Paul in his First Epistle to Timothy, chapter 5, verse 17, makes mention of elders who rule well, who take the lead well (*καλως προεστωτες*) and who are to be counted worthy of double honor, especially they who labor in the word and doctrine. These presbyters were worthy of double honor because of their age and their good work, serving the congregation well and laboring, toiling in the word and doctrine.

These appointed presbyters were also classified as *επισκοποι*. Paul, who summoned the presbyters of Ephesus to Miletus, tells them that the Holy Spirit has set them *επισκοπους*, overseers, bishops to shepherd the Church of God. Again in his letter to Titus, the Apostle tells his trusted companion to appoint elders in every city, such as are blameless, and then adds: For an *επισκοπος* must be blameless as the *οικονομος*, the steward of God, that he may be able to encourage with sound teaching and to convict those who gainsay. In I Tim. 3:1 the Apostle even makes mention of an *επισκοπη*, an office of a bishop, an overseership in saying: If a man aspires to an overseership, he is desirous of a good work. Then he continues to list the qualifications of the incumbent

of such an office which should qualify him to care for God's church and to have a good testimony from those without (v. 7).

It is in this third chapter of I Timothy that the Apostle also sums up the qualifications of the *διακονοι*, deacons, of those who serve. Among other things the deacons must hold the mystery of the faith in a pure conscience (v. 9). Timothy is to let these also first be proved, then he is to let them serve (*δικονειτωσαν*, v. 10), serve as deacons. Having served well they acquire unto themselves a good degree (*βαθμον*), a good standing. The seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom, whom Peter and the brethren in Jerusalem appointed to the business or duty of serving tables, Acts 6:3, were undoubtedly such *διακονοι*, although they are not designated as such. Still Luke speaks of the *διακονια*, the ministration, in which the widows of the Hellenists were overlooked, and of the business to which the seven were appointed, namely to serve tables (*διακονειν τραπεζαις*). We may conclude from the *αντιλημψεις*, the helps, *die Hilfeleistungen*, in I Cor. 12:28, and from the *διακονια* in Romans 12:7, that the institution of the diaconate spread to other congregations. In the Philippian Church the deacons take their rank after the *επισκοποι*, the bishops (Phil. 1:1), the two orders together constituting the recognized ministry of the congregation there. The greeting in Phil. 1:1, in which mention is made not only of the saints of Christ, but also of bishops and deacons, implies a development of church polity in so far as the functionaries are grouped into a twofold ministry of bishops and deacons. In this ministry the two titles, bishops and deacons, are, of course, not used interchangeably. There is every reason for their not being used thus. Only the *πρεσβυτεροι* or *επισκοποι* played a leading role in their respective congregations, while the deacons, as their name implies, were helpers and assistants of the presbyters. A similar relationship existed between the *πρεσβυτεροι* and the *νεωτεροι*, the elders and the younger, in I Peter 5:1–4. As the elders had certain duties to perform in their congregations, namely to feed the flock of God, thus the younger, to whom our Lord also refers Luke 22:26, had certain duties. And in performing these duties they were to submit themselves unto the elders.

As to the two titles, presbyters and bishops, however, there can be no doubt that they *are* used interchangeably, the duties of the presbyters even being described by the term *επισκοπειν* (I Peter 5:1). This use of *επισκοπειν* to describe the duties of the presbyters explains why the incumbents of this ministry carried two different titles, the one, *πρεσβυτερος*, springing out of the analogy of the Jewish synagogue and used to express the dignity of the office, the other, *επισκοπος*, springing out of the analogy of Greek institutions and used to designate the functions of this office. It is, therefore, not surprising that these two terms could be used interchangeably and that they were used indiscriminately. "It is by human authority," to quote our Confession, "that the grades of bishop and elder or pastor are distinct" but it is "by divine authority" that "the grades of bishop and pastor are not diverse" (Smalcaldic Articles, Trigl. 523, 63 and 65).

Indeed, there were diversities of functions and functionaries in the Apostolic Church, but there were no diversities of grades, especially not between presbyters and bishops, as we later on find them in the ecclesiastical hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church. Where functionaries were appointed in local congregations, or where they appointed themselves, as in the case of the earliest converts in Achaia, the household of Stephanas, already referred to (p. 187), there they were appointed to the service of saints, making themselves servants unto all, that they might not abuse the power of the Gospel, and might gain the more (I Cor. 9:18, 19).