

Office Politics

A fresh look at the burning issue of church leadership

When it comes to church government, who gets it right? STEVE CREE unearths some startling evidence that suggests we've all been asking the wrong questions all along...

What's in a Name?

Have you ever noticed the defining factor in most denominational names – Episcopalian, Presbyterian, Congregational, Pentecostal, Independent? What's in a name? In short, a particular understanding of *church government*.

It's a bit surprising, that this doctrine should have won denominational naming rights. It's even more surprising how denominational representatives often claim exclusive biblical warrant for their particular structure. What is truly staggering, however, is how the real biblical emphasis is silenced in the debate. Does the New Testament really seek to present a blueprint for church government? Or is its emphasis elsewhere?

A Sin of Omission

Discussions of church government have proceeded from a dubious assumption: that church government *is an end in itself*. This sidelines the missionary emphasis of the NT. It produces a domestic agenda, and a passive notion of our task. We are guilty, therefore, of a shocking sin of omission – clinging to *our order* while forgetting *our mission*.

In Acts 1:6-8 we find Jesus transforming just such a *passive domestic* agenda (1:6) – that of the apostles – into an *active mission* agenda (1:8). The Book of Acts thus presents a church constituted by Christ for gospel mission. This is what drives the book of Acts. It is the story of a people commissioned with the Word and empowered by the Spirit *for mission*. Whatever organisation we encounter in this book, it is organisation *for mission*.

Exegetical Fallacy #1 – Offices

Acts 6 is a favourite stop-off point for church government theorists. Clowney represents the consensus approach:

“This marks the first division of office in the church of the New Covenant, and that the choosing of the seven provided for eldership as well as the diaconate”.ⁱ

The real consensus represented here is not merely his specific conclusion, but his more basic assumption: that the passage is about the institution of offices in the church.

This approach does violence to the narrative. Incredibly, it argues for a different conclusion to that explicitly given by the author. Luke simply does not conclude, “and so, the office of deacon was instituted”, or similar. Rather, “so the word of God spread” (Acts 6:7). If you go looking for offices in this passage you'll probably come up with them. But that is not the concern of the narrative. Its concern is with the progress of the mission from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth.

If we acknowledge the integrity of the narrative, the real significance of Acts 6 emerges. It is about a threat to the ongoing mission. The focus of the story is *ethnicity*. The narrative highlights the fact that it is *the Hellenist* widows who are being neglected. So, there's a *threat*: the gospel may stall at this point (6:2) – not yet even out of Jerusalem; a *solution*: seven men (all Hellenists!) are appointed to look after the problem (6:5); *the result*: the gospel continued to spread (6:7). The outward movement of the gospel toward the Gentiles can continue.

Acts 6 is not about a new office. It is certainly not about the institution of the diaconate. The seven are nowhere called “deacons”, whatever overlap their initial task may have with the role of deacons outlined in 1 Timothy 3. It is dubious exegesis to impose 1 Timothy 3 as an interpretive grid. But even if such an approach was conceded, the seven end up looking more like the *overseers* of 1 Tim 3 than the deacons. Within moments of this episode, narratively speaking, we find members of the seven - Stephen and Philip - engaged in *word* ministries – doing very apostle-like things! The note is not so much *something* new being done, but *someone* new doing it. Hellenists. And note this: who is it that preaches the sermon that provokes a movement of the gospel into Judea? *Stephen* (8:1). And who first proclaims Christ in Samaria, and is described as an Evangelist? *Philip* (Acts 8:4ff; cf. 21:8). Have these men lost their job descriptions? Or maybe they're not deacons afterall – at least as we understand them. But then, they don't really fit *any office* as we understand them. **Unless, that is, we understand ministry structures to be flexible and subservient to the demands of the gospel mission.**

Exegetical Fallacy #2 – Elders

It is easy to find the word ‘elder’ in the NT and assume we know what is being spoken of. But what does the NT mean by *presbeuteros* - ‘elder’? Why is Luke is so unhelpful in our search for rigid definitions? The existence of elders in the early church is introduced without explanation in Acts 11:30. Luke is similarly vague in narrating the appointment of elders at Antioch (Acts 14:23), and introducing us to the elders at Ephesus (20:17). Where did they all come from? What did they do?

The introduction of ‘elders’, in narrative terms, is unremarkable. Luke assumes that the role of these elders will be understood by his readers. So we need to locate the assumed background information. For that, we need look no further than Luke's former book. Luke had spoken of the elders of Israel in his Gospel (Lk 22:66), and now he speaks of elders in the church. He sees no need for nuance or qualification. Clearly, the role of these early church elders is analogous to that of the Jewish elders who met in the Sanhedrin. “Elders” in Acts, therefore, is best taken in a generic sense. **It is an umbrella term describing those with general administrative oversight of the community.**

Therefore, we need to be wary of the common conclusion represented by Coenen:

*“By the time of the composition of Acts it is clear that the Pauline churches of Asia-Minor had adopted the “presbyterian” system of government”.*ⁱⁱ

This statement appears to claim too much – reading back later structures into the text. But the greater problem with the statement is actually in the opposite direction: it says *nothing*. To assert that Acts attests to a “presbyterian” form of government, is as meaningful as concluding that it presents a “leadership form of leadership” or “a government form of government”. We are merely told that there were leaders, and nothing more specific than that.

W.Grudem makes a similar error: “Although some have argued that different forms of church government are evident in the NT, a survey of the relevant texts shows the opposite to be

true: there is quite a consistent pattern of plural elders as the main governing group in New Testament churches”.ⁱⁱⁱ It is difficult to comprehend Grudem’s line of argument. He wants us to understand that the broad notion, “plural elders”, somehow excludes the possibility that “different forms of church government are evident in the NT”. All he has proved, however, is that the NT churches had leaders. We see that leadership was exercised; and that it was (generally) exercised by more than one person. That a NT church has “plural elders” tells us very little about its ministry structure. We must avoid likening *elder* to contemporary officials with the same title, or likening *plurality* to modern ideas of democracy.

On the evidence of Acts, therefore, we must maintain the broadest of definition for our understanding of “elder”. It appears to be an overarching category, open to a range of functions or sub-categories. The search for more rigid definitions arises from neglect of the missionary framework of the book, a framework that demand flexibility.

Exegetical Fallacy #3 – Elders, Overseers and Deacons

If parts of Acts provide stop-off points for church government theorists, 1 Timothy is their favourite playground. The focus is Paul’s use of three Greek words: *presbeuteros* - elder, *episkopos* - overseer, and *diakonos* - deacon. What is their interrelationship? The theories abound. Surprisingly absent, however, is the possibility we have canvassed from Acts – that ‘elder’ is an overarching category for leadership, open to a range of functions. This is all the more surprising because Paul’s usage of the term in 1 Timothy, and elsewhere, accords exactly with this understanding.

1 Timothy discusses the role of ‘overseers’ (3:1-7) who must be “able to teach”, and ‘deacons’ (3:8-14) who must “serve”. The term ‘elders’ isn’t used until 5:17 – referring to a group of whom *only some teach*. And who have we learned in this letter have the responsibility for teaching? – the “overseers”. The most integrated reading of this material, therefore, is that “elder” is an overarching category. It incorporates both groups Paul had previously discussed: overseers and deacons. Some elders have a teaching function (overseers) and others a *serving* function (deacons).

This argument is supported by Philippians, which Paul addresses to the *overseers* and the *deacons* (1:1). Hasn’t Paul forgotten the *elders*? If elders were a separate “office”, then Paul’s omission would be remarkable. If, however, the overseers and the deacons *together make up* the eldership of the church, it is easily explained. Those who appeal to an interchange of *presbeuteros* and *episkopos* in Titus 1 and Acts 20 ignore the fact that in both cases: (i) the first term used is *presbeuteros*, and (ii) when the term *episkopos* is subsequently introduced, there is a concomitant narrowing of focus to the issue of doctrine/teaching (Titus 1:9, Acts 20:29-31). The terms are only interchangeable to the extent that Paul, given the priority he accords ‘word ministries’, seamlessly moves from the broad category “elders” to those possessing the greatest responsibility among them – that subset of elders who teach.

Who are the elders? All leaders in the local church. Who are the overseers? Those leaders with “word ministries”. Who are the deacons? There is no warrant for a more specific definition than those leaders with “other ministries”, or even “support ministries”. The NT language about ‘office’ is fluid. ‘Elders’ is a broad term meaning ‘leaders’. There is sometimes a simple division made within this group between those who teach and those who serve. This should not, however be understood as necessitating ‘two offices’ in a strict sense. What is necessary is leadership, and what is most essential to leadership is teaching. So, on analogy (but not straight conformity) with the logic of Acts 6, this *may* necessitate the presence of “other ministries” – deacons – leaders who act in a support role to the “word ministries”, so ensuring their continuance. Most importantly, the requirement for an

overseer to “have a good reputation with outsiders” (1 Tim 3:7) again reminds us that *mission is the framework of leadership*.

Should you Choose to Accept it

Leadership is for mission. There are rigid and flexible aspects to the NT teaching. *Rigid*, in that leadership must occur, and is primarily grounded in “word ministries”. *Flexible*, in that the structures are not ends in themselves. The evident key, to *both* the rigidity and the flexibility, is the missionary framework within which the ministry structures are formed. What is fixed – what is immovable – is the mission imperative. The gospel mission must continue.

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ⁱ E.Clowney, *The Church*, (Leicester: IVP, 1995), 213. [commenting on Acts 6].

ⁱⁱ L.Coenen, “Bishop” in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, 4 Vols, C.Brown (ed.), (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1986), 199. [Commenting on Acts 14:23].

ⁱⁱⁱ W.Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 912.