

Office Issues Re-opened

STEVE CREE'S article "Office Politics" in the last issue of *Perspective* generated considerable response from our readers. Is "elder" a term that includes both "overseers" and "deacons"? Has our mission been subverted by an over-fascination with matters of "office" and "government"? Read on, as Steve battles it out (lovingly) with a selection of our readers...



A RESPONSE FROM DAVID HALL

Thanks for your very helpful article on church leadership.- a difficult topic and one in which it is I think hard to come up with definitive statements.

There were a couple of areas where I couldn't follow your argument. Under "Exegetical Fallacy #2 - Elders" you appear to be critical of those arguing for a plurality - and say that "it was (generally) exercised by more than 1 person". From my understanding of the text all (not generally) the instances (19 I think) of "presbuteros" in Acts are plural. It seems illogical to then talk of "our understanding of "elder"" - Acts only speaks of "elders". Also you conclude that the term "appears to be an overarching category". This does not seem consistent with the following:

- Acts 4:5 rulers, elders and teachers of the law
- Acts 4:8 rulers and elders of the people
- Acts 4:23 high priests and elders
- Acts 15:5 apostles and elders

You can check the others out and it appears to me that the term "elders" in Acts is not an overarching category but its own sub-category.

Under "Exegetical Fallacy #3"

You stated: "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. ... What is necessary is leadership, and what is most essential to leadership is teaching"

This appears to me to be illogical - this may be that I am missing your point or lack understanding. The logic in this section appears to me to be like this. Elders generally mean leaders - within this there are those that **teach** and those that **serve**. But leadership has as an essential component **teaching**.

If you are saying that an essential component of leadership is teaching, haven't you then excluded those who serve?? I am in agreement with you that ministry structures are about the gospel mission but I disagree strongly with your handling of the text in Acts and am mystified by some of the logic.

Thanks again for the article, it sure got me thinking, especially to look closer at Acts and what it does say about elders.

David Hall

A REPLY FROM STEVE CREE

How many elders? Doesn't Acts only speak of plural elders? Yes. But in a descriptive rather than a prescriptive manner. My concern is simply that we remember that church happens where two or more believers are gathered, not where two or more elders are gathered. That said, the very argument that 'elder' is an overarching category does indeed assume that plural eldership is the normative NT pattern.

A category error

Do references in Acts suggest that elder is not an over-arching category but it's own subcategory? No. Start with the background provided in Luke, looking closely at Luke 22:66, for example. 'Elders' is clearly used in apposition with "the chief priests and the teachers of the law". That is, they are all elders, but some are chief priests, and others are teachers of the law. Luke, thinks of 'elder' as an over-arching term. So when you read 'apostles and elders', don't assume that the two terms are wholly exclusive. This hypothesis is confirmed in the letters: the Apostle Peter identifies himself as an elder (1 Peter 5:1-2). Apostles are elders. But, of course, not all elders are apostles. So 'elder' is an over-arching category incorporating a range of functions. In any case, for something to be an over-arching category, it is not necessary to prove that there are no other categories. So, apples and bananas are both fruit, but they are not vegetables. You need to consider the argument internally with regard to "elder" not externally. Which brings us to the next point...

The essence

If you are saying that an essential component of leadership is teaching, haven't you then excluded those who serve?

No. I would only be excluding those who serve if I said that the ONLY component of leadership is teaching. Those who serve play a part a vital part in ensuring that those who teach are free to teach. It is exactly because of the essential nature of teaching that others may be required to play this supportive role. Teaching must happen. And to make sure it happens, other support roles may be needed.

Steve Cree

RESPONSE FROM PETER BARNES & CHRIS BALZER

Some of the things in Steve Cree's article "*Office Politics*" are well said. Often we attempt to justify every aspect of our own particular form of church government (whatever that might be) from the New Testament. There is, however, no problem with accepting the broad principles laid down in the Bible, then (for good order, efficiency, strategic ministry, guarding truth) agreeing to a further set of guidelines by which we collectively operate. Also, we would insist, with Steve, that structure must serve mission. However, the church also exists for edification (Eph. 4:11-12), and is sometimes called upon to exercise discipline (1 Cor. 5) and make 'governmental' decisions (Acts 15), and structure must equally serve these ends.

There are a number of sweeping generalisations and some disturbing leaps in logic in Steve's article. Firstly, Steve would have us believe that previous generations have believed that 'church government is an end in itself' (p. 3). This is a bit rich. A.A. Hodge, for example, in his *Evangelical Theology*, (reprinted 1990, pp. 181-3) is by no means atypical in writing that 'All high-churchism, all claims that our Church is the one Church and only Church, are of the essence of schism; all

pride and bigotry are of the essence of schism; all want of universal love, all jealousy, and all attempts to take advantage of others in controversy or in Church extension, are of the essence of schism.' Hodge specifically says: 'I am not making any claim for Presbyterianism'.

Secondly, Steve makes a big leap in asserting that elders is the general term which covers both overseers and deacons. J.B. Lightfoot's meticulous labours, published in his commentary on Philippians (1885), cannot be so lightly dismissed. Steve points to Acts 20 and Titus 1, but claims that after the *presbuteros* is introduced (Acts 20:17; Tit. 1:5), there is 'a concomitant narrowing of focus to the issue of doctrine/teaching' when the *episcopos* is referred to later in the texts (Acts 20:28; Tit. 1:7). But there is nothing in Acts 20 and Titus 1 to indicate any sudden narrowing of focus away from deacon-elders towards overseer-elders. Paul seems to be speaking of the same group from Acts 20 verse 17 through to verse 35. In v.38 he refers to 'you overseers', not 'those among you who are overseers', i.e. he is speaking to all the elders, not a sub-group of them.

The same also seems to be the case in Titus 1:5-9. Paul instructs Titus to appoint *presbuteroi* in every town. He lays down certain qualifications for these elders. He then immediately says: "Since an *episcopos* is entrusted with God's work...." *Episcopos* and *presbuteros* are surely interchangeable terms. Furthermore, Peter writes to presbyters to 'fulfil the office of bishops (*episkopoi/overseers*)' in 1 Peter 5:1-2. Again, it seems clear enough that Peter is not writing to those presbyters who are also overseers, because all presbyters are overseers (bishops).

Back in the days of the early Church, Jerome anticipated Lightfoot's conclusion by contending that 'It is proved most clearly that bishops and presbyters are the same.' Steve's case is not helped at all by 1 Timothy 5:17 where Paul writes of elders (i.e. overseers and deacons, in Steve's view). Steve points out that only some elders teach while the deacons serve (p. 5). However, the distinction in 1 Timothy 5:17 is not between those elders who teach (i.e. overseers) and those who do not (presumably the deacons). It is possibly referring to a distinction between teaching elders and ruling elders, but more likely a distinction between those elders who labour at teaching (perhaps in a full-time capacity) and those who do not, i.e. all elders rule and teach but some work at it full-time.

The thesis that traditional views of church office are a great barrier to mission is, alas, a beguiling one. It is unfair to traditional views of church office, and works on the false assumption that more flexibility in church office will make for more conversions. A more convincing thesis might be that those in church office need to know the gospel, have the courage to proclaim it, and be possessed of the love of God and people so as to be willing to do so.

There are recognised leaders (office) in the New Testament Church. Plurality of leadership at a local level also seems clear (Phil. 1:1; Heb. 13:7). On Steve's understanding, it could be possible that a mono-episcopal overseer would do the overseeing, and his 'elders' be similar to members of the Committee of Management. The pressing questions for Presbyterians today - because of the primacy of the word - is who may exercise headship in the Church under Christ? The question is, who may engage in authoritative teaching and who may exercise discipline over that teaching, as well as over other matters of spiritual decision-making? Presumably the answer to this will be related to who may legitimately be admitted to this office/function.

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STEVE CREE REPLIES...

How big is your mission?

What about edification ...and discipline... and governmental decisions? Shouldn't mission take it's place alongside these? NO! Our mission is bigger than that. It does not exist alongside other concerns, but permeates all concerns. Indeed, mission is at the heart of each of the examples raised above. So: the 'edification' of Ephesians 4:12 actually *requires* mission activity – the apostles, evangelists, etc of 4:11. The 'discipline' issue of 1 Corinthians 5 stands within an extended discussion about the believer's freedom (ch 5-11:1), which is summed up in a call to mission (10:31). And the so-called 'governmental' decision of Acts 15 is specifically made in order to "not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God" (Acts 15:19). This decision cannot be separated from mission. Rather, it is subservient to it. A diabolical dichotomy is created where government is pitted against mission.

How big is your broom?

Isn't it a sweeping generalisation to argue that many have regarded church government as an end in itself? No. In fact, you would have to sweep away centuries of church history to believe otherwise. For example, what was the driving force behind the historical debate between Episcopalians and Presbyterians? Concern for governmental purity is a strong contender. Concern for mission is not.

How far does your logic leap?

Aren't there disturbing leaps of logic in the article? No. But there certainly seems to be in the response above. It is argued, on the one hand, that I wrongly claim that mission is the only end served by structures...because, for example, *government is also an end in itself*. It is then argued, on the other hand, that I wrongly assess traditional positions...because *no-one sees church government as an end in itself*.

Putting your denomination forward

A.A.Hodge said "I am not making any claim for Presbyterianism". Isn't that more typical?

Sure. But read on. In the next paragraph he says: "our duty is to maintain our true inheritance, and to prove true to the stock from which we came". The claim may not be exclusively for Presbyterianism, but it is for *denominationalism*. And it is a claim that inherently makes denominational structures ends in themselves. It produces a mindset where denominations are masters rather than servants – where the operative word is *maintain* rather than mission. And we will then tend toward reading our denomination into the biblical evidence, rather than allowing the evidence to critique our denomination. We will even think the most pressing question we face is one of "order" (as in the response above). We may even think that governmental purity is the process by which God will bless the church. And our mission – the reason for it all – will be far from our thoughts.

Putting your Lightfoot forward

Doesn't this approach too lightly dismiss the labours of Lightfoot? No. Let's get Lightfoot right first. He saw a problem and proposed a solution. I agree with him on the former and merely nuance him on the latter. Lightfoot had a problem with the view that saw *episkopos* (overseer) and *presbeuteros* (elder) as wholly separate offices. Agreed. His solution was to regard them as interchangeable. Agreed. My argument is, with Lightfoot, that overseer can be interchanged with elder. I simply extend this insight to make a case for including *diakonos* (deacon) into the argument. The only difference is whether the interchangeability between elder and overseer is

total or partial. I believe that I have presented solid exegetical data for the latter position – that all overseers are elders, but not all elders are overseers. Some are deacons.

On my interpretation of 1 Timothy 5:17, I do not understand the objection to my logic. The overseer is called to teach (3:2) and the deacon is called to serve (3:10). 1 Tim 5:17 then makes a distinction between elder-types. The clearest distinction comes through the phrase: “especially those whose work is teaching and preaching”. Some elders teach, some don’t. Overseers teach, deacons don’t. Is the logic really that bad?

CONCLUSION

I hope this discussion serves to take us back to the biblical data for a closer look. But not merely with the question ‘how do we govern?’. We must not divorce the ‘how’ and the ‘why’. We must constantly ask: ‘why do we govern?’. I suggest that the heart of the answer must be our gospel mission. Secondly, not only should we take a fresh look at the ‘office’ categories in the NT, we must also look at other ways the NT talks about ministry...

“Gift” language is far more prevalent in the way Paul talks about ministry in many of his letters. In fact, while Acts 20:17 speaks of the Ephesian elders, there is no mention of elders in the letter bearing their name. Paul only mentions certain people who have a particular function in the church. They are not presented to us as office-bearers in the technical sense of the word. Elsewhere, the focus is seemingly even further removed from ‘office’, as we are presented with lists of various abilities that are given by the Spirit to the church (1 Cor 12, 14, Rom 12).

‘Office’ and ‘gift’, however, are not mutually exclusive categories. They are easily thought into each other – and that is exactly what Paul has done. Firstly, the table below, with each list presented in text order, demonstrates consistency with my rough division of the ‘office’ of elder into (i) ‘word ministries’ and (ii) ‘other ministries’. When Paul uses ‘office’ language he moves from teaching elders to other/serving elders. Similarly, when using ‘gift’ language he moves from speaking gifts to other/serving gifts. This observation is further and strikingly corroborated by the shorthand summary of giftedness in 1 Peter 4:11: *speaking* or *serving*. Secondly, the priority of ‘word ministries’, observed in Paul’s ‘office’ language, is maintained in the lists (the order being logical, not merely chronological).

Note that such personified gifts (apostles, prophets, evangelists and pastor-teachers), are all *word* and *mission* focussed. Similarly, just as Paul has the “outsider” in mind in his requirements for ‘office’ (1 Tim 3:7), “the unbeliever” is kept firmly in view as he discusses the use of gifts in congregational life (1 Cor 14:23-24). The language varies – ‘office’ or ‘gift’ – but the missionary framework is constant.

Steve Cree