

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Canadian Journal of Theology* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_canadian-journal.php

Notes and Comments

IS THE BISHOP "MOD"?

SIR W. S. GILBERT long ago expressed the fear of many members of the United Church concerning the introduction of bishops into its conciliar system.

Lord Chancellors were cheap as sprats,
And Bishops in their shovel hats
Were plentiful as tabby cats,
In point of fact too many.

It is not an exaggeration to say that the greatest theological factor impeding the union of the Anglican and United churches in Canada is the role of the bishop. Now surely the place to begin any discussions concerning the bishop must be an investigation of his role in the New Testament. The word "bishop" is such a loaded one that it must always be interpreted. In this case the dictionary that we shall use for our definition is the New Testament itself.

The Greek word *episcopos* may be translated in English as bishop, superintendent, inspector, president, regional director, spiritual guide, watcher, overseer, leader, shepherd, moderator, co-ordinator, supervisor, or commissar! It is a word charged with emotional overtones, as these translations indicate. The word "bishop," however, has the advantage over these other translations of *episcopos*, because it is a term which cannot be used in a secular framework — a fact which, of course, may or may not appeal to modern churchmen. The word occurs twice in the Acts of the Apostles. In Acts 1:20 it appears in the quotation from Psalm 109:8, and is related to Judas' service; in this passage it is equated with *diakonos* (v. 17) and *apostolos* (v. 25). It appears again in Acts 20:28, where the *presbyteroi* (v. 17) are called to exercise the function of *episcopoi*. In the New Testament epistles the word *episcopos* occurs four times. At Philippians 1:1 it is used in the plural, which means that there was more than one "bishop" in the local congregation at Philippi. In the Pastoral epistles (I Timothy 3:2 and Titus 1:7), the word is used in the singular. In First Peter 2:25, the office of *episcopos* is compared with that of Christ's ministry. Jerome in his commentary on Titus 1:5-7 recognized that *episcopos* and *presbyteros* were synonymous in New Testament usage: "Idem est ergo presbyter qui episcopos" ("the bishop, therefore, is the same as the presbyter"). It would appear that the New Testament usage warrants the assumption that the term *episcopos* was more generally used in the Gentile-Christian circles and *presbyteros* in the Jewish-Christian diaspora. For example, Paul addresses the leaders of the Church as *episcopoi* (Phil. 1:1) and Peter calls them *presbyteroi* (1 Peter 5:1).

We turn now to investigate the function of the *episcopos* in the New Testament. The evidence supports the view that the word *presbyteros* designates

the office of the *episcopos*. The *presbyteros* (or elder) was a man of relatively long standing in the local congregation. He was a senior and responsible person appointed to be the minister in the local church. Where the question of his function is mentioned the word *episcopos* comes into use. The function of the *presbyteros* was the overseeing of the local congregation. He was its leader, superintendent, chairman, shepherd, bishop. Until the rise of the "monarchical episcopate" all "overseers" were "elders" and all "elders" were "overseers." What were the duties of these "presbyter-bishops"? A job-analysis of their work, as the New Testament reveals it, shows that they had many functions.

1. They were directors of the local congregation and as such would carry out any judicial enquiry (Acts 15:2, 4, 6, 22; 16:4).

2. They were pastors and "fathers in God" to the little congregations which could so easily fall prey to unscrupulous men (I Peter 5:2; Acts 20:28, 35).

3. They were the leaders in the public worship of God, including prayer and the ministry of healing (James 5:14; I Tim. 2:1).

4. They were responsible for the Christian education programme in the local congregation (I Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:9).

5. They were charged with communicating sound doctrine and had to be able to enter into dialogue with heretical teachers. They were "apologists," in the true sense that they were capable of giving a "reasoned defence" of the faith (Acts 20:28; Titus 1:9).

6. They had the responsibility for discipline in the church (I Thess. 5:12; Titus 1:11, 13).

7. They were to be evangelists, and as such were committed to the task of recruiting for church vocations (II Tim. 4:5).

8. They were to set a good moral example to the flock under their care (I Tim. 3:3, 4).

9. They appointed other presbyter-bishops in an ordination service which included prayer, fasting, and laying-on of hands (Titus 1:5; I Tim. 4:14; I Tim. 5:22; Acts 14:23).

10. They administered the sacraments (Acts 2:42; Acts 8:38; I Cor. 1:14).

11. They were Bible students and were responsible for the correct hermeneutic. Markus Barth has said: "Only as a learner and teacher of the Scriptures can Timothy be a true bishop."¹¹

12. They had the oversight of the benevolent fund, and in particular the care of the widows and orphans (I Tim. 5:9).

This is by no means an exhaustive list of the functions and duties of the presbyter-bishops, but it will serve as a guide to their work as outlined in the New Testament.

One further question remains to be investigated: namely, how were these presbyter-bishops appointed in the early church? From the evidence in the New Testament three distinctive patterns emerge. (1) There are the "Apostles" (cognate with the verb *apostello*, "to send"), that is, those who had

1. *Conversation with the Bible* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964), p. 191.

been appointed by Jesus and were referred to as the "Twelve." It must be noted, however, that this category is not restricted to the original "Twelve." Paul claimed to be an apostle (I Cor. 9:1, 4-18; II Cor. 12:12; I Thess. 2:6; Gal. 1:1; etc.). Barnabas is referred to as an apostle (Acts 14:14), and in the list of resurrection appearances the "Twelve" are distinguished from the "Apostles" (I Cor. 15:5, 7). In Romans 16:6 Andronicus and Junias are called "apostles" (Junias may even refer to a woman, Junia!). The "Twelve" were quite unique, and when they died no one was appointed to take their place. The only evidence of any appointment is that of a successor to Judas (Acts 1:15). His place had to be filled at the beginning to complete the "Twelve," but when James the son of Zebedee was executed by Herod Agrippa I (Acts 12:1), no successor was appointed. Indeed, it is possible that by this time (AD 44) there were no surviving candidates, and the "Twelve" as companions of Jesus had no successors. Only two of the originals, Peter and John, have any prominence in the New Testament records. (James, the Lord's brother, was converted after Jesus' death by a post-resurrection appearance [I Cor. 15:6].) When the seven deacons were appointed (Acts 6:6) the apostles prayed and laid their hands on them. This looks like *episcopal* ordination. With the passing of the first generation the apostolate - resting as it did on the eyewitness experience of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus - passed away. Because of the uniqueness of its nature it could not possibly be transmitted to others. Episcopal ordination as thus represented was from now on continued in the presbyterial ordination. (2) The Holy Spirit appoints and gives special gifts. (See, for example, I Cor. 12:4-11 and Eph. 4:11.) This *charismatic* ministry (so-called from the Greek word *charisma*, meaning "gift") was a common form of ministry in the early church. As time passed, however, it gave way to a more settled and ordered form of ministry. This development has been repeated again and again in the history of the church. The form of ministry which we see here is a recognition of special gifts, and looks very much like the present *congregational* type of ordination. (3) The appointment of presbyter-bishops by leaders of the church represents the third pattern of ministry. Paul and Barnabas were first appointed by the church at Antioch (Acts 13:3) and sent out on their mission. They in turn appointed "elders" (i.e. presbyter-bishops) in every town where a little church was established (Acts 14:23). Titus, too, is directed to appoint "elders" in Crete (Titus 1:5). This looks very much like the *presbyterian* form of ordination. Thus we see that all three types of ordination found in the church today may be found in the New Testament.

Some mention must also be made of the "itinerant" apostles, though they do not receive a large press in the New Testament. At first Peter and John are localized; then as the church grows they wander about from place to place. The best examples of these itinerant ministers are Peter and Paul. Peter, we are told, also took his wife along with him (I Cor. 9:5). In Third John we have a picture of the problem created by these wandering apostles when Diotrephes, the local minister, resents the intrusion of these wandering itinerants (III John 1:9).

One question that inevitably arises in discussions of church union is that of the relationship of the "bishop" to the "presbytery." In other words, if a presbyterian form of church government is to incorporate bishops into its structure, as was the case in Scotland in the seventeenth century, then where is the bishop to be placed? The New Testament is not clear on this point. Sometimes bishops and presbyters seem to be identical (Titus 1:5, 7). However, the bishop usually appears in the singular, with the exception of Philippians 1:1, and is never mentioned together with the presbyters. Furthermore, the presbyters are clearly treated as a special group of regular officers (I Tim. 5:17 ff.), who among other things teach and preach.

The Dead Sea Scrolls have thrown considerable light on the origins of the Christian church. One of these features has been the existence among the monks of Qumran of an official called an "overseer" or "inspector." In the *Manual of Discipline* this *mebaqquer* is described as a "shepherd," and his duties seem to be quite like those of the New Testament bishop. Did the early church derive its *episcopos* from the Dead Sea communities' *mebaqquer*? There may quite possibly be a link between the two officials, especially since their duties seem to be so much alike. However, the evidence is insufficient for us to draw any certain conclusions.

From the above investigation, it will be seen that the New Testament picture of the "bishop" is by no means a uniform one, and we do an injustice to the evidence if we try to squeeze it into any one mould – particularly if it happens to be the most suited to our own denomination!

ROBERT E. OSBORNE

*Emmanuel College,
Toronto*