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# THE EMERGING ORGANIZATION OF THE CHURCH IN THE NEW TESTAMENT, AND THE LIMITATIONS IMPOSED THEREON

by GEOFFREY S. R. COX

**T**HE author of this paper, which he calls "a tentative study", is  
Vicar of Gorsley with Clifford's Mesne in Gloucestershire. He  
prepared it in the first instance for the Westminster Fellowship.

LET me begin by warning of two dangers, stating two difficulties,  
and making two apologies, before outlining my plan of action and  
proceeding to the matter proper.

## I

You will not need me to remind you that there is much confused  
thinking in the present day. Indeed much of what passes for  
"Thought" is little better than "Feeling" dressed in another's  
clothes, and bombarded as we all are by the mass media of com-  
munication, we need to be alive to the danger that we too may fall  
into the slipshod thoughtlessness of those around. This will appear  
in a variety of ways, but especially important is the matter of  
prejudice, of prejudging the issue. We do this most frequently and  
unconsciously not by failing to question things, but by the very  
way in which we form our questions. The old question "Have you  
stopped beating your wife yet?" will give some idea of what I  
mean. Whichever answer you give, the assumption has already  
been made that at some time or other you *have* been in the habit  
of beating your wife. The same problem has not been faced by  
those who are at present attacking the Pauline authorship of the  
epistles which bear his name, since what is fed *into* a computer of  
necessity controls what comes out, and what is *omitted* may well  
have been of fundamental importance. In the same way our task  
may well be complicated if we form our questions in the wrong  
way and assume what we are trying to prove. Thus to ask the  
question, "What is the pattern of church order in the New Testa-  
ment?" assumes from the outset that there *is* such a thing as a  
clearly defined church order which can easily be discovered. It will  
be better for us to begin with such a question as "Is there any

church order set out in the New Testament?", and whatever our innate prejudices may say, we must answer this question on the basis of the evidence before we go on to question 2. I have considered this at some length because the question of prejudice is so important, and so often unrealized. Again and again people say, "I cannot believe that God would, or would not, do a certain thing." But we are not the judges of what God should or should not do. Therefore let us not prejudge the issues, but let us make sure that we ask the "right questions", and not such questions as carry already within their womb the answer which we want.

This leads me to the second danger, which is really the previous one in a different form, that of loose thinking, combined with a closed mind. Now I am well aware that it is quite impossible to come to any matter with a completely open mind. Those lecturers who beg their students to leave all their previous ideas and come to their study with an open mind, are merely asking them to exchange their own prejudices for those of their lecturer. In fact, the only thing that can assuredly be said about an open mind is that it is vacant. We are all conditioned by our background, our upbringing, our connections, and very often too by those who have been of most help to us spiritually. Realizing, then, this danger, we still need to be as honest as we can, and to bring everything to the bar of Scripture. We must be willing, on the one hand, to admit if we are wrong, and on the other to take no glory to ourselves if we are shown to be right. "What has thou that thou didst not receive?" We must be on our guard all the time against loose thinking, for we are all guilty of it at one time or another. Some will no doubt be found in this paper, for one of our temptations is to say, "That is the evidence" when what we really mean is "That is my interpretation of the evidence". Therefore let us be careful, let us think what we mean by the words that we use, and let us define our terms, so that we can give clear and logical and Scriptural as well as lexicographically correct and honest reasons for the hope that is in us. In this connection we need to be especially careful with our use of words that are what I must call "emotionally loaded" for us, such as Bishop, Elder or Deacon. Each of us has his own *bête noire*, be it some prelatical tyrant on the episcopal bench, or some bigoted but equally tyrannical deacon or elder who may be our church secretary or treasurer.

Two difficulties arise in the consideration of the material with which we have to work. First is that of the order in time of the writing of the different parts of the New Testament, for if there is a development in time, this will be at least hidden, and possibly

even obliterated, if we read the evidence in the wrong order. I suggest that all Paul's letters except the Pastorals can be fitted into the framework of Acts, leaving Peter's letters, Hebrews and the Pastorals to be written between A.D. 57 and 70, and John and Jude shortly after. However, this is only relevant to our subject in that it is agreed that the Pastorals are later and that James is earlier, with Acts written between A.D. 62 and 65.

The second difficulty, which also cannot be definitely resolved, but must be held in mind, concerns the nature and population of the early church. How far and for how long was it completely Jewish in outlook, and how far did this influence the growth of any organization? Again, of what class were the early believers? Some were slaves, others were of the upper classes. What were the possible times and places for meeting together for worship? I mention these questions to remind us that it is sometimes a little facile to say "There is no need of any extra-Biblical evidence," for the Lord deals with man in his environment, and indeed uses it, and yet further has prepared that environment to further His plans. (I am not suggesting that we *build* on extra-Biblical material, but merely that we are willing to use it for illustration, as indeed we do so frequently in our recourse to commentators.)

Let me close my Introduction with two apologies. First, much of what I have to say will seem to be largely destructive. This is probably just, but springs from our present situation in which, as Nehemiah found when rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem, "there is much rubbish." We have, I feel, far too many "sacred cows", and some of them need to be examined carefully, and then taken away quietly and disposed of. My second apology concerns the necessarily rather sketchy exegesis of the passages under review. My text-book has been the whole of the New Testament, and I have had to consider three lengthy passages as well as some hundreds of other verses in less time than many would give to the exposition of even a part of one verse. Of course none of you will be expecting that I should give you all the answers, and in the nature of the exercise I have rather regarded my task as one of searching for, and then asking, those questions which seem to focus on the true problems which face us.

## II

As to the outline of this paper, I have set myself to answer two major questions: Is there any order—in the technical sense—observable in the New Testament picture of the Church? and are any officers enumerated? This latter involves a fairly lengthy

examination of the names and usage, together with qualifications, duties and origins. Two minor questions concern the size of the early church in relation to the officers and the surrounding population, and the limits of authority of different officers, and lead into some queries concerning present practice, and some tentative suggestions of my own.

*Question One. Is there an observable Order in the N.T. Church?*

This question sub-divides into five sub-questions.

(1) *Who administers the Sacraments?* We will ignore the fact that we are already begging one large question by using such a term as "sacrament", which has no N.T. basis, and merely ask whether any limitation is put on the administration of what we call the sacraments, namely baptism and the Lord's Supper. As to *Baptism*, we find after the dominical command to the apostles in Matt. 28: 19-20 to baptize, that there is almost complete silence as to the physical agent of the sacrament. While the one who lays his hands on others is mentioned, of the eleven cases of actual baptism cited, only Philip's baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch and Paul's of Crispus and Gaius and the household of Stephanas (Acts 8: 36; 1 Cor. 1: 14, 16) mention the one who does the baptizing. All the rest are passive. Again, with *the Lord's Supper*, while it may be argued that since Christ presided at the institution it is *likely* that the senior Christian would similarly preside, there is no proof to be drawn from the references in Acts 2: 46 or 20: 7, or again in 1 Cor. 10: 16 or 11: 23-28. It *might* be inferred from v. 11 of Acts 20 where we read that, at the end of his long sermon and restoration of Eutychus, "Paul . . . had broken bread and eaten" that Paul was in charge, but it seems a very slender inference on which to build a church order. Thus it seems fair to say that there is no definite rule as to who shall administer the sacraments in the N.T. church.

(2) *Who preaches?* There is no room here to discuss the difference between *kerygma* and *didache*, a distinction which, *pace* so many scholars, is still open to some debate. Our question only concerns whether or not there is any limit on the personnel involved. The apostles obviously preached (Acts 5: 42; 6: 2, 4, etc.), as did the prophets such as Judas and Silas (Acts 15: 32). Timothy is also encouraged to do so (1 Tim. 4: 13) and the Ephesian elders (Acts 20: 17, 28). I feel very doubtful about any departmentalizing of preaching, teaching, exhorting, etc., so I include under this heading church members who have a doctrine or a revelation or an interpretation, as in 1 Cor. 14: 26, and

would suggest that the only limitation on any official ministry of God's Word is placed by Paul on the ministry of women (1 Cor. 14: 34-35; 1 Tim. 2: 11-12). (Let us not cast this limitation aside to readily as mere prejudice for the apostle does subjoin a weighty theological reason for his prohibition. However, this does raise a problem when we consider the case in Acts 21: 9 of the four daughters of Philip, who, we read, "did prophesy".) This question, as do some others, shades over almost imperceptibly into:

(3) *Who tends the flock, that is, exercises pastoral care?* In John 21: 15-17 Peter is given this responsibility, and he passes it on to fellow-elders in 1 Pet. 5: 3. Paul instructs the Ephesian elders in this duty (Acts 20: 28) and Timothy is given the same advice for his elders/bishops (1 Tim. 3: 1-7; whether these are the same as the "faithful men" of 2 Tim. 2: 2 is an interesting point), while the existence of such pastors is assumed in Heb. 13: 17.

The questions which I have put as Nos. (4) and (5) under this heading might perhaps have been better considered first, yet they will form a fitting summing up to our conclusions so far. We ask, *What did the Christians do when they came together, and Where did they do it?*

(4) "They continued together in prayer," we are told at the beginning of Acts (1: 14) and this seems to have been one of their continuing activities (3: 1, etc.). They met to break bread together (2: 46; 20: 7) and to hear God's Word read, both from the Old Testament and the New, as the latter was being formed from the writings of the apostles and prophets and evangelists—using this last in the sense of authors of the Gospel accounts. Their activities can be summed up as the offering of spiritual sacrifices (1 Pet. 2: 5), of themselves (Rom. 12: 1), of praise (Heb. 13: 15), of giving to others (Phil. 4: 18) and of doing good (Heb. 13: 16).

(5) The question as to *where* they did these things raises some interesting issues for it reminds us, what we may be tempted to forget, that for a considerable time Christianity was merely regarded as a sect of Judaism, an offshoot perhaps, but still within the main stream of the Jewish religion as far as the Roman rulers were concerned. We need to remember that the Romans aimed at an overall uniformity and that it was only because of the obduracy of the Jews that they were permitted to worship in their own way and were thus constituted as a *religio licita*, a permitted religion. Thus Christians were able to shelter under this protection for a time, no doubt in the providence of God, until the new faith was strong enough to bear the attacks and persecution alone. Thus we find that as well as meeting in their own homes the early Christians

“continued daily with one accord in the Temple” (Acts 2: 46; 3: 1), using it for prayer and worship, as does Paul on his visits. If their conduct elsewhere and Paul’s preaching are to be a guide—and his words to Agrippa in Acts 26: 10-11 support the idea: “Which thing I also did in Jerusalem: and many of the saints did I shut up in prison, . . . and I punished them oft in every *synagogue* . . . and I persecuted them even unto strange cities”—then the early believers remained and worshipped in the synagogues for as long as they were able. After his conversion Paul preached always at first in the synagogues, at Damascus (9: 20), Salamis (13: 5), Thessalonica (17: 4) and Ephesus (19: 8)—whence he went to the hall of Tyrannus, taking the disciples with him. This would seem to be the reason why James refers to outsiders coming into “your synagogue” in Jas. 2: 1, and suggests that there may well have been one or more “synagogues of the Christians” in Jerusalem, just as Acts 6: 9 suggests that there were various others for the different dwellers in Jerusalem.

To summarize thus far, it would not seem unfair, or stretching the evidence, to say that as to any observable *order*—leaving on one side the *officers*, which we must consider next—there is no limitation laid down on the administration of the sacraments. The limitation on preaching is open to discussion, and may depend on a too rigid definition of the word. The ministry of women, however, *pace* the four daughters of Philip and the doubtful Phoebe, does seem suspect. The pastoral care, in so far as it is a matter of prescription, seems to be confined to elders (Tit. 1: 5), bishops and of course the apostles and their immediate envoys. The activities of Christians together can be summed up as worship which involves prayer, breaking bread—is this a technical term yet?—hearing God’s Word, and active service. All this they carried out in their own homes, and in the synagogue and Temple, for it would appear that the larger assembly had the prior right in the eyes of all.

*Question Two. Are any Officers, that is to say Office-bearers, enumerated in the N.T. Church?*

Here is not just the heart, but the body of our problem. The immediate temptation which faces us is the one which faces all our technological and quantitative age in its dealings with the Bible. We assume that any lists or titles—or anything which we can force into such an appearance—are lists in our understanding of the term, and that the words they use are technical terms. Thus we neatly tabulate the lists in 1 Cor. 12, Roman 12 and Ephesians 4, and

exercise our ingenuity to the utmost in tying up the one with the other, seeking to explain why the apostle omits this here or adds that there; and why he changes the order between this occasion and that. (There is no qualitative difference between those who do this, I would suggest, and those who define the term "few" as irrevocably and unchangeably *eight*, because Peter in 1 Pet. 3: 20 says "a few, that is eight, were saved . . .".) We have no right to assume without proof that these *are* technical terms, referring to offices, although I well know that a long succession, from at least Calvin onwards, have done so. Indeed one point which the context seems to press with the utmost vigour is that these are *gifts* for the Church, and *not* offices. This, however, we must examine. (One thought which needs serious study by those who will maintain the opposite concerns the use of the different terms in the New Testament. If their thesis is right then we shall be, to say the least, surprised to find so careful a chooser of his words as Paul being careless and confusing in his terminology.) The simplest way to prosecute this difficult task is to examine each of the "titles" in turn, answering, in passing, the subsidiary questions such as "What is the N.T. usage of this term?" "What are the qualifications laid down for the holders?" "What is the manner of entry into this office?" "What purpose has this office in the church?" and "How did this office come into being, and what were its antecedents?" Of course not all the answers are provided for each question, so the undertaking is not as vast as it seems. We shall start with the three passages already cited, and take them in the reverse order of their appearance in the N.T., for no other reason than that of ease of consideration. (As we look at these let us ask ourselves on the one hand whether these titles refer to offices or gifts, as specifically and exclusively to the one or the other, and on the other hand whether these titles are intended to have a permanent or temporary, a regular or irregular, place in the life of the church.)

(1) *Ephesians* 4: 11

"And He gave some *apostles*". This title need not detain us long for there can be little argument about it. The *usage* would suggest that for the most part these were in a class by themselves, heading the list here and in 1 Cor. 12, set apart both from the elders and from the church (Acts 15: 2, 4, 6, 22). The *qualifications* are set out by Peter in Acts 1: 21-22, namely to have "compared with us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John unto the same day that he was taken up from us," and thus to be "ordained to be a witness with us of His resurrection." The *manner of appointment*



was by the direct ordination of Christ (Mark 3: 14; Acts 9) or in the case of Matthias by selection of a "short list" and the casting of lots (Acts 1: 21-26). (The defensibility or otherwise of this last action does not concern us here. The fact does.) Their *purpose* is set down primarily in Matt. 28: 19-20, and ("if ye will receive it") Mark 16: 15-16, though there are other references. They *came into being* as a special group, clearly non-repeatable by the terms of their qualification, at the express will of Christ, and ended as an Apostolic College with the death of the last apostle. For the sake of completeness we must mention that in Acts 14: 14 we read of "the apostles, *Barnabas* and Paul"; that Paul tells the Galatians (1: 19) "But other of the apostles saw I none save *James*, the Lord's brother"; that the word is translated, as it may justly be, "the *messengers* of the churches" in 2 Cor. 8: 23, and that Epaphroditus is styled "your *messenger* (apostle)" in Phil 2: 25. It is not absolutely certain that the term has yet hardened its meaning, as it very soon does, of course, in the sub-apostolic age.

"And some *prophets*." While second in the Corinthian list this title ranks first in that sent to Rome. The sixteen or so specific references merely take them for granted, and little help is given in the pursuit of our enquiry. The usage, especially in 1 Cor. 12: 27-28, Eph. 2: 20; 3: 5; 4: 11; Rev. 18: 20, suggests, from the frequent coupling with the apostles, that these two groups are in a completely separate category, and this would seem a valid conclusion from the task of a prophet in the Old Testament, to declare God's Word as yet unwritten, and would explain why both apostle and prophet died out together.

"And some *evangelists*." While the verb is, naturally, used many times in the N.T., the noun occurs only three times: of Philip in Acts 21: 8, in the present verse, Eph. 4: 11, and in 2 Tim. 4: 5 of Timothy, where it is also linked in the same sentence with the *δικαλονία* or "ministry." Philip may cause us a little trouble since neither we, nor the early church in the days succeeding the first century, can be sure which Philip this is, the apostle or the deacon. In either case we have what could at the very least be called a confusion of offices or orders, if so be that this title does indeed represent an order. Some would say that this *was* an order which passed away with the first two we have examined. Others would raise a question which needs further thought, namely: How far can we separate "evangelism" from any other part of preaching? Is this not the misunderstanding which has wreaked such havoc in the church of Christ in the present day? To adduce the instruction to Timothy seems again a somewhat flimsy foundation,

for a passing reference linked to what may well be, and indeed must be if the hypothesis is correct, another separate office, is not basis enough for the claims that are made, nor indeed for the theories of ministry of God's Word that are built upon it.

We pass now (without any apparent justification in any text that I have seen) from what has been called the irregular into the regular ministry. (I have been appalled—that is not too strong a word to use—at the amount of baseless assumption that appears in works of ecclesiology, and Reformed theologians, I am sorry to say, are no exception to this. The principle which is so often followed is of the kind “Because *I* have not seen or heard of the exercise of this gift or ministry, it no longer exists.”) We are told that this distinction is valid because the former are self-evidently no longer in existence while those to which we now turn again self-evidently are.

“And some *pastors* and *teachers*.” You may differentiate between these two if you so wish. You will be in excellent company since those who approved the *Form of Presbyterian Church Government* at the Westminster Assembly clearly felt that this should or could be done. However I would suggest that the text itself, with its studious omission of the definite article between the two titles, when Paul has already used it in each case prior to this, does incline one's judgment the other way. As to the first, the word ποιμήν, “shepherd”, is used almost without exception of Christ in the New Testament. (The exception is before us). Similarly the cognate verb ποιμαίνειν, “to feed/rule”, is used only of Christ, with the exception of 1 Pet. 5: 2 where the instruction, awkwardly enough, is addressed to elders. There is no other clear reference in the other lists, and it would need to be proved that “ministry” (διακονία) in Rom. 12 refers to the pastoral office, which it seems Peter refers to the presbytery. *Teaching* comes third both in Rom. 12 and in 1 Cor. 12. Apart from Acts 13: 1, where we read of “certain prophets and teachers”, the use is confined to Paul himself in 1 Tim. 2: 7 and 2 Tim. 1: 11; to Timothy in 1 Tim. 4: 13 and in a condemnation of the Hebrews (5: 12) who themselves “ought to be teachers.” (Time has failed me to follow up all the references to διδάσκω, but I shall be grateful for any relevant verses which I have overlooked.) I would suggest that again the evidence is too weak to be made the foundation for an office or order.

## (2) 1 *Corinthians* 12: 28

The Ephesian list closes, so we must transfer our attention to the Corinthian catalogue. In such a context of “gifts” the only bases I can find for suggesting that this list deals with offices or orders are (a) in the illustration of the body, which is open to discussion,

and (b) in the verb ἔθετο, ("God *set* some")—but the middle of τῆθημι will scarcely bear the required weight to overthrow my thesis.

Apostles, prophets and teachers have been considered under the Ephesians passage. "*Miracles*", Charles Hodge tells us, are a different office from "*gifts of healings*," but the evidence for this statement is not forthcoming. Clearly the words do refer to something different, but there is no other reference that will support the idea of an office connected with either. "*Helps*" was applied by commentators from Chrysostom onwards to the diaconate. "*Governments*" is associated by many with "*ruling*" in Rom. 12, although there is only the connection of thought, for the word in the first case (κυβέρνησις) is concerned with "*governing (steering) ships*" and in the second (προιστάμενος) with "*going before*", different again from the word for "*leader*" (ἡγούμενος) in Heb. 13: 17.

"*Diversities of tongues*" closes the Corinthian list, although the following verses may summarize it, and may very likely also refer back to the beginning of the chapter, verses 7-11, where the apostle speaks without dispute of *gifts*.

### (3) *Romans* 12: 6-8.

There remain in the Roman catalogue "*exhortation, giving and shewing mercy*," which *can* with considerable difficulty be forced into a collection of offices but which in the context seem to bear a much simpler sense if taken along with what Paul says in verse 6, "*having gifts*."

We must pause here to ask a question which is fundamental. *By what standard* are we going to say (a) that some of these titles as listed are "*offices*", while others are "*gifts*"—for this is what commentators do—and if we decide that all are offices or orders, again *by what standard* are we going to say (b) that some are permanent while others are only temporary?

### (4) *Other Ministries*

Having exhausted the three main catalogues, we must consider any other apparent titles which are worthy of the name. In Acts 9: 39, 41 we read of "*the saints and widows*" and again of the "*widows*". While the former are clearly not so, can there be a separate order of *widows*? In Acts 6: 1 we read of some who could qualify, as in the reference just cited. Paul mentions in 1 Cor. 7: 8 the "*unmarried and widows*". Jas. 1: 27 commands us to "*provide for the widows*". The last two references are equivocal, but the former lend considerable support to the idea, particularly when we turn to 1 Tim. 5 and especially verse 9 where we read

"Let not a widow be *enrolled* . . ." (the same word is used of soldiers, or of the Senate). Was this an order, or merely a pensioner's list, if you like, in Ephesus? If the former, why has it passed away, and should it not be revived?

(5) *Bishops, priests and deacons*

Our problem now is the progression in which we consider "bishops, priests and deacons". Although there is the order "bishops and deacons" in Philippians 1: 1—if it is a progression of rank, is it *ascending* or *descending*?—one writer suggests that these two, which so as not to beg the question are regarded as "orders" *now*, came into being in the providence of God to prepare the church for the next emergency it was to face. Thus the diaconate in Acts 6 came into being to fit the church for the next stage of conflict which ensued on the martyrdom of Stephen, just as the presbyterate appeared in Acts 11 before Herod's assault on James and Peter. We need to exercise caution here as before, for while it is very likely that these become technical terms in due time, it seems from the evidence that the words are still being used loosely even as late as the Pastorals, and this can be shown by a similar variation in our English translation.

"*Deacon*" is unfortunately only one of the translations of the word δίακονος, and occurs in Phil. 1: 1 and in 1 Tim. 3: 8, 11 where it concerns the qualifications for this work. At other times it is translated *minister* eighteen times outside the Gospels—three times of Christ, twice of the ruler in Rom. 13, and thirteen times of the Christian ministry, that is to say, eight times of Paul, twice of Timothy, twice of Tychicus, and once of Satan's ministers as counterfeits. The reference to Phoebe in Rom. 16: 1 is translated "servant" in the A.V. Similarly the *usage* of διακονία is somewhat loose, covering finance (2 Cor. 8: 4; 9: 1) and relief-work (Acts 11: 29); ministrations of death and life (in 2 Cor. 4), ministry of the Word (Acts 6: 4) and of tables (6: 2) as well as the overall Christian ministry which Paul thanks God for putting him into, and charges Timothy to make full proof of (Col. 4: 17; 1 Tim. 1: 12; 2 Tim. 4: 5, 11). Apart from the qualifications of a deacon in 1 Tim. 3: 10, 13, the verb seems to have at its heart the thought of service in a variety of forms. The *qualifications* for this work as laid down by Paul in 1 Tim. 3: 8-13 concern qualities of character which well agree with this concept of service, which is reinforced by the work which they are seen to do, that is the *purpose* of the office. The order was appointed, if (as is suggested) this was its *inception*, to "serve tables" (Acts 6: 2), that is to take care of the administrative side of church life, so as to free those with the

specifically "spiritual" gifts for the work to which God had called them. One of the requisites for this work may well have been the gifts we have noted above. It is an open question as to whether there was an order of women deaconesses. Some would suggest, again such as Chrysostom, Clement of Alexandria and Theophylact, that the "women" of 1 Tim. 3: 11 are not "wives", as the A.V. has it, but members of this deaconess order, as are perhaps the "widows". As to their *appointment*, the only record given us is in Acts 6 where we read in verse 3 that they were chosen by the multitude, and in verse 6 that they were "ordained", that is appointed by laying on of hands, by the apostles. One further thing needs to be said here about the diaconate, namely that both from the prominence which Luke gives it, which suggests that it is a new thing requiring careful comment, and from the dissimilarity from either the Levite, or the *chazzan* or synagogue-attendant, it is very unlikely that the order had any previous original from which it was copied. We may fairly say, then, that on the basis of Acts 6, Phil. 1, and 1 Tim. 3, there was an order or office of deacon, although the word also had wider connotations during apostolic times.

As to the identity of *bishop* and *elder/presbyter*, we need do no more than mention Acts 20: 17, 28; 1 Pet. 5: 1-2; Titus 1: 5-7 and 1 Tim. 3: 8-13 with 5: 17-19, where the overlap is clearly set forth. Even such a writer as Jerome will not attempt to deny the identity, and the only dissentient voice in early centuries is Ignatius who, with his martyrdom-complex and indiscriminate letter-writing, has so much to answer for in so many ways. The *elder/presbyter* makes his first specifically Christian appearance, as we have suggested, just before the death of James, in Acts 11: 30. No word of explanation is offered, which suggests that the concept is already familiar to the Jews and therefore to Jewish Christians. If our other suggestion is also true, that Christians continued to worship in synagogues, whether with others, or in their own specifically Christian ones, then it would be natural to take over the system which had already served them well. A further support for this is found in the usage in Revelation where we read of the *twenty-four* elders, who can fairly be said to symbolize the worshippers of both Old and New Covenants, and thus to emphasize yet again Christianity as the true continuation and completion of Judaism. We then read of Paul's ordaining elders in every place (Acts 14: 23), and in the following chapter hear almost in very verse of the apostles and elders joined together in their work. In 1 Timothy instruction is given concerning elders, and Titus is told

to ordain them (Tit. 1: 5). James takes them for granted (5: 14), while Peter gives advice as a fellow-elder (1 Pet. 5: 1-3) and John uses the name as a title for himself (2 John 1; 3 John 1). Thus far we have answered the questions as to *usage* and *inception*. The *qualifications* are laid down in 1 Tim. 3: 1-7, although the title is "bishop", and again centre on the Christian character with the significant addition "apt to teach" (v. 2). The *purpose* of the order may be summarized as a general pastoral oversight of the church, for the Ephesian elders are told to feed the flock of God (Acts 20: 28) and Peter's readers are told the same (1 Pet. 5: 3). These are they who have the rule over others (Heb. 13: 17), and who labour in word and doctrine (1 Tim. 5: 17). They visit the sick (Jas. 5: 14) and also, if we take 1 Tim 5: 14 with 2 Tim. 1: 6, ordain others, whether to the diaconate or presbytery, it is not stated. (Since it is Timothy who is the object of this ordination, the situation is not made any clearer.) This serves to lead into *their manner of appointment*, of which we are given two hints. Titus is told, as we have just said, to "ordain" elders, and the word used, καθίστημι, has the sense in its other N.T. uses of appointment by someone from above.<sup>1</sup>

Paul in Acts 14: 23 "appoints" elders in every place, and the word here has given rise to some disagreement, possibly again because the result we want can determine our choice of authority. The verb χειροτονέω means in origin "to choose by show of hands", and this seems to be its meaning, in the sense of choice (though not really of election?) in 2 Cor. 8: 19. However, it early came to mean "to appoint" and three dictionaries will quote Philo and Josephus as illustrations, with the additional material provided in a variant reading in Tit. 1: 9 and the subscriptions to Titus and 2 Timothy. What seems most weighty in this context is that the verb is an active aorist participle and Paul is the subject. (I must confess that I stand in opposition to the redoubtable John Owen and his forerunner the other John, Calvin, on this point, but when I see that Owen's other support for the idea that ministers are to be elected by the suffrage of the people are the case of Matthias in Acts 1, where surely the choice was that of the apostles, and Acts 6 with the deacons, while he ignores Titus, I am not too bothered,

<sup>1</sup> In the Gospels it appears in the stories where one is "made a ruler" (Matt. 24: 45, 47; 25: 21, 23; Luke 12: 14, 42, 44). In Acts, apart from 6: 3, it is used of Joseph made ruler of Egypt and Moses likewise (7: 10, 27, 35). Acts 17: 15 seems a neutral use, as do Jas. 3: 6; 4: 4 and 2 Pet. 1: 8, while Rom. 5: 19 might be discussed. Otherwise three references in Hebrews speak of the high priest ordained from above (5: 1; 7: 28; 8: 3) while 2: 7 speaks of man as "set over" the works of God's hands.

I must admit.) I have taken some time over this, first, in order to give all the evidence where possible, and, second, to show that the evidence does not seem to be entirely conclusive in the compelling way that some would seem to think. Nothing need be added on *bishop* except to cite the references already noted, namely Acts 20: 28, Phil. 1: 1; 1 Tim. 3: 1-2, Titus 1: 7; 1 Peter 5: 2—and 2: 25 of Christ. It is an interesting sidelight that as the term *elder* was customary for the Jew, and thus was immediately comprehensible to anyone in a Jewish environment, so the term *bishop* (overseer) was frequently among the Greeks as a word for the overseer of a religious club or society, and thus would again carry an immediate meaning to the hearer. For the sake of completeness it should be noted that elders are called both pastors (Acts 20: 28; 1 Pet. 5: 2) and teachers (1 Tim. 3: 2; Titus 1: 9) though for the sake of the same completeness we are forced to ask by what standard it is laid down that in 1 Tim. 5: 1 πρεσβύτερος should be translated as a substantive, i.e., “elder”, when the same word in the feminine gender is translated as “elder women”. Surely we must be consistent here. *Either* we treat both terms as substantives, in which case we might be faced with an order of “younger men” and “younger women” (which could always tie up with the “young men” of Acts 5, whom we have so far ignored, and who have been canvassed by some as forerunners of the diaconate) *and* we have an order of lady-elders, together with the widows as before; *or* we treat them all as adjectival, and the passage as a piece of helpful advice to the youngish Timothy. We cannot have it both ways, however, and in this case are justified in demanding an *either/or*.

What can be concluded from all this? That language is used quite loosely in the New Testament on these matters, even in the Pastorals, and that each case must be decided on its merits. From the Pastorals there seem to be two clear orders of offices in the church of any continuing ministry, namely of bishops/elders and deacons. Thus far one can go quite dogmatically. The next steps will have to be decided in discussion.

### III

We come now to my first minor question which springs out of the foregoing, since it asks: *What was the size of the early church?* This is more important than it at first appears, for we have seen so far that while there are two orders in the church, nothing has been laid down as to the number of such officers in each assembly. We only read of these officers in the plural in every area. Does this mean that each assembly had many or few or only one of each?

It is always assumed that each individual church group had at least a number of each. Is this a valid assumption? Or is it susceptible of proof?

Before looking at the church in Jerusalem a thought may be spared for the size of the following of the Lord Jesus even before His death. On one occasion some 5,000 *men* came to listen to Him; on another 4,000. Multitudes flocked to Him, and while it is true that many did go back from following (John 6) it does not seem probable that *all* did so. To make but two points in this connection, we are told that before Pentecost there were at least 120 in Jerusalem (Acts 1: 15), and Paul reminds us that some 500 saw the risen Lord at one time (1 Cor. 15) though where these were gathered we are not told. On the day of Pentecost some 3,000 souls were added to the church, and while no doubt many returned to their homes, the number of men in the church by Acts 4: 4 was about 5,000. After the judgment on Ananias and Sapphira we read that (5: 14) "believers were the more added to the Lord, multitudes both of men and women." Acts 6: 1 tells of another increase in numbers, as does v. 7: "And the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem greatly; and a great company of the priests were obedient to the faith"; and finally the brethren tell Paul in 21: 20 "many thousands have believed". Thus within a population of some 55,000 in the city the Christians were not a completely insignificant minority, and were hardly able physically to meet together as one assembly. Nor is this likely when we remember the number of synagogues which we have already noted, and the purpose of the synagogue and church, namely to provide fellowship and instruction. We are thus faced with a question in relation to the church at Jerusalem which has been rather glossed over. In view of the size of the church, which is used in the singular here, is it not at least a fair interpretation to suggest that the title does cover more than one synagogue or assembly of Christians, each with its own one or more elders and deacons, and is it thus fair to speak of the church as a blanket term for the Christians in a geographic area? The same case can be made for Antioch (Acts 11: 21, 24) and Ephesus (Acts 19: 10, 17, 18-20; 20: 31; 1 Cor. 16: 8, 9, 19) and Colossae (Philemon 2; Col. 4: 15). This still leaves unanswered the question as to the proportion of elders and deacons to any assembly, as it does that of the size of any assembly, although the numerical quorum for a synagogue of the Jews, as well as the size of the houses of the period, may give us some clue as to the latter.

The second minor question concerns *the limits of ministerial*



*authority*—using the word in its widest sense—for this is the only limitation that I can see on the emerging organization of the church. It is an interesting point to note that very little is said concerning the authority of anyone human. That the elders had some disciplinary power is suggested by Paul in 1 Cor. 5 but we are not told that he is writing specifically to the presbyters, so it could be understood of the authority of the whole church. (This thought will not seem quite so cumbersome and unlikely if we are not too determinedly wedded to the thought that the church must all be one, and therefore a large, assembly. The small assembly, possibly even of the size of the Wesleyan and other “societies”, may well have been the case.) The only other authoritarian statements come from the lips of Paul, and these are mingled with pleas and requests which do not make the systematizers’ task any easier. (Perhaps they are intended for that purpose?) On the one hand Paul has “confidence in” the Galatians, that they will not be otherwise minded. He warns in 1 Cor. 4: 14, beseeches in 2 Cor. 10: 1, 2 and implies in 2 Cor. 1: 24 that he does not have dominion over his converts’ faith. On the other hand he lays down clear instructions for Timothy’s help, and has already apparently exercised a definite church authority in the case of Hymenaeus and Alexander (1 Tim. 2: 20). To the Corinthians he writes of “my ways which be in Christ, *as I teach everywhere* in all the churches” (1 Cor. 4: 17) and again (7: 17), “*so ordain I* in all the churches.” That he does have and use the authority of an apostle on occasions seems clear, although also it appears that he prefers to rule by love rather than by outward authority. Under the heading “Of Classical Assemblies” the *Form of Presbyterial Church-Government* already cited maintains that “The scripture doth hold forth, that many particular congregations may be under one presbyterial government,” and thus suggests that there is a further limiting authority over the individual congregations. It adduces as proof (a) the church of Jerusalem, which consisted of more than one congregation (four reasons added), all of which congregations were under one presbyterial government (four reasons added again) and (b) the church of Ephesus similarly (*Confession*, pp. 178-9). Thus we can again go little further in our conclusions than to say that there appear to be three possible human authorities active in the early church, the ministry within the individual congregation, and in the local geographical gathering of congregations, and the apostolate. All these, however, do not appear to be very strongly stated and will no doubt bear discussion and enquiry.

Penultimately I want to raise some queries of my own concern-

ing the accepted theory of the present day. The basis of the Anglican division into a threefold ministry is not claimed to be anything more than foreshadowed in the New Testament. It is seen as the natural historical development of the apostolic age, and appears at the latest very early in the second century, as witness the wretched Ignatius. (Although he was no doubt a man of excellent character and reputedly a devoted follower of the Lord, I use this epithet for him since he said some very unguarded and stupid things about the episcopal office which have caused considerable difficulty ever since.) The bases of Presbyterian (Westminster Assembly) and Independent polity might be said to be slightly more Scriptural, though further study would need to be made, and a choice of one or the other considered, but again by what criterion would we choose? The division which we noted between "pastor" and "teacher/doctor" seems really to date from Cyprian, and was again taken up, from the Roman church, at the time of the Reformation. It would seem that this is a false distinction, as also might be the assumption that there was to be only one minister, in the present-day limited sense, to any one congregation. I am concerned to see how frequently the phrase "it is expedient" occurs in the passages we have referred to in the work of the Assembly of Divines, which would suggest to the unbiassed reader that we are not on quite such sure ground as we have been led to believe. Again, John Owen in *The True Nature of the Gospel Church* says some things most dogmatically, including the distinctions within the presbytery, which I feel I have shown to be at least open to question. But enough of raising more questions! Let me close with a tentative summary, a dilemma and a quotation.

It seems fair to say that as far as the evidence carries us without difficulty, the offices of elder and deacon are laid down in the New Testament. Qualifications are clear, duties reasonably so, the manner of appointment similarly so. It seems correct to say on the evidence of Gal. 6: 6 and 1 Tim. 5: 17 (as well as 1 Cor. 9) that members of the presbytery may be full-time and thus fully supported economically by other members of the church. The number of elders, etc., does not seem to be clearly laid down however, any more than does the optimum size of a congregation. (Ours are probably much too big.)

My dilemma is as follows: *Either* we say, as some do, that there is a permanent plan and pattern for the Church and its order laid down in the New Testament, in which case I do not think it would be hard to prove that everyone of us is unscriptural in one point or another, *or* we say that church polity is not laid down as categoric-

ally and plainly and unmistakably as is the means of our salvation and the like.

I therefore close, entirely sincerely, with some well-known words from the preface to the *Scots Confession* of 1560: "if any man will note in this . . . any article or sentence repugnant to God's Holy Word, that it would please him of his gentleness, and for Christian charities' sake, to admonish us of the same . . . and we upon our honour and fidelity, by God's grace, so promise unto him satisfaction from the mouth of God, that is from His Holy Scriptures, or else reformation of that which he shall prove to be amiss."

*Gorsley, Ross-on-Wye.*