

# Churches NEED Overseers

***Have We EVER Considered what effect having an Oversight Body would have on the Overall Integrity and Ethical Conduct of our Organizations? Why do we think it so inappropriate for there to be Overseers? Does the Bible speak to this?***

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While the New Testament speaks to the matter of how the Church of God ought to be administered, generations operating under the traditional approach have come to regard what ought to be obvious as an offense against the institutions that we operate under.

Before we start this topic, we should be reminded that the New Testament as we have it, at least the more common ‘authorized’ versions, were translated under the auspices of ecclesiastics – appointed by a king – already set in their thinking as to how a church ought to be organized. Under the long-standing Clergy / Laity divide, (the two-tier system) all administrative decision-making fell exclusively to the ‘Clergy’. The ‘laity’ was clearly out of the picture when it came to scrutinizing the decisions and actions of those who ‘served them’! Doctrinal positions especially were clearly not the purview of the membership at large!

## **Modest Changes!**

In this regard, we should approach this subject realizing that certain Greek words, from which our Bible translations came, were assigned substitute words for those originally written, in order to accommodate the belief system already in place at the time (the middle 1500’s). Thus, we read words such as “Bishop” and “Deacon”, which in our ears today carry with them a sense slightly different than what was meant originally. Another concept injected into the thought stream was the idea of a formal “ordination ceremony” being essential for a person to be inducted into the ranks of the formal ministry. Not only that, but another “ordination” was necessary each time a servant was raised to a rank of office higher than his present one. Even the title “Minister” was used in such a way that it changed slightly from its original intent. We tend to think of the minister as our “Master”, where

“Servant” is the more correct meaning of the Greek word “deacon” which is its most common original Greek term. We think of a minister as being an administrator, more than being the simple Servant that his calling requires.

And, how does a person transfer from one “class” into the other? What process or what operation authorizes a regular member to “move up” and become a “minister”? Is there a Biblical model for that? The conceptual model employed in the religious world has somewhat affected even the Church of God. There is a strong taboo set deep in the hearts of the majority when it comes to considering such questions, and an even stronger aversion to the idea of anyone other than a “minister” examining the credentials or the actions of a minister.

In practice within the ranks of the Church of God, at least in this generation, it was demonstrated in numerous ways that a person exhibiting a desire to serve in whatever capacity, who wasn’t first asked to take on such service, would be permanently ‘marked’ as presumptuous, self-seeking or labeled with some other derogatory term, and permanently set aside from any possibility of promotion. Such was the wall of distinction between the Clergy class and the Laity, and the jealous regard for its exclusive jurisdiction.

We need to ask ourselves, was this the situation also evident in the early Church, or did it establish itself only after the two-tier system had become implemented? Was it such an offense against the “ministry of God” in the early days, as apparently is the case today, to blur the line of distinction? Was it so wrong for a person to aspire to service of God’s people? Today the establishment ministry would answer, “emphatically: yes”! Yet Paul commended such aspirations. (1<sup>st</sup> Tim. 3:1)

Before we continue, we should point out the three words that have gained a cognitive sense that they didn't possess originally. They are:

**Deacon;** The Greek word “**deakonos**” (Strong's Concordance #1249) in the KJV is transliterated deacon only five times. It is correctly translated “servant” three or more times. Servant is actually the most accurate translation. But it is translated as “minister” over a dozen times.

Ironically, the Greek word “deakonos” is never translated deacon in the singular. Both places in which the KJV has singular deacon (1<sup>st</sup> Timothy 3:10, 12), it is rendered in the English as a five word phrase “the office of a deacon” which is in Greek “deakonea” (Strong's #1248 or 1249) which correctly refers to a ministry or service. (The five words in this phrase are only one word in Greek.)

But, the substituted word ‘minister’ in our time conveys a different meaning than did ‘deacons’ in the first century. We perceive of the minister (deakonos) as the man in charge, being in unquestionable authority, with less if any emphasis on being the servant of those he is in charge of! While he may be accountable for the spiritual welfare of the flock, it was not intended that he be any kind of an overlord, which today is more the norm! (See Mark 10:42-44; Luke 22:25-26)

Today, deacon is defined as the lowest level among the ranks of the ministry, where in fact, the first ‘deacons’ – so called – were replacements standing in for the leading Apostles!

**Bishop;** The correct translation for bishops should be “overseers” (correct translation is given in some KJV margins) and servants for “deacons”. The false translation “bishops” (Greek “episcopos”) is correctly translated overseers in Acts 20:28. It is under the ecclesiastical structure of the two-tier system that the title bishop is seen as a leader with greater authority over lower level ministers and over the membership. When we perceive correctly, and especially when factoring-in Christ's instructions regarding higher office, the “greater-in-service” individual serves more than usual, not actually doing less due to his greater authority!

**Ordain;** It is this consideration that also can work

to complicate our perception of service functions that ought to be within God's Church. It is the formal Ordination Ceremony that solidifies in peoples' minds the rank structure of the two-tier system. Few have duly noted that there is no formal ordination ceremony given in the New Testament: neither by instruction, nor by example. In the few places where the word ‘ordain’ is actually used, it doesn't refer to any ordination ceremony as we might conceive of one.

### Is Consecration the Same?

We do find, from historical accounts, where the term “consecrated” is applied to men being assigned to “oversee” certain regions, such as when Paul consecrated Caradoc, Bran and Linus. (See my article on “*Why Stand We in Jeopardy*”). Consecration may have been the term used in the first century, not ordination, though it too is not a Biblical term. Those consecrated were men of good character, with credibility and experience in managing their own lives and others' affairs appropriately. (See 1<sup>st</sup> Tim. 3 and 2<sup>nd</sup> Tim. 2)

Those events we might deem ordinations in the New Testament were when “hands were laid” upon certain individuals, endorsing their service, such as in Acts 13:3 and 1<sup>st</sup> Tim. 4:14. But such events do not picture a minister (deacon / servant) of whatever rank being re-ordained each time he is elevated in rank over what he had been before. Nor do these picture the membership being left out of the selection process such as in Acts 6:3-6.

Though the ordination ceremony idea, as we know it, is not found prescribed in the New Testament, it does, however, work to seriously inhibit the average disciple from serving his brethren in many effective ways, and in particular, it frustrates the congregation in working together as they ought to in responsibly fulfilling their God-ordained tasks: Those tasks being in part to oversee those affairs which impact their congregation.

While there are “overseers” who are charged with the oversight of the congregation(s), that is not the only level of oversight that needs to exist. When the leading ministry (overseer) retains exclusive decision making and policy making, the Church is put in a vulnerable position. That, as not all servants

are as honest in their motivations and conduct as they ought to be. There ARE such things as **hirelings**. The Bible speaks of them. In essence, a hireling is one who serves primarily for the paycheck, not so much a genuine love of the flock.

### By Their Fruits!?

We are admonished to “know them by their fruits”. Such a thing would effectively be impossible IF we were not allowed to critique the teachings and conduct of our ministry. Just that admonition shows that we OUGHT to be maintaining oversight in what our leadership is doing. The Ephesian congregations were known for their examination of the credentials of the ministry at large (even outside of just their own region) and were commended for tirelessly identifying and making known their findings.<sup>1</sup>

Peter’s instruction to those privileged to serve was this: “*The elders which are among you I exhort, who am also **an elder**, and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that shall be revealed: Feed the flock of God which is among you, **taking the oversight** thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind; Neither as being lords over God’s heritage, but being **ensamples** to the flock.*” (1<sup>st</sup> Pet. 5:1-3) Peter, the supposed leading Apostle, didn’t see it appropriate to call attention to his supposed ‘rank’ when admonishing others. He equated himself with them, as elders in fact, having been in the Church for such a long time. It was his longevity that he felt it appropriate to emphasize, not his perceived authority!

In those environments, whether a governmental entity or a religious one, when there is no oversight on the part of all involved, the culture can become corrupted. That is one major reason why God required the members to maintain frequent and relevant communications with one another. The

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<sup>1</sup> “*Unto the angel of the church of Ephesus write; These things saith he that holdeth the seven stars in his right hand, who walketh in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks; I know thy works, and thy labour, and thy patience, and how thou canst not bear them which are evil: and **thou hast tried them which say they are apostles, and are not, and hast found them liars**, And hast borne, and hast patience, and for my name’s sake hast laboured, and hast not fainted.* Revelation 2:1-3

concluding book of the Old Testament states this in chapter 3: “*And now we call the proud happy; yea, they that work wickedness are set up; yea, they that tempt God are even delivered....*”<sup>2</sup> Here we see what can happen when men assume free reign to do what they wish without constraints. They arrogantly take the “higher ground”, oppressing those “under them”. It is deemed WRONG by them and their system to ever criticize a minister.

The antidote is found in these next words: “*Then they that feared the LORD **spake often one to another**: and the LORD hearkened, and heard it, and a book of remembrance was written before him for them that feared the LORD, and that thought upon his name. And they shall be mine, saith the LORD of hosts, in that day when I make up **my jewels**; and I will spare them, as a man spareth his own son that serveth him...*” God commends and has an especially high regard for those who remain attentive on His behalf, and the Church’s, who maintain contact with one another without fear. They “know them BY their fruits” as they should, maintaining an awareness of all matters that affect the health and vibrancy of the Church. They exercise their senses of discernment, which Paul chides the Church for NOT doing, as they should have been doing, in Hebrews 5:14.

### Discernment at the Highest Level

These regular members who maintain diligence on behalf of the flock have a glorious assignment awaiting them in the future: “*Then shall ye return, and discern between the righteous and the wicked, between him that serveth God and him that serveth him not.*” They in the Millennial Kingdom will continue doing what they in this lifetime have demonstrated themselves to be good at doing! They have been found exercising and honing their senses of discernment throughout their lives!

Paul recognized the mandate of the membership as a body. It was their God-given assignment to be the “pillars and grounds of the Truth”. He reminded one of his favored appointees to remain mindful of that, not diminishing the importance of it. Timothy was charged in how he was to conduct himself among God’s people: “*But if I tarry long, that thou*

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<sup>2</sup> Malachi 3: 15-18

*mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth.*" Paul recognized that IF the Church was to remain true in the Faith as delivered, they must be the uprights and buttresses of Truth as a well-structured body. Any church which functions only under the imposition of what some minister deems "the truth" to be will succumb to other ideas when out from under that man's influence. No, the Church must be grounded itself. That's where oversight of and by the Body itself is essential. When it's not there, that congregation's enduring faithfulness is put in serious jeopardy!

### **Power Corrupts!**

The US Government has what are called "oversight committees". By the record, we can see that they are not of the caliber that we would hope for. Imagine what it would be like if the people (as it originally was intended) were given oversight in what our government is doing. How much waste corruption and other shenanigans would end?

It was in the late 1970's when I first heard the famous quote of Lord Acton, in which he expressed this opinion in a letter in 1887 to Bishop Creighton: "**Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely**"! I will admit that the quote shocked me, considering what was going-on in the WCG at the time. I took exception to it, mentally, assuring myself that such a thing **COULD NOT HAPPEN** in God's Church. If anything is amiss, He will correct it. It wasn't seen as our job to critique or criticize anything. (Including even certain unbaptized / unconverted high ranking administrators, it seems!)

I knew that there was no real oversight committee in the WCG, no such function was allowed, and I'm sure, others in the Church felt as I did at the time. We were sure that God would not allow anything amiss to take place in His Church. Absolute power was appropriate there, most of us felt (we who were not in position to know what was really going-on at the time). But, I was particularly uncomfortable with Lord Acton's premise just then for what are now obvious reasons. You see, the unthinkable was TRUE! Unsupervised power does corrupt!

We have clear and unmistakable evidence that any entity that operates without some form of

oversight – from above and below – will become corrupted if left on its own inevitable course. Yes, even God's Church! If we follow Peter's instruction to be submissive one to another (1<sup>st</sup> Pet. 5:5) we won't see the destructive conditions that we have experienced. By abandoning our mandate to know them which rule over us, to know them BY their fruits, not by their prestigious "offices" alone, we place God's Church at serious risk! When we are instructed to "know them", we should strive to do exactly THAT, fully, without hesitation or reservation!

### **With Full Discernment**

No person with God's Spirit ought to check his brains at the door, as was encouraged, and rather forcefully so at times. God's Word instructs us to: "*Remember them which have the rule over you, who have spoken unto you the word of God: **whose faith follow**, considering the end of their conversation... Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as **they that must give account**, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you.*"<sup>3</sup> If this meant that we were to disregard what we might know about our leader(s), and follow them anyway, just on the basis of them being appointed over us, then would that not tend to corrupt our minds, contaminate our beliefs and compromise our principles? Granted, they **MUST GIVE ACCOUNT**, as we all will, but to overlook obvious faults in their conduct or teachings, just on the basis of their prestige, how can that be right or good for the Church? And is it just to God that they will give account? Are they exempt from having to give account to the Church also when and if they do her harm? Our ministry has done us much harm!

### **Truth's Consequences**

The lesson of recent times has impressed itself upon a number of us, while others have missed the point entirely. By God's design, I feel, we were put in a position that revealed where we stood. Did we regard our leadership more highly, or did we regard God's Truth more highly? That was the choice put before us. We were tested! If God's people won't

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<sup>3</sup> Hebrews 13:7 & 17.

monitor the situations in the Church, who will?  
That IS our mandate!

