

# Church Structure: Positions or different kinds of service?

## *The aim of this article*

*In this article we will outline our understanding of different kinds of services in the Church. We prefer to use the expression “kinds of service” (1 Cor 12:5) in the Church rather than positions. Christ calls us to serve in the Church and not to strive for positions. After touching on some basic principles belonging to this topic we will briefly describe the church structure as it was in the time of the New Testament and compare it with the situation in today’s institutional churches. Finally we will present the reasons why we do not have one pastor and explain why we chose to return to the church structure of the New Testament communities.*

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## ⚓ **1 All Christians Are Brothers and Sisters**

Jesus Christ is the head of the church. He has a direct and living relationship with every Christian without any other mediator.

For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus... (1 Timothy 2:5)

All Christians are brothers and sisters and together they take care of the church—each one according to the gifts he has received.

But God has so composed the body, giving greater honour to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. (*1 Corinthians 12:24-25*)

But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brothers. And call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven. Neither be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Christ. The greatest among you shall be your servant. Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted. (*Matthew 23:8-12*)

There are differences among Christians in experience, knowledge of the Bible, and obedience to God. We should be aware of these differences but we should never consider them fundamental differences. We cannot divide Christians into two groups—those who have been enabled to reveal God’s will and those who follow (i.e. clergy and laymen, those who have and have not been baptised with the Holy Spirit, etc.).

## ⚓ 2 The Structure of the Church in New Testament Times

### ⚓ 2.1 Elders

In the Acts of the Apostles we read of various examples where the Apostles appointed elders:

And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed. (*Acts 14:23*)

**The elders** (Greek: elder = *presbyteros*) are Christians who, because of their maturity in faith and their obedience, were respected by the communities and took care of them. In the New Testament **they are also called overseers** (Greek: overseer = *episkopos*) **and shepherds** (Greek: *poimenes*) **of the church.**

Now from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church to come to him. (*Acts 20:17*)

...and in the same context we read about the same people:

Take heed therefore to yourselves, and to all the flock, wherein the Holy Spirit has set you as overseers, to shepherd the assembly of God, which he has purchased with the blood of his own. (*Acts 20:28*) (Darby translation)

The elders mentioned in verse 17 are called overseers here in verse 28. Their service is to shepherd the assembly of God. The way these terms are used interchangeably reveals that they do not describe different levels of hierarchy. They simply describe different aspects of the same service. In some translations the word “overseer” (*episkopos*) is rendered “bishop”. In the Bible *episkopos* just means an elder and cannot be compared to the so-called “bishops” of today. Actually, it was only in the second century that a single person became the leader of a community in one town, unlike in the time of the Apostles when communities were not led by one person but by a collective of elders.

Elders are addressed in plural in *Philippians 1:1* and *1 Peter 5:1-5*.

Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus,  
To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons....  
(*Philippians 1:1*)

So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of  
Christ.... (*1 Peter 5:1*)

In *Acts 14:23* and *Titus 1:5* [1] several elders were appointed.

This structure was a certain kind of protection against false teachings. If one of the elders went astray then he would be reproved by the others.

Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, of which the Holy Spirit has  
made you overseers...and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted  
things, to draw away the disciples after them. (*Acts 20:28,30*)

It was also a protection against the danger of a single person gaining an exalted position, which is criticised in *3 John 9*:

I have written something to the church, but Diotrephes, who likes to put himself first,  
does not acknowledge our authority.

The collective leading of the Christian community, as illustrated above, does not mean that the elders decide everything. In *Matthew 18:15-18* Jesus shows that the most important decisions should be carried by the whole church.

If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens [to you], you have won your brother. But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven. (*Matthew 18:15-18, NASB*)

What then, brothers? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up.... Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said. If a revelation is made to another sitting there, let the first be silent. For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all be encouraged. (*1 Corinthians 14:26,29-31*)

Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints. (*Jude 3*)

Every Christian bears responsibility for the teaching and the decisions of the church, which is Christ's body. An elder should not replace the function of the body but he should care for its well-being.

## 2.2 Deacons

Philippians 1:1 mentions deacons. The Greek word means a “servant”, “helper” or “minister”. Related expressions are found in Acts 6:1–6.

...their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution [2] . (Acts 6:1)

It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve [3] tables. (Acts 6:2)

The issue here is the distribution of food among the needy Christians. The Apostles appointed seven disciples who took this service on. They are not called deacons in this passage but most probably the word “deacon” used in *Philippians 1:1* and *1 Timothy 3:8* is also connected with the service of organizing and distributing material things.

## 3 The Post-Apostolic Structure of the Church

After the death of the Apostles Peter and Paul the situation did not essentially change. We can see this from a letter, which the Christian community in Rome wrote to the Christian community in Corinth around the year A.D. 70. This letter is known as the First Letter of Clement. It does not form part of the New Testament and we quote it here only as a historical document. The main concern of this letter is the proper respect due to elders. We read there:

*For our sin will not be small, if we eject from the episcopate those who have blamelessly and holily fulfilled its duties. Blessed are those presbyters who, having finished their course before now, have obtained a fruitful and perfect departure [from this world]; for they have no fear lest any one deprive them of the place now appointed them. But we see that you have removed some men of excellent behaviour from the ministry, which they fulfilled blamelessly and with honour. (1 Clement 44)*

We read about presbyters (elders) who fulfil the task of episcopate (the task of an overseer). The terms *episkopos* (overseer) and *presbyteros* (elder) are once again used synonymously in this letter, while we read nothing about a single leader. We can see here that the New Testament church structure as described above did not change even after the death of the Apostles. The Apostles did not appoint single leaders over the local churches even when they left this world behind. So when the apostle Paul finally left the Ephesian church, though he was aware that some Christians were in danger of falling away, he merely said:

And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace.... (Acts 20:32)

By the beginning of the second century, though, we already find a single leader in a number of local Christian communities in Asia Minor and Syrian Antioch. They were called “*episkopoi*” (overseers) which was originally a synonym for elders. We read about them in the letters of Ignatius of Antioch (c. 35–c. 110) without any reference to their special appointment by the Apostles. Nothing suggests that moniscopacy[4] came to existence by the will of the Apostles. Apart from Matthias, who replaced Judas as the twelfth apostle (Acts 1:15–26), there is no mention in the Bible of the need to appoint successors for the Apostles.[5]

Ignatius imagined the role of a bishop in the church as follows:

*See that you all follow the bishop, even as Jesus Christ does the Father.... Let no man do anything connected with the Church without the bishop. ...Wherever the bishop shall appear, there let the multitude of the people also be; even as, wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic [6] Church. It is not lawful without the bishop either to baptize or to celebrate a love-feast; but whatsoever he shall approve of, that is also pleasing to God, so that everything that is done may be secure and valid. ...He who honours the bishop has been honoured by God; he who does anything without the knowledge of the bishop, does in reality serve the devil. (Smyrna 8:1-9:1)*

Emphasizing the role of a single person in this way is completely alien to the New Testament.

This development continued so that by the end of the second century Irenaeus from Lyon considered the *episkopoi* to be the successors of the Apostles.

## ⚓ 4 The Roman Catholic Church Structure

In the documents of the Roman Catholic Second Vatican Council (1965) we read:

*But the task of authentically interpreting the word of God, whether written or handed on, has been entrusted exclusively to the living teaching office of the Church, whose authority is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ. This teaching office is not above the word of God, but serves it, teaching only what has been handed on, listening to it devoutly, guarding it scrupulously and explaining it faithfully in accord with a divine commission and with the help of the Holy Spirit, it draws from this one deposit of faith everything which it presents for belief as divinely revealed. (Dei verbum 10)*

What this practically means is that one needs a special “key” to “unlock” the Bible. According to the Roman Catholic Church, priests as representatives of the bishop hold the key to unlock the true meaning of scripture.

The apostle John, on the other hand, wrote in his first letter to all Christians:

I write these things to you about those who are trying to deceive you. But the anointing that you received from him abides in you, and you have no need that anyone should teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about everything, and is true, and is no lie—just as it has taught you, abide in him. (1 John 2:26-27)

The key to understanding the Holy Scriptures is the Holy Spirit who dwells in all Christians. This is the anointing John refers to.

In the Roman Catholic Church the authority of the bishops is often compared with that of the Apostles. We regard the authority of the Apostles as unique due to their personal experience with Jesus and the role they played in laying the foundations of the church.

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and

prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone.... (*Ephesians 2:19-20*)

The apostle Paul also connects his apostleship with having seen Jesus:

Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are not you my workmanship in the Lord? (*1 Corinthians 9:1*)

## ⚓ 5 The Usual Church Structure in Protestant and Free Churches

Most Protestants and free churches reject the Roman Catholic doctrine about the teaching office of bishops. At the same time they usually see the necessity of appointing one pastor over the elders. The pastor takes the task of preaching in the church and has the last word in important decisions. One argument often given in support of this is the example of Timothy and Titus, Paul's co-workers, who had significant authority in Ephesus and Crete (*1 Timothy 1:3, Titus 1:5*). This reasoning disregards the fact that these co-workers were left in these places to finish the work of the apostle. They did not remain there indefinitely and no position or office was established to continue their role after their departure.

Jerome, one of the church fathers from the fourth century, did not consider this widespread form of church government to have been given by the Lord but to have been a later development within the church. He wrote:

*...Before splits appeared in [our] religion through the stimulation of the devil, and before it was spoken among the people: "I belong to Paul, I to Apollos, and I to Cephas himself", the churches had been governed jointly by councils of presbyters. As soon as each of them started considering those he baptised his own, and not Christ's, it was decided all over the world that one man chosen from among presbyters [in each community — translator's remark] should be set over the rest to take care of the whole church. In this way the seeds of schism were done away with. ...For that reason bishops should consider that they were placed over presbyters due to a custom rather than by a command of the Lord; and that one ought to rule the church jointly, imitating Moses who, though he might have stayed alone in the lead of Israel, chose seventy men with whom he judged the people together. (Jerome, Commentarius in epistulam Pauli ad Titum 1:5)*

But implementing a man-made "custom" is not a real spiritual solution for the problem.

## ⚓ 6 Our Conclusions

1. No man is infallible. Every one may need correction. Every Christian should grow in bearing responsibility. We do not see it as God's leading to appoint one leader over the church or a local Christian community.
2. Elders help a Christian church to hold onto the right teaching and way of life. Their authority should not be based on a university degree or on leadership skills but on their obedience to God, Christian virtues, experience, and their ability to teach. Elders in the church can be either appointed or naturally recognized by their good example and perseverance. In the Bible we do not find any examples of a church appointing elders by vote. Unlike many communities in the New Testament, our community was not founded by missionaries who appointed elders. We have grown gradually and we know each other well. We also know our elders. This does not change their task, and everything we have said concerning elders can be applied to them. They take part in our lives and we take part in theirs. They earn their own money in normal jobs, as do the others. They, too, need encouragement

and admonition, as do the others. They, too, confess their sins to any of the other Christians. The elders are not the only ones who teach.

3. We should not come together to be fed a programme but to share. It is not difficult to take part in meetings where somebody puts on a programme. This way, however, does not teach a person to take on responsibility. If Christians do not learn to bear responsibility for the church a development towards a wrong structure is unavoidable. Loving others means taking on responsibility for them. The Apostle Paul encourages us to do this:

I myself am satisfied about you, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able to instruct one another. (*Romans 15:14*)

Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. (*Galatians 6:1*)

In doing this we can build unity which is not imposed from above but which comes from our hearts. Such unity can also be a testimony for the world.

But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or an ungifted man enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all; the secrets of his heart are disclosed; and so he will fall on his face and worship God, declaring that God is certainly among you. (*1 Corinthians 14:24-25*)

We learn to bear this responsibility every day, preserving the humility that makes us able to listen to the others—to our elders, but also to our younger spiritual brothers and sisters. (*1 Peter 5:5*)

## ⚓ 7 Passages that are used to justify the structure found today

There are two passages where the word “overseer” (Gk: episkopos) is written in singular. Namely 1 Timothy 3:2 and Titus 1:7. Titus 1:5 refers to the same people, and there you can see that it assumes there are several elders or overseers in a community. Here Paul describes the prerequisites for being an overseer in the community. He does not want to say that there should only be one. The description of the deacons in 1 Timothy 3:8 is written in plural, but this does not contradict the description in singular in the earlier verses. They are simply different ways of listing the most important requirements for both tasks. It’s like saying: motorbikes usually have two wheels. A car, however, always has four.

In Hebrews 13 leaders are mentioned twice. In verse 7 the apostles and elders from the beginning of the church are meant. In verse 17 the elders at the time of writing the letter are meant. This is just another term for the elders or overseers — which is another indication that the early Christians did not have official titles and positions.

James the brother of the Lord is often referred to as the leader of the community in Jerusalem because he is mentioned separately in various places in the New Testament (i.e. Acts 12:17 and 21:18). He also spoke the last word at the so called apostles council. There is no doubt that he had great authority among the Christians. His obedience and deep understanding of Jesus' teaching are apparent from the letter of James. Even non-Christians referred to him as James the righteous. There is a world of difference, however, between a believer who enjoys great respect due to their great devotion and having a position as the sole leader of a church. Such a position did not exist at all in the early church. As previously mentioned, John the apostle sharply criticised the wish to be the first (3 John).

Regarding the claim that Peter was the bishop of Rome or even the first Pope, we are preparing an article about the papacy.

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#### Footnotes

1. There are two passages in which we find the word "overseer" (*episkopos*) written in singular. These passages are: *1 Timothy 3:2* and *Titus 1:7*. In *Titus 1:5* we can see that a plurality of elders in the church is presupposed. So the word "overseer" is used in singular because these passages describe the qualities required of an overseer. It does not express that there should only be one overseer.
2. Literally: "daily service" Greek: *diakonia*.
3. Greek: *diakonein*.
4. Church government by monarchical bishops: monarchical episcopacy.
5. The number twelve was symbolic of the nation of Israel and the Apostles wanted to maintain this number as an expression of a new beginning of God's nation. This was important when the Apostles started preaching. Later, when James the apostle died, the number was not completed.
6. In the original meaning of the word, i.e. "whole" or "general"—not "Roman" Catholic.

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