

Ecclesiastical Government (9th)

(The study for today begins looking at the officers in the congregation that the Lord Jesus Christ appointed and their particular function.)

In our previous study we found that the New Testament church is a congregation of the Lord and that Christ gave all power and authority to each congregation as well as everything “needful for ... carrying on that order in worship and discipline, which he hath instituted ... to observe, with commands and rules for the due and right exerting and executing of that power.” This is so affirmed by the Baptist confessions in the earliest days of Europe and America as stated in the *London Baptist Confession of 1689* and also adopted by the early Baptist in America by the Philadelphia Association.

Chapter twenty-six, Article eight, of this confession says, “A particular church, gathered and completely organized according to the mind of Christ, consists of officers and members; and the officers appointed by Christ to be chosen and set apart by the church (so called and gathered), for the peculiar administration of ordinances, and execution of power or duty, which he entrusts them with, or calls them to, to be continued to the end of the world, are bishops or elders, and deacons.” Noticed that the officers are (1) appointed by Christ; (2) chosen and set apart by the congregation; (3) for administration of the ordinances; (4) for execution of power or duty which God entrusts with, or calls them to; (5) that these officers are to continue to the end of the world; and, (6) that such officers are bishops or elders, and deacons. Nothing is said of any other officer within or apart from the congregation. Nothing is said of any auxiliary organization, institution, society, association, synod, council, or group for ecclesiastical authority.

Allow me to digress at this point and say that a congregation may seek the advice of a minister or a group of ministers from separate congregations, or even seek the wisdom of other congregations regarding a matter, but in the end, the final word is within the congregation itself. This is what was seen with the congregation at Jerusalem in Acts chapter fifteen; the whole church (congregation) was involved. I would also say that this appeared to be the purpose of associations in the early days of the Baptists in America, but, sad to say, later often associations assumed powers over various congregations. However, congregations working together for the mutual benefit of a godly cause is encouraged, but the cause must never be deemed more important than the congregation. In other words, it is good to provide support to “mission work,” but when such support fails to support the pastor or pastors of the congregation or the poor and needful within the congregation it is wrong. Yes, “As we have ... opportunity, let us do good unto all men,” but “especially unto them who are of the household of faith,” Galatians 6:10. While Paul collected money for the saints at Jerusalem, he equally taught those congregations that the ministers are to be supported, cf. I Corinthians chapters nine and sixteen. This principle equally applies to poor widows and others within the assembly. I would draw your attention here that the “missionary congregations” (congregations established by mission work as Corinth, Philippi, and others) contributed to the so-called “mother” congregation at Jerusalem. How many “missionary congregations” do you know of that ever send support to congregations from which the ministers were sent to establish or build up the so-called missionary assemblies? Is it any wonder that Christianity, as a whole, is backward from what is taught in the Scriptures? Please do not misunderstand me. I am not condemning what is called “mission work”; far from it. May the gospel be proclaimed throughout the entire world. I only desire that we are not guilty of letting a good thing be used contrary to the health and benefit of the congregation as established by the Lord Jesus. Obviously, if we fail to function as our Lord ordained in the Holy Scriptures we fail to honor and glorify Him as He ordained.

Let us return from our digression back to the subject at hand. We find, first, that the officers are appointed by Christ. This is to say that the officers within (not over) the congregation are appointed by

Christ. In other words, officers who are constituted by man are not of God. Obviously, the ministers should be called by God, but we must remember that deacons are included in the list. While deacons must meet certain qualifications prior to ordination, we must not think that because a man has all the qualifications for being a deacon he must be recognized or ordained as such. When the congregation at Jerusalem selected the seven men in Acts chapter six we must not conclude that they were the only men that were “of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom,” Acts 6:3. Therefore, when the confession says that “the officers appointed by Christ,” it means those listed are the officers that God or Christ ordained which are bishops or elders and deacons. There are no other officers and we will continue with this premise. However, the Lord willing, we will study these officers in detail later.

The second thing listed is that they are “to be chosen and set apart by the church (so called and gathered).” It is clear that the “church” intended is a congregation. Therefore, no Bible college or seminary or denominational hierarchy has any authority to designate or ordain any man to the ministry or deaconship. Additionally, when a congregation has appointed and ordained a man to either office, it is not obligatory that such an individual maintain the same position in another congregation. In other words, if a man is a deacon in one congregation and if he moves to a different location and become a member in another congregation, the second congregation is not obligated to appoint him to be a deacon. The second congregation may already have sufficient number of deacons. The same may be said regarding the office of eldership or pastor in the second assembly. It is left to the discretion of the congregation as to whether an individual may function within the congregation. Because a person functions as an officer in one congregation, he should not expect to function accordingly in another congregation, and he should not take offence when he is not recognized as such. We must all remember that it is Christ that has the preeminence and that each member of the congregation is there for the honor and glory of the Lord. On the other hand, if a transfer of membership takes place of an officer and the subsequent congregation has a need for such an officer she is a liberty and has the authority to recognize the officer.

The Scriptures plainly show that the congregation is to appoint the officers. It is generally accepted that Acts chapter six is when the office of deacon was established. Acts 6:3 plainly says that the congregation was to look out among them for such men to fill the office. The qualifications of a deacon are more specifically outlined in I Timothy chapter three.

Acts 14:23 equally declares that elders are selected by the congregation. It says that Paul and Barnabas “ordained elders in every” congregation. The word “ordain” is the Greek word χειροτονέω (cheirotoneō) and means “to be a hand-reacher or voter (by raising the hand). Therefore, it was not Paul and Barnabas that selected and established the elders in the congregations in their missionary travels; the congregations selected the men to be their elders. Obviously, synods or any other ecclesiastical authority did not establish the elders in the congregations.

The third item given above declares that the officers are “for the peculiar administration of ordinances.” Generally, both Baptists and Protestants agree with this. However, for those young in the faith it might be beneficial to review this for their edification.

As previously stated, Acts chapter six is normally considered the time when deacons were established within the congregation of God. It is recorded that those seven men were set apart (appointed or ordained) to “serve tables,” Acts 6:2. According to the context, the tables under consideration were those of the Grecian widows, Acts. 6:1. Some advocate that the tables refer to the table or tables used during the Lord’s Supper. Though the deacons certainly may be useful and expected by the congregation to assist and support the pastor during the Lord’s Supper, the context of Acts chapter six extends to other duties. I Timothy chapter five outlines the qualifications of widows that are to be supported and cared for by the congregation. However, as previously stated, we shall study the office and function of deacons in more detail later. But for now, we find that while the functions of the deacon are many, it may (and often does) assist the minister with the “administration of the ordinances,” not only the Lord’s Supper, but equally with baptism.

It is generally believed among all branches of Christendom that the minister of the congregation administers the ordinances. We plan to discuss this more fully when we review the offices and functions in depth. Since our allotted time is used up, we will continue in our next session.