

# Ministry, Prophecy, Teaching and Leadership

This study has arisen out of a shared written discussion, which started as a consideration of the question of women in church leadership and was specific to one particular fellowship. My contribution to the discussion was too 'personalised' to that fellowship to allow it to be shared with anyone else, but a number of issues presented themselves and it may prove useful to look at these in more general terms. Yes, I shall certainly include thoughts about the roles of women in the church but, instead of starting there, at what seems like a 'half way point', I aim to go 'backwards' to basic Biblical principles – and also range further 'forwards'. So this **not** primarily a study about 'women in church leadership' but rather an attempt to find out more of the Lord's purposes for his Church in ministry, prophecy, teaching and leadership.

**NOTES:** 1) Please forgive me the frequent references to Greek words, and don't be put off by them! I am not a Greek scholar, and you certainly do NOT need to be one to read these notes, but over the years I have found great value in getting back to the real, basic meaning of many words in the New Testament (NT), often bringing fresh light and simplicity to what previously seemed to be knotty questions. By looking at these real meanings, we join the simplest, most uneducated listener or reader of NT times, who would have understood **instantly** when they met these words. Hopefully, you will find the same benefit as we explore together.

2) 'For the avoidance of doubt' (as they say in the legal profession), it is perhaps worth saying that by 'the Church' I do not mean any organisational body, denominational or otherwise, but rather all (and only) those who have new life through personal faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. I generally use a capital letter ('Church') when referring to the whole body of Christ across the world and lower case ('church') when referring to the local body of believers. I may also refer to local bodies as 'congregations' and 'fellowships'.

## Ministry

There is often some confusion about what 'ministry' in the local church really means. In some people's minds, it equates directly with teaching and leadership. This is the common pattern in many modern congregations, and I am not sure whether this arrangement is the cause or the effect of the typical 'one man' (or 'one person') ministry. On the face of it, there may seem to be a close link between ministry and leadership, but I believe this does not line up with what we find in the NT.

First of all, the words – 'minister' and 'ministry'! There are two basic ideas expressed by them in the NT:–

1) A public servant, doing 'work for the people'. The Greek word for someone doing that is *leitourgos*, and other words spring from the same root.<sup>1</sup> These are not the commonest words for 'minister' and 'ministry' in the NT, and all their occurrences are listed in the footnote. If you check them out, you will find a common theme of practical assistance or priestly function, performing a service for other people, doing something that they cannot do for themselves.

For example, Paul compares his presenting the gospel to Gentiles as being like a priest

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<sup>1</sup> *Leitourgos* = a public servant (**Romans 15:16, Philippians 2:25, Hebrews 1:7, 8:2**); *leitourgeo* = to act as a public servant (**Acts 13:2, Romans 15:27, Hebrews 10:11**); *leitourgia* = public service (**Luke 1:23, 2 Corinthians 9:12, Philippians 2:17, 2:30, Hebrews 8:6, 9:21**); *leitourgikos* = serving (**Hebrews 1:14**).

making an offering, and the writer to the Hebrews speaks of the Lord Jesus acting as a priest in the heavenly sanctuary. The only other way in which these words are used is to represent practical help such as financial support. The English word 'liturgy' comes from *leitourgia*, and is an accurate representation of what it describes: someone doing something for someone else, as can be seen in any religious 'service'. This was typical of the Jewish priesthood under the Old Covenant (or, in fact, of **any** priesthood) but it is **not** the intended shape of Christian meetings under the New Covenant, despite the sad fact that probably the majority of present-day Christian meetings have now become routinely fixed as 'services'! We shall explore more a bit later.

2) The words *diakonia* and *diakonos* occur frequently in the NT,<sup>1</sup> and their basic meanings are 'service' and 'servant', along with *diakoneō*, meaning 'to serve'. These words cover practically **any** aspect of service except 'religious service', *leitourgia*. The same word *diakonia* is used both for Martha serving Jesus and the disciples with food in **Luke 10** and for the different 'ministries' in **1 Corinthians 12**. The Authorised (King James) translation of 1611 often rendered these words as 'ministry' and 'minister', and that practice has continued with many subsequent translations. Perhaps 'minister' may have meant 'servant' in 1611, but it certainly does not do so today! These days, a 'minister' is either a government appointment or a 'minister of religion' – either of which equates very closely to *leitourgos* (above), but not to *diakonos*.

In everyday life in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century, a *diakonos* was male or female, an employee, perhaps a servant in a household, and totally different from a slave. Slaves were bought and sold, but a *diakonos* was a free person who nonetheless performed service for their employer. The senior *diakonos* in a household was the *oikonomos*, usually translated 'steward', who was in charge of running the whole household for his master. Paul sometimes describes himself as having been given a 'stewardship' (*oikonomia*),<sup>2</sup> though he also refers to himself – and others – fulfilling the role of *diakonos* to the churches.<sup>3</sup> In neither case is there any implication of leadership, simply the fulfilling of a given role and responsibility.

And then there are the passages where this same word is translated 'deacon'.<sup>4</sup> This word is really just an English rendering of the Greek *diakonos* and has become a technical term or religious jargon to mean someone appointed to undertake chiefly practical tasks in the local church. Most people consider the seven men who were appointed in **Acts 6** to have been the first 'deacons', although the word *diakonos* is not found in that chapter. We may need to remind ourselves that the word simply means 'servant' and would have had that meaning for anyone fulfilling that role or referring to those who did. Again, no reference to any form of leadership.

In **1 Timothy 3:13**, the word *diakoneō* has usually been over-translated as 'served as deacons'. This exaggerated translation only serves to perpetuate the false notion of a class of church 'officers' called deacons. The Authorised (King James) version even translates *diakoneō* here as 'used the office of deacon'! The word means 'serve', pure and simple, just as *diakonos* means 'servant', not 'deacon'.

<sup>1</sup> *Diakonia* 34 times, *diakonos* 29 times, *diakoneō* 45 times. Too many to list them all here!

<sup>2</sup> **1 Corinthians 9:17, Ephesians 3:2, Colossians 1:25**. See also **Luke 12:42 & Titus 1:7**. This is also the word from which we get the English word 'economy' – the 'rules of the house'.

<sup>3</sup> **Romans 16:1, 1 Corinthians 3:5, 2 Corinthians 3:6, 6:4, 11:23, Ephesians 3:7, 6:21, Colossians 1:7,23,25, 4:7, 1 Timothy 4:6**. (In **Colossians 1:25**, Paul describes both his stewardship and his servanthood!)

<sup>4</sup> **Philippians 1:1, 1 Timothy 3:8, 12**

When we speak of ‘ministry’ in the Church, we are usually thinking about specifically spiritual input rather than practical support (though of course they may overlap to some extent) and somehow we have managed to attach a sense of ‘leadership’ to ‘ministry’, so that anyone who has any sort of ministry is automatically thought of as having a leadership role. I can’t see that anywhere in the NT, though there may be a slight overlap which we shall see when we look specifically at teaching in the local church.

A false ‘priestliness’ infected Christian church practice from very early days, with the establishment of a ‘clergy and laity’ model, which is totally alien to the teaching of Jesus and the apostles. This has tended to blur the clarity of *diakonia* – simple, straightforward serving each other – with the overtones of *leitourgia* – an official, organised and religious activity – and so has probably contributed to the confusion of ministry with leadership.

If we start to look through the New Testament with a proper understanding of the basic meaning of these words, this confusion of ministry with leadership begins to evaporate. One passage clearly shows how *diakonia* describes the proper functioning of the church, locally and further afield: **Ephesians 4:11-16**:–

*“And he gave some apostles, and some prophets, and some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints into the work of **service** (*diakonia*, i.e. ministry), into the building up (Greek *oikodōme*) of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ. As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming; but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all into him who is the head, Christ, from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working<sup>1</sup> of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up (*oikodōme*) of itself in love.”*

Here we have what are sometimes called the ‘fivefold ministries’ – apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers – and we see the prime responsibility that they have: to equip the ‘saints’ – i.e. believers. Those same saints, having been equipped, are then able to get on with their responsibilities: getting into the work of service (*diakonia*) and into building up the Body of Christ (i.e. the Church). There’s that word again, *diakonia* = service = ministry. And then, as we read on, we see that growth in the Body depends on each part working properly, being held together ‘through every joint of the supply’ (literally). Without question, the apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers are exercising their various ministries, but they are directed specifically towards equipping the other believers into their own ministries – which will build up the church. Please don’t be fooled by the idea that it is the work of the ‘fivefold ministries’ to do all the service and all the building up – the Greek is VERY clear!

Paul paints the same picture in **Romans 12:3-8**, describing how we are in Christ together as one body and, like the different members of a human body, have different functions for the benefit of the whole body. He mentions prophecy, ‘service’ (*diakonia* again), teaching, encouragement, giving, leading and showing compassion. In reality, each of these is a form of service – *diakonia* – and we function in them according to the measure of the faith which God has ‘apportioned’ to us. The word means ‘divided’ and is used for Jesus dividing up the two fish in **Mark 6:41** – divided among all the people, all 5000 of them! I like the picture: ‘a piece for you, a piece for you, a piece for each one . . .’ Each piece is different

<sup>1</sup> ‘Proper working’ in the Greek is actually ‘working in measure’ – and see **Romans 12:3 & 6**.

and distinct, but together they make up one complete whole. Quite deliberately, the Lord has divided up the different areas of service between us all, according to the specific faith we are each given to exercise our own specific function. We don't all have the same areas of faith, but each one of the many different functions that we have is essential for the body to operate properly.

We can see the same in **1 Corinthians 12:4-31**, where Paul again shows that the wide variety of gifts and 'ministries' (*diakonia*) are given by the one Holy Spirit, and that each one is vital. In **v.7**, he makes it abundantly clear that *'to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good'* (literally, 'to bring together' or 'to bear together'). And in **11:5**, he is very clear that women can contribute to that benefit by praying or prophesying.

And how does it work out in practice? In **1 Corinthians 14:26-33**, we read about what a Christian meeting looked like in the 1<sup>st</sup> century. Here Paul expects that 'each one' will have something to contribute to the assembled company, and that everything needs to be done for 'building the house' (the real meaning of that obscure word 'edification').<sup>1</sup> The word is *oikodōme* again, as in **Ephesians 4**. Earlier in that chapter to Corinth, Paul expresses the wish that all of them would prophesy, so that the church may receive 'edifying' – i.e. house-building, *oikodōme*. Is all of this 'ministry'? Of course it is – serving one another in the Body of Christ!

I hope that we can see clearly from these passages (and others) that 'ministry' is a function of **every member** of the Body of Christ and certainly **not** reserved for those in leadership.

### Prophecy

So, what about prophecy? Where does that fit in? **Does** it fit in, or is it only a thing of the past? From the passages we have already looked at, it is clear that Paul regarded it as a normal, functioning ministry in the fellowship meetings of the local church. We also see Agabus as a New Testament prophet, speaking the mind of God on two occasions,<sup>2</sup> each time bringing predictions of future events which were directly relevant to the current situation. John the Baptist, historically in the books of the New Testament but effectively the last of the Old Testament prophets, very definitely brought a message ringing with 'thus says the Lord'. Jesus confirmed him as being 'a prophet and more than a prophet' (**Matthew 11:9, Luke 7:26**).

The key characteristic of prophecy throughout the Bible can be summed up in those same four words: 'Thus says the Lord'. Perhaps in more modern speech we might say simply, 'This is what the Lord is saying'. In the context of the meeting described in **1 Corinthians 14**, two or three prophets might speak and the rest of the fellowship are called upon to 'pass judgment' – in other words, to judge and discern whether the words are truly from the Lord himself. If the Lord has really spoken, then careful attention is needed. If he has not spoken, the words can be safely disregarded. No room for mindless acceptance of whatever the 'prophet' may say, nor for just dismissing something we may not like the sound of, but an immediate need for all believers to **learn** to discern the mind of the Lord and recognise when he is speaking. If the believers in Thyatira had exercised proper discernment, the false prophetess 'Jezebel' would never have been able to pervert their ways (**Revelation 2:18-29**).

There are (at least) two common ways in which the sort of prophecy which we see in the churches in the New Testament is watered down in these times from 'thus says the Lord'

<sup>1</sup> See '[Building the House](http://www.justonecandle.uk)' from [www.justonecandle.uk](http://www.justonecandle.uk)

<sup>2</sup> **Acts 11:27-28, 21:10-14**

to something rather tamer:—

1) Some people believe that prophets and prophecy are no longer valid in the Church, but they would find it hard to justify that belief from the New Testament. Maybe nowadays we don't hear prophecy in the Church to the same extent that Paul expected, but that doesn't mean that God has withdrawn the gift. An oft-quoted so-called 'proof' of this idea comes from **1 Corinthians 13:8-12**:—

*"Love never fails; but if prophecies, they will be done away; if tongues, they will cease; if knowledge, it will be done away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part; but when the perfect comes, the partial will be done away. When I was a child, I used to speak like a child, think like a child, reason like a child; when I became a man, I did away with childish things. For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I will know fully just as I also have been fully known."*

The theory goes that prophecy and all the other gifts were given as temporary measures but that they are no longer needed now that we have the whole canon of scripture ("now that 'the perfect' has come", they say!). Here are some of the holes in this theory:—

a) When he had already given a gift of direct communication with his children, why should God withdraw that gift of prophecy, simply because they had managed to agree on a selection of documents which they were sure were divinely inspired? He didn't do that in Old Testament times, and the New Testament gives no indication that prophecy is a temporary arrangement, other than as described in the next two points.

b) Paul writes that 'prophecy will be done away' at a future time, and also talks about knowledge being done away, apparently at the same time. Has knowledge disappeared? I don't think so!

c) If we take the verse in context and not just as an isolated statement, we can see that Paul is saying that the various gifts (and knowledge as well!) will be done away with at a future time 'when the perfect comes', and that time will be when we shall actually see the Lord face to face and stop seeing him dimly, as if in an imperfect mirror.<sup>1</sup> Gifts and 'knowledge' will be superfluous: we shall know fully, just as we are already fully known. (See more of this amazing process in **2 Corinthians 3:18** and **1 John 3:2**, plus **Romans 8:29** and **Philippians 3:21**.)

d) **1 Thessalonians 5:19-22** : *"Do not quench the Spirit; do not despise prophetic utterances. But examine everything; hold fast to that which is good; abstain from every form of evil."* An irrelevant instruction if prophecy no longer exists – and we happily embrace the instructions in the preceding verses!

e) Many years after Paul wrote, the apostle John heard these words from one of the angels who was explaining to him things that he saw in the 'Revelation of Jesus Christ': *"the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy"* (**Revelation 19:10**). Evidently, the spirit of prophecy was still needed in order to preserve the testimony of Jesus (see also **Revelation 1:2,9, 12:17, 20:4**). No reason to stop today!

f) The Lord Jesus himself spoke of 'false Christs and false prophets' arising in the last days and leading people astray (**Matthew 24:11, 24, Mark 13:22**). If there were no real Christ, there would be no false ones – no-one would be stupid enough to pretend to be him. Equally, if there were no possibility of there being real prophets, nobody would claim to be one. Have you ever been offered a fake £3 note? Of course not, because there are no

<sup>1</sup> From ancient times, mirrors had been made of highly polished metal or even stone, so the image was far from perfect. Although glass itself had been invented in Egypt and Mesopotamia in about 3500 BC, the Greek word for glass is not used in any Bible references to mirrors. Modern (silvered glass) mirrors were invented about AD 1835.

genuine ones to imitate.

2) The second way in which NT-style prophecy is watered down can be summed up in the statement that “the difference between teaching and prophesying is not obvious”, and similar words to that effect. This approach effectively equates all sound Bible-based teaching with prophecy, and therefore tries to claim that every NT reference to ‘prophecy’ actually means ‘teaching’, especially perhaps in **1 Corinthians 14**. To be blunt, I think this is a ‘fudge’, for several reasons:–

a) In the absence of many people in the Church being prepared to stick their necks out and say ‘thus says the Lord’, perhaps it tries to give us a reassuring answer to the question ‘Is prophecy still active in the Church?’ Is such reassurance valid?

b) The other side of that same coin is that it means that it gives us some justification to labelling gifted teachers as ‘prophets’. In one way, I don’t argue with that, because proper teaching needs the impetus of the Holy Spirit’s inspiration in order to be effective in our lives, and that usually means that there is at least an element of ‘thus says the Lord’ as fresh teaching brings us fresh revelation. But that does not mean that they are the same as NT prophets! By all means, let teachers teach and even say ‘thus says the Lord’ if they consider it appropriate. The rest of us then need to follow Paul’s directions and judge what is said.<sup>1</sup> Then we will be better able to assess whether they are prophesying, and give them due recognition if appropriate.

c) I don’t see the NT writers equating teaching with prophecy.

d) Equating teaching with prophecy brings confusion when we look into what Paul said about the roles of women in the Church. He was clear that it was wrong for women to teach men but nonetheless encouraged them to prophesy in the open meeting, where both men and women were present. He evidently did **not** equate the two (see below).

Yes, the Lord has designed prophecy to continue in the Church, but it is not the same as teaching and/or Bible exposition! Certainly, a real prophetic insight brings valuable light to Bible teaching, but it is not necessarily the same as ‘thus says the Lord’. Let’s have both!

## Teaching

The Greek word *didaskō* means ‘to cause to learn’, a process that warms the heart of every true teacher in any context, not only in the Church. If no real learning takes place, just standing up (or sitting down in the Jewish tradition) and spouting forth truth and knowledge is simply a waste of everyone’s time, energy and attention. Anyone who has ever tried to share any teaching knows only too well the glassy eyes and apparently vacant expressions of those who may be listening but don’t seem to be taking anything in – although sometimes appearances are deceptive! The teacher’s eyes quickly latch on to the faces of those who are visibly responding to his words, and he longs to know that they are not just responding in the moment but will take away with them the seeds of understanding that he has been able to share – and see them begin to grow and develop in their own lives. The apostle John had the same delight as he heard reports of results in practice (**3 John 1:3-4**).

For me, the most valuable teaching always brings **light**. There may be truth that I have ‘known’ for ages, maybe for several years, and then someone speaks or writes and opens it up and I see it as I have not seen it before: it lives! Or it may be something completely fresh that unlocks truth that I have never even glimpsed before. **Psalms 119:130** and **Ephesians 5:13** say the same thing. This is the same ‘prophetic edge’ to teaching which we looked at under ‘prophecy’. Not quite the same as ‘thus says the Lord’, but with a very

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<sup>1</sup> **1 Corinthians 14:29**

real sense of the Holy Spirit bringing true enlightenment.

It seems to be no coincidence that the commonest word for 'know' in the NT is *oida* – 'to have seen or perceived'. The other two are *ginōskō* and *epiginōskō* and the difference between them is significant. *Ginōskō* usually seems to mean 'knowing' in the sense of having the information. *Epiginōskō* goes one step further and recognises the information, making it more personally relevant.<sup>1</sup> There are two related words, *gnōsis* and *epignōsis*, which mean 'knowledge' and 'recognition' respectively. *Epignōsis* is sometimes translated as 'real' or 'true' knowledge – much more than just having the information – even 100% correct information – in your head.<sup>2</sup> For example, Peter makes good use of both of these words (and *oida*) in the first chapter of his second letter:– *epignōsis* in **2 Peter 1:1,2 & 8**, *gnōsis* in **v.5 & 6**, *oida* in **v.12 & 14**.

As another illustration of the difference between 'knowing' and 'recognising', *ginōskō* and *epiginōskō*, let's look again at that passage from **1 Corinthians 13**:–

*"Love never fails; but if prophecies, they will be done away; if tongues, they will cease; if knowledge (gnōsis), it will be done away. For we know (ginōskō) in part and we prophesy in part; but when the perfect comes, the partial will be done away. When I was a child, I used to speak like a child, think like a child, reason like a child; when I became a man, I did away with childish things. For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know (ginōskō) in part, but then I will know fully (epiginōskō) just as I also have been fully known (epiginōskō)."*

Why all this concern with 'knowing'? Simply because real spiritual knowledge (*epignōsis*) is the desired outcome from teaching and learning, and we want to have teaching which is genuinely valuable, because there are dangers with the wrong sort of knowing.

The passages that we have looked at in **2 Peter 1** and **1 Corinthians 13** should reassure us that knowledge is valuable, but they also warn us that it is not the total answer. Paul's letters are full of teaching, but still he sounds this warning: "Knowledge (*gnōsis*) inflates, but love builds up" (**1 Corinthians 8:1**), and warns against the possibility of "always learning and never coming to a recognition (*epignōsis*) of the truth" (**2 Timothy 3:7**).

In **1 Corinthians 2**, Paul reveals the underlying process of that 'recognition' or 'true knowledge' which he longs to see as a result of his teaching. He refuses to use 'persuasive words of wisdom' (**v.4**), but he does 'speak wisdom among those who are mature' (**v.6**). He makes it very clear that it is the Holy Spirit himself who reveals the 'things of God' and that Paul and his apostolic companions speak those truths in words taught by the same Spirit:– *"Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may know the things freely given to us by God, which things we also speak, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit, combining spiritual with spiritual"* (**v.12-13**). Real teaching!

As we have just seen from Paul's example, teaching needs to come with the revelation and authority of the Holy Spirit. It is very definitely **not** merely passing on correct information in such a way that it can be memorised and repeated in any kind of formula! This is a high requirement and it is not surprising that teachers can expect to be judged with a higher level of judgment (**James 3:1**).

<sup>1</sup> In the NT, *oida* is used 335 times, *ginōskō* 225 times, and *epiginōskō* 48 times.

<sup>2</sup> The Greek *epi* means 'over', 'above' or 'on top of' – so maybe *epiginōskō* is 'knowing above knowing'?

When Jesus taught, he taught with authority, and it was noticed. See **Mark 1:22, Matthew 7:29**. What he said was not like the teaching of the scribes, who just repeated the ‘correct’ teaching but with no personal insight or experience. Jesus called the scribes and Pharisees ‘blind guides leading the blind’ (**Matthew 15:14, 23:16, 24**). They had not seen anything, could not see anything, and so were experts in leading other people to fall straight into a ditch! When speaking with Nicodemus, Jesus said: “Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know and testify of what we have seen, and you do not accept our testimony” (**John 3:11**). When Jesus says ‘we’ here, I think he probably means both himself and John the Baptist. They both spoke with authority, John because he passed on what had been revealed to him, and Jesus because he only did what he saw his Father doing (**John 5:19**).

The fundamental authority of any teaching is not vested in the teacher himself, but in the truth and accuracy of the contents, and especially in the extent to which the Holy Spirit can use that teaching to bring eye-opening revelation and therefore be the means of genuine spiritual progress in those who receive it. And yet, despite the apparent contradiction, true teaching cannot be delivered by someone simply taking hold of information and passing it on, however accurately. The teacher needs to have tasted the reality of the truth that is passed on, otherwise there is a very real danger of producing another generation of ‘Pharisees’ who, as has been said, were ‘dead right’. The Pharisees were pretty much doctrinally right, but they were spiritually dead. Someone who has flawless doctrine but no spiritual life is in much more danger than someone with incorrect or incomplete doctrine but who is learning to hear and respond to the voice of the Holy Spirit. Jesus and Paul both had things to say about this!<sup>1</sup> Anyone attempting to teach in the church without the true enlightenment of the Holy Spirit in their own experience is not merely ineffective but also passing on the real peril of lifeless ‘truth’ and endangering the spiritual progress of those who follow their ‘teaching’.

Yes, anyone endeavouring to teach in the church is taking on a big responsibility, because the lives of fellow believers will be deeply affected if they follow the teaching they receive. No wonder James warned of the higher level of judgment!

As is obvious from looking at authority in teaching, there is a hint of ‘leadership’ built into it. On the one hand, Paul advocates that overseers and ‘the Lord’s bond-servant’ (i.e. Timothy, to whom he is writing) should be ‘able to teach’<sup>2</sup>, but that does not mean that all who are able to teach are necessarily elders/overseers in the local church. Authority in teaching is not the same as ability to function properly as an elder/overseer, although ideally the two roles will be combined in at least some individuals.

All of which leads us naturally on to a consideration of leadership in the local church . . .

## Leadership

There is a serious warning from the Lord himself for anyone who thinks that they may possibly be a teacher or a leader in their own right. Jesus said, *“do not be called Rabbi; for One is your Teacher, and you are all brothers. Do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, he who is in the heavens. Do not be called leaders; for One is your Leader, that is, the Christ”* (**Matthew 23:10**).

When we think of leaders and leadership, we tend to think of structure and organisation. Classically, that always used to be a hierarchy, with one person (king, queen, emperor or

<sup>1</sup> **John 5:39-40, 2 Timothy 3:5**

<sup>2</sup> **1 Timothy 3:2, 2 Timothy 2:24**

dictator) at 'the top of the tree', with successive layers of lesser authorities beneath them. The same pattern has usually been adopted in both businesses and society in general. More recently, there has been a trend towards 'flatter' organisation with less emphasis on the 'boss and employee' relationship and more on the idea of 'colleagues'.

Jesus took it much further! He told his disciples that they were all brothers and said that whoever wanted to be great among them should make himself the servant of all, just as he had come as a servant.<sup>1</sup>

So, in many ways, we are not looking at 'leadership' in the Church so much as looking at 'ways of serving' – which brings us back to *diakonia* !

We have already looked at those described as 'servants' of the church (*diakonos*, sometimes translated as 'deacon') and have seen that there is no leadership role for them in the New Testament, neither stated nor implied.

The nearest we can find to 'leaders' in New Testament local churches are described by two words, which clearly show two important aspects of their responsibilities, 'elders' (*presbuteroi*) and 'overseers' (*episkopoi*). Confusingly, *episkopoi* has often been translated as 'bishops', a word now used to describe non-local people with senior rank in a hierarchical religious organisation – nothing like the Church!

The Greek word *presbuteros* (plural *presbuteroi*) simply means an older man, with the understanding that seniority in years often brings wisdom, so hopefully a *presbuteros* would be the right sort of person to offer advice and guidance. It may not be the case in 21<sup>st</sup> century Western culture, but many (perhaps most) older cultures respected the wisdom of the 'village elders' or their equivalent, and many non-Western cultures still do.

The word *episkopos* (plural *episkopoi*) literally means 'one who looks over', and our English words 'supervisor' (from a Latin base) and 'overseer' mean exactly the same. We are familiar with the roles of supervisors in our daily lives, whether they are overseeing an office, a building site or anything else. They may also have specific personal skills and functions in their workplaces, but their primary role is to make sure that the work gets done according to the plan and design of the proprietor – not to do it all themselves! If there is no workforce team, there is no need for a supervisor. And an *episkopos* in a NT local church was exactly that, in the local church, one of the group of 'elders' / 'overseers', not some remote official!

The parallels in the local church are obvious. If we look at the NT references to 'elders' and 'overseers' with understanding of the basic meanings of these words, we are less likely to get confused. And, as we start to look at this question, I would really recommend that we do not allow ourselves to try to 'fit in' any particular structure that we may be part of, but rather take a step back and try to get a basic understanding of how local churches and their leadership functioned in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century. Once we have taken that pace back and looked **honestly** at what we can see in the New Testament, then (and only then) we should be much better placed to see how we can move forwards together.

Changes will probably be needed, but not change for change's sake, nor the adoption of any sort of ready-made 'system' that we may be able to see operating in other fellowships. This is not a case of trying to win over others to our own interpretation, but rather of discovering together – as best we can – how the Lord has designed for us to function together in fellowship.

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<sup>1</sup> **Matthew 20:26, 23:11, Mark 9:35, 10:43, Luke 22:26,27, John 13:12-17.**

There are very many references to the word *presbuteros* in the NT and most of them actually refer to the Jewish elders who clashed with the Lord Jesus and the apostles on numerous occasions. But there are significant passages concerning both elders and overseers in the local churches, so let's look at them:

There were 'elders' in the church in Jerusalem from early days, and they were not necessarily the 11 or 12 original apostles, as they are referred to separately, as 'the apostles and elders'. Evidently not the same people. That's interesting; I think I had always assumed that the 11 (or 12) would have been the only leaders there at the time. Perhaps the apostles were following their calling as 'sent ones', travelling outside the city, and left the guiding and overseeing of the local church to the elders? How were they chosen? We are not told. (**Acts 11:30, 15:2, 4 & 6, 15:22-23, 16:4, 21:18**)

Paul and Barnabas appointed elders/overseers in the churches where they had seen people come to faith in Jesus (**Acts 14:23, 20:17 & 28, Philippians 1:1**).

Paul gave instructions to Timothy and Titus about the need for, and qualifications of, elders/overseers in every local church (**1 Timothy 3:1-7, 5:17,19, Titus 1:5-11**).

James expected there to be elders in the local church to whom people could turn if they were unwell (**James 5:14-15**).

Peter encouraged elders to 'shepherd the flock' and 'exercise oversight' (*episkopeō*), and the younger men to 'be subject' to them (**1 Peter 5:1-5**). **Hebrews 12:5** uses the same word *episkopeō* but it's translated as 'see to it that . . .'

John refers to himself as 'the elder', not specifically saying whether he was one of a number of elders in a local church. He may have simply meant that he was an old man; the word is the same. He reputedly lived to be nearly 100 years old (**2 John 1:1, 3 John 1:1**). Peter also refers to himself as a 'fellow elder' (**1 Peter 5:1**).

**In all these cases (except John and Peter) elders/overseers are always in the plural; never just one man in leadership.**

And yes, all these elders and overseers are men, not women, which leads us on to an important 'side issue' when considering leadership in the local church . . .

### **Women in Church Leadership?**

As background to this question, I started to write a few paragraphs about man-woman relationships in the Church, which then became too lengthy to include in this present study, so I have produced those notes separately.<sup>1</sup> I believe that the Bible teaches a 'divine order', in which the husband is the head of the wife, just as Christ is the head of the Church.<sup>2</sup>

If all believers already had this same understanding, there would be no need for much discussion, and certainly not for my separate study notes! We would not need much 'introduction' to the question of whether women have a role in local church leadership! But there has been much discussion and confusion, especially in recent years, along with a very real pressure for local congregations to 'modernise' and accept the norms of present-day society. Any suggestion that women should not be in church leadership is often routinely viewed as 'sexist' and therefore automatically wrong. We need to look into the question carefully to find a good scriptural basis for an understanding of our

<sup>1</sup>'Gender Equality – ?' from [www.justonecandle.uk](http://www.justonecandle.uk)

<sup>2</sup> **Ephesians 5:22-33**

husband-wife relationships, before we look at specific instructions regarding leadership and teaching.

Both elders/overseers and teachers carry a level of responsibility and authority in what they do. As we have already seen, the overseer needs to be able to give direction and, if necessary, correction, and the teacher needs to give clear, scriptural and Holy-Spirit-based instruction. In both cases, the authority which these men have springs from their own practical and spiritual experience walking with the Lord. Their knowledge of truth and how to live in Christ has been forged in real life.

So, the question is really to find those areas of church life together in which women can function freely without upsetting the divine order of ‘arranging themselves under’ the functional authority which is given to men, and specifically under their own husbands if they are married. (Without going into further discussion, it seems clear that single women come under the authority of their fathers when they live at home.)

Paul says *“I do not allow a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man, but to remain quiet.”*<sup>1</sup> Some people have interpreted this to mean that Paul thinks that women have nothing to contribute, but this is far from the truth. We have already seen that he encourages women to take part in the meetings of the local church by praying and prophesying, and he actively encourages older women to teach their younger sisters in Christ.<sup>2</sup> The key phrase in this verse is ‘over a man’, and it is his understanding of the ‘divine order’ in male-female relationships which drives this instruction.

I believe that a major cause of objection to Paul’s approach is the conflation of ‘ministry’ with ‘leadership’ and/or ‘authority’. He is very clear that women are free to take part in any aspect of ‘church life’ except anything that entails exercising authority over men. Unlike some people today, Paul does not equate prophecy with teaching, and so draws the distinction between the two.

Prophecy (as we have seen) consists in essence of someone sharing what they believe God is saying in the moment – ‘Thus says the Lord’ – and there is a responsibility on the rest of the congregation to judge and assess the validity of the ‘prophecy’. It has no intrinsic authority unless verified, and the person delivering the prophecy has no personal authority either. Any authority rests entirely with the word from the Lord; the prophet is simply a mouthpiece.

We could argue that teaching is also subject to verification. If we believe that any teaching we receive is wrong, we have a perfect right to reject it. Nonetheless, teaching still carries a level of authority, because instruction is being given in exposition and application of Biblical truth. The teacher is more involved in the word that he brings than the prophet is in his or her ‘word’. Of course the prophet is much more than a ‘recorded announcement’ passing on the Lord’s words, but the prime responsibility is to pass on those words as accurately as possible.

As we have seen, there is tremendous value when teaching carries an element of ‘thus says the Lord’, but still the words have come through the teacher’s own thought processes and the teacher cannot stand back and just say ‘this is what the Lord said’. He needs to open out the word and make it as intelligible as possible, and this process carries its own level of authority and responsibility. For a woman to do this would place her in some level

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<sup>1</sup> **1 Timothy 2:12**

<sup>2</sup> **Titus 2:3-4**

of authority over both women and men in the church and, especially if her own husband is among the listeners, would upset the divine order of 'arranging herself under' her husband.

What about female pastors? It was consideration of this possibility that triggered my contribution to the original discussion which I mentioned at the start of this study.

There seem to be two key factors at play here, pulling in opposite directions. The first is that pastoral care is something that comes naturally to many women, perhaps more than to many men. The ability to get alongside someone, especially when they are going through a tough time, and to express care, sympathy and often simple practical support, seems like an extension of the maternal instinct, and we can probably all think of specific women we have known who have excelled in this sort of care, often 'below the radar', unrecognised and often unseen.

The second factor, apparently pulling the other way, is that the title of 'pastor' is often given to the official leader in a local church, usually to just one person. As we have seen, churches in the New Testament had groups of elders, not a single person carrying all the leadership responsibility, so the idea of 'one person leadership' in the local church is alien, before we even get to the question of 'female pastors'! Then we need to be clear that 'pastor' means 'shepherd', one who exercises care, not necessarily in any sort of leadership position. It is a real bonus, of course, if elders can also exercise this pastoral care, and Peter draws attention to this responsibility in **1 Peter 5:1-4**. Note the instruction for elders not to 'lord it' over the others!

Much debate took place some years ago about 'the ordination of women', and it still rumbles on in some quarters. When asked for my opinion, I have always said that I disagree with it, mainly because of my objection to 'ordination', and only after that with regard to women in church leadership. 'Ordination' has its roots in the Old Testament, where a priest was ordained through a ceremony in order to stand between God and man. That is not applicable under the New Covenant. We have a great high priest in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have direct access to the Father and, in turn, we as his children stand as priests ourselves, between our Father and the world.

Strangely, denominations that do not designate people as 'priests' still follow the practice of ordination and, by doing so, perpetuate the idea of a separate priesthood, despite a nominal belief in the priesthood of all believers. They would protest, of course, that these ordained 'pastors', 'ministers' or 'clergy' are not really priests, but the reality is that they usually occupy a very similar position and function. Plus, of course, this is not an example of the plurality of elders which was evidently the NT norm.

### **In Closing . . .**

I have endeavoured to look at as many aspects as possible in this study of ministry, prophecy, leadership and teaching in the Church, but no study like this can ever be complete and it is very unlikely that all readers will agree with everything I have written. However, within those limitations I hope that the thoughts which I have shared in these pages will be useful as we consider these important aspects of our shared life in the Body of Christ. Please do not hesitate to contact me if any points need clarification or if you want to enter into positive discussion.

Dave Taylor   November 2025

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