

Wings

*“Those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength;
they shall mount up with wings like eagles.”
Isaiah 40:31*



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Bishops and Deacons

Church government in the New Testament is not a complicated concept. Our challenge is trying to study the subject without being prejudiced by a host of modern misconceptions and errors.

“Paul and Timothy, bondservants of Jesus Christ, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons” (Phil. 1:1).

“This is a faithful saying: If a man desires the position of a bishop, he desires a good work. . . . Likewise deacons must be reverent, not double-tongued, not given to much wine, not greedy for money” (1 Tim. 3:1, 8).

Together, these two passages neatly summarize everything we need to know about church government in the New Testament. The reference to bishops and deacons, in separate texts addressing two different congregations, provides clear evidence as to how the Lord wants His people to be organized and led.

A study of the terminology used in these and related passages clarifies the job descriptions of both positions. The word translated “bishop” has a distinctly non-religious background in Greek culture. A more literal translation would be “overseer,” someone who is responsible for managing workers under his supervision. Working as a team (always plural, never singular; see Ac. 14:23; Ac.

21:18), these men are the decision-makers in the congregation, the ones who guide and direct the activities of the group in keeping with the higher authority of Christ through the New Testament.

“Overseer” is just one of several labels these men wear. Study carefully Ac. 20:17-35 and 1 Pet. 5:1-4, and you’ll notice that they are also called “elders” (Greek: presbyters), whose work is to “shepherd” or “pastor” the flock. These additional labels reinforce the idea of men who, by reason of age and experience, have proven themselves to be models of wisdom and decorum—in other words, the ideal candidates for leadership in a group of people whose wildly different backgrounds can challenge even the best of leaders. That’s why the qualifications for these men (in 1 Tim. 3:1-7 and Tit. 1:5-9) set the bar so very high; the men who fill this role can make or break a congregation.

Like “bishop,” the word “deacon” carries a modern ecclesiastical connotation that did not exist in the original language. The word simply means “servant.” The deacons, in other words, are

the servants who assist the elders/bishops in executing their decisions in behalf of the congregation (“serve as deacons” in 1 Tim. 3:10 is literally one word, “serve”). Here, too, the qualifications for this office emphasize the trustworthy character essential for those who are entrusted with this work.

Notice that in all these passages, the preacher is conspicuously absent. The reason is simple: *The preacher is not the leader of the church.* The preacher is an independent voice of instruction, the “conscience” of the congregation, if you will. His preaching and teaching, if done correctly, should keep everyone, bishops, deacons, and saints, looking to God and His word for their direction.

Finally, the New Testament is completely silent about any higher offices linking local churches together. That silence screams loud and clear God’s intention that local churches operate independently of each other. A local church, with its bishops and deacons, can function fully on its own. Efforts to tie churches together risk the creation of bloated and overbearing bureaucracies.

– David King