

The Sacrament of Holy Orders
Addendum #1 New Testament Exegetical Issues
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There are several exegetical issues pertaining to ordination. Some of these issues have to do with the scriptural usage and understanding of the orders of Bishop, Presbyter, and Deacon. Other exegetical issues involve the role of women in the ministry of the church. These issues will be examined in this paper, which will also examine the Greek words associated with ordination.

The ICCEC recognizes the three orders of Bishop, Presbyter/Priest, and Deacon. These are three orders referenced in the New Testament but the usage and understanding of the early church was not the same as our current usage and understanding. For example, it is not clear exactly when the Greek word *epískopos*, as used in early Christian circles, passed from the generic meaning “overseer” or “guardian” to the specific meaning “bishop” as we now understand it. The former meaning is likely in Acts 20:28, where Paul is said to have described the elders of the church at Ephesus (Acts 20:17) as *epískopoi* of the flock, appointed by the Holy Spirit.¹ The pastoral connection is also found in 1 Pe 2:25, where Jesus is described as the shepherd and *epískopos* of our souls.

We find in the New Testament clear evidence of individuals who are appointed to a position very similar to that of the Apostles themselves, and exercise the Apostolic functions of authoritative teaching and ruling, and especially of the laying on of hands. Plainly both Timothy and Titus are occupying, in Ephesus and in Crete, the place that would naturally be taken by an Apostle. They are not merely rulers of a congregation like Epaphras or Archippus, but of the whole Christian Church in a large city or district. And they exercise the office not merely of deciding who are fit candidates for the office of ‘elder’ or ‘deacon,’ but of actually appointing men to these offices by the laying on of hands, and of ruling those who are already appointed, hearing and deciding charges brought against them, administering to them praise or rebuke.

Biblical exegesis requires sensitivity to the context of a passage. When Scripture is taken out of context, faulty conclusions and blurred perspectives result. Two matters impact this discussion significantly – the issues of literary context and cultural context. Each biblical writer directed his word to specific issues. The task of the biblical expositor is to determine the precise nature of those issues.

Overseers and Elders

From the Pastoral Epistles, 1Tim 3:1 indicates that the tradition of aspiring to the office of bishop (*episkopé*) was starting to be established. In Phil 1:1, St. Paul addresses *epískopoi* along with deacons. The meaning of “bishop” as we now understand it seems probable but this cannot be equated with the modern episcopacy. Counsel was clearly given on the types of persons suited

¹ The association of elders and exercising guardianship [from the verb *episkopéō*] is used in 1 Pe 5:1–2

for the office.² The guidelines given by St. Paul included exemplary personal, domestic, and organizational traits.

It has been sometimes held that the laying on of hands upon Saul and Barnabas at Antioch, already alluded to an appointment that was similar to the later Episcopal office which developed by the second century. While it is clear that bishops at that time were distinct from deacons, their relationship to presbyters or elders is more uncertain. The epistles to Timothy and Titus include material about elders that complements and overlaps their discussions of bishops.³ Certainly, by the time of Ignatius (early 2nd century) the order of bishop was being established in the church.⁴

In the churches founded by early Christian apostolic ministry teams there were charismatically endowed individuals who were being raised up and trained for the spiritual care of local Christian flocks. This plurality of shepherds or elders is referred to as “*presbuteroi*” (presbytery) in the New Testament. These elders were to exercise oversight over the churches. Their role was primarily an office of teaching, of adjudicating questions of right and wrong, and of providing pastoral oversight. They pass on the teaching they have received and commit it to others, who are to commit it to others again.⁵ Those to whom it is committed are likewise called presbyters or elders.⁶ The sacraments are under the supervision of this ordained ministry, but are not their personal prerogative. When the office of bishop becomes separated from that of elder in the 2nd century, the tasks of teaching, pastoral oversight and supervision of the sacraments are shared between the two offices. Presbyters, however, continued to have certain judicial duties, in restricting impenitent offenders from the Lord’s Table and certain ordaining duties, in assisting with the ordination of other elders.⁷

A clear distinction between the office of bishop and presbyter (elder) is seen in the letters of Ignatius, the bishop of Antioch. Written around A.D. 117, they testify to the emergence (at least in one geographical area) of what came to be called the episcopate. Churches began to have a bishop, who was assisted by several presbyters and deacons. Thus there was a threefold order of ordained ministry. The bishop was seen as the chief celebrant in worship, the chief pastor of the flock, and the chief administrator of the people of God. After the emergence of councils of

² 1 Tim 3:2–7; Tit 1:7–9

³ 1 Tim 5:17–22; Tit 1:5–6

⁴ Trenchard, W. C. (2000). *Bishop*. In D. N. Freedman, A. C. Myers, & A. B. Beck (Eds.), *Eerdmans dictionary of the Bible* (p. 190). W.B. Eerdmans.

⁵ As referenced in 1 Cor 11:23; 15:1, 3; 2 Thes 2:15; 3:6; 2 Tim 2:2; Presbyters are appointed by the laying on of hands (Acts 6:6; cf. 11:30; 1 Tim 4:14; 5:22; 2 Tim 1:6).

⁶ Acts 14:23; Tit. 1:5.

⁷ Beckwith, R. T. (1996). *Presbyter; Presbytery*. In D. R. W. Wood, I. H. Marshall, A. R. Millard, J. I. Packer, & D. J. Wiseman (Eds.), *New Bible dictionary* (3rd ed., pp. 954–955). InterVarsity Press.

bishops, as distinct from the local church presbytery, there came the afore-mentioned theology and application of apostolic succession. By A.D. 150 it was widely held that bishops were the chief guardians of the teachings of the church.

The emergence of the office of bishop as distinct from that of presbyter may be accounted for by pressures inside and outside the churches in the first century, pressures which necessitated leadership by one man in contrast to leadership by a group of presbyters. It is also possible to see this development as initiated by the original apostles toward the end of their ministries. This development helped to organize and preserve the teachings and traditions of the church and eventually led to the presbyters becoming identified as “priests” who served under the bishops.

Strictly speaking, the New Testament does not refer to early Christian ministers as “priests” (Greek *hiereis*) but as bishops and presbyters. Nevertheless, it is from this latter term that the English word “priest” is actually derived, primarily because of their priestly functions of administering the sacraments.⁸

Deacons

In addition to the Presbyterate and Episcopacy we recognize the Order of the Diaconate. It is generally felt that the origin of the office of deacon stems from the appointment and ordination by the Twelve of seven men to administer the daily food allotment (*diakonía*) to the Hellenistic Christian widows.⁹ The apostles declared that they could not be diverted from proclaiming the Word to waiting (*diakonéō*) on tables. The seven, who did much more than distribute food, pioneered the proclamation of the gospel among Hellenistic Jews and Gentiles (e.g., Acts 6:8–9; 8:26–38).¹⁰

The Greek word *diákonos* as used in early Christian circles passed from the generic meaning “servant” or “minister” to the specific meaning “deacon.” The former meaning is obvious in the Gospels (Mt 20:26; 22:13; 23:11; Mk 9:35; 10:43) where it is used for “waiters at table”.¹¹ cf. Jn 2:5, 9; Acts 6:2). Paul uses the word metaphorically in various ways to describe himself or other Christians.¹²

⁸ Hahn, S., ed. (2009). *In Roman Catholic Bible Dictionary* (pp. 729–730). Doubleday. Concerning the Catechism of the Roman Catholic Church

⁹ Acts 6:1–6; It should be noted that the word *diákonos* is not actually used here.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Also see Jn 2:5, 9 and Acts 6:2.

¹² This term is used as servant or minister (1 Cor 3:5; Eph 6:21; Col 4:7); servant of the gospel (Eph 3:7; Col 1:23); servant of the church (Col 1:25); servant of the new covenant (2 Cor 3:6); servant of God (6:4); servant of Christ (11:23; Col 1:7; cf. Jn 12:26; 1 Tim 4:6); and servant of righteousness (2 Cor 11:15). Paul also refers to Christ as a servant (Rom 15:8; cf. Gal 2:17).

With reference to one who holds a specific office in the church, the word *diakonos* (“deacon”) occurs in only two passages in the New Testament: Phil 1:1 and 1 Tim 3:8, 12. Phil 1:1 contains Paul’s greetings to the “bishops and deacons.” While no activities are specified here, they are mentioned along with the bishop.¹³

In 1 Tim 3:1–13, St. Paul says that the “deacons” must be men of disciplined character and moral repute (vv. 8–9); they must qualify for the office by being “proved worthy” (v. 10); and they must be in control of their households (v. 12). They were not to be “double-tongued,” nor were they to be “greedy of filthy lucre” (v. 8). Deacons were to be first “proved,” and Timothy was certainly expected to be able to approve those whom he appointed. The historical development of the office of deacon is linked with that of bishop to whom they serve.

Elsewhere in the New Testament St. Paul uses the term minister to denote his fellow workers in the gospel ministry—of Timothy (1 Thess 3:2), Tychicus (Col 4:7), and Epaphras (Col 1:7). St. Paul’s own ministry (1 Cor 3:5; 2 Cor 3:6; 6:4; 11:15) and the ministry of Christ (Rom 15:8) are also so designated. These latter references indicate that the term was widely used in contexts other than Holy Orders.¹⁴

Issues Pertaining to the Ministry of Women

When discussing issues pertaining to the role of women in the Church, context becomes extremely important. An example of the importance of correct contextual analysis occurs in Gal 3:28. In explaining the meaning of justification, Paul said that in Christ there is “neither Jew nor Gentile, slave or free, male or female.” The outstanding social characteristic of Christianity is that ethnic (“Jew nor Greek”), economic (“bond nor free”), and gender (“male nor female”) distinctions have no bearing on salvation, nor upon equal standing among all Christians. It is obvious that the context of the statement is its explanation of the impact of justification. This is a soteriological statement: it speaks to the doctrine of salvation. The teaching is that all believers, without regard to social distinctions, have equal access to God through Christ, and consequently, are to be unified in the Body of Christ.

Paul’s larger eschatological perspective that in Christ God’s act of new creation has begun. “For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation” (Gal 6.1). In the old order, circumcision counted for a great deal in one’s relationship to God—God’s covenant was with Israel, which gave them great privileges not shared by those outside Israel (cf. Rom 3.1-2; 9.4-5). Now, in Christ, the intimacy with God to which those privileges bore witness can be experienced by both Jew and Gentile. One is still either a Jew or a Gentile, but the significance of that identity has been radically transformed.

¹³ Dunnett, W. M., & Johnson, A. F. (1975). *Deacon*. In C. F. Pfeiffer, H. F. Vos, & J. Rea (Eds.), *The Wycliffe Bible Encyclopedia*. Moody Press.

¹⁴ Ibid

In Gal 3.28 Paul is making the same point about other distinctions among people. The contrasting pairs stand for any privileged class over against an unprivileged class. Rich/poor, slave/free, Jew/Greek, male/female—each pair illustrates the basic contrast high status/low status. What Gal 3.28 is saying is that persons of both high and low position can be brought together in the Church. In context Paul is arguing for, “the admission of Gentiles, law-free, into the Church,” not the overthrow of the social order itself. This radical change that has come in Christ led to very countercultural patterns of life in the early Church, but it did not lead to elimination of all role distinctions and the structures of society and does not authorize the sacramental ordination of women as deacons, priests, or bishops.

Several years after the writing of the Epistle to the Galatians, Paul wrote to both Timothy and Titus, giving them pastoral instructions about how the church is to be organized. Both the books of 1 Tim and Tit provide clearly for a hierarchical approach to church order in which men rather than women were to occupy that role. The texts of Scripture teach us that in God’s order men serve in headship in the family and in the Church. The biblical model for family roles supports that stance as well. It is not a matter of inferiority or worth, for all persons are of equal worth, reflecting the equality and diversity of the Godhead. It is matter of function.

Some have pointed to Gal 3:28 as justification for women serving as pastors. However, it is a misuse of Scripture to produce ecclesiastical patterns from soteriological passages. While St. Paul clearly affirms the equality of men and women in salvation, he just as clearly affirms the priority of men in church leadership. There is no conflict. The contextual issue is crucial for an accurate exposition in this, as in all areas. Readers must exercise great care, therefore, to determine the nature of the issue under discussion in order to understand and apply the message relevantly today.

Deaconesses

No formal recognition of deaconesses as an institution of consecrated or ordained women aiding the clergy is to be found in the New Testament. When mention is made in the church tradition of the ordination of deaconesses, this is to be understood not of ordination properly so called, but of a special benediction in virtue of which, in convents of women, those receiving it were empowered to read homilies or gospels before the community.¹⁵

There is indeed the mention of Phebe (Rom 16:1), who is called *diakonos*, but this may simply mean, as the Vulgate renders it, that she was “in the ministry (i.e. service) of the Church”, without implying any official ordained status. Again, it is not improbable that the “widows” who are spoken of at large in 1 Tim 5:3–10, may really have been deaconesses, as elderly widows had

¹⁵ Addis, W. E., & Arnold, T. (1887). In *A Catholic Dictionary* (Sixth Edition, With Additions, p. 629). The Roman Catholic Publication Society Co.

a role in the early church.¹⁶ That some such functionaries were appointed at an early date seems probable from Pliny's letter to Trajan concerning the Christians of Bithynia (Ep. X, 97, AD 112). There can be no question that before the middle of the fourth century women were permitted to exercise certain definite functions in the Church and were known by the special name of diakonoi or diakonissai. However, these ministries were different, in terms of both role and authority, from those of the ordained male clergy. The Sacrament of Order is the sacrament by which grace and spiritual power for the discharge of ecclesiastical offices are imparted to men rather than women.

Greek Words Associated with Ordination

Towards the end of the second century there are found in use the words *ordo* and *clerus*, from which of course are derived orders and clergy. When people in a community responded to the Gospel churches were established and local presbyters, deacons, and bishops were "ordained" to carry on the work of the ministry. A study of the five Greek words that are translated ordained, will give us a more clear understanding of the authority and responsibilities of these ordained elders and bishops.¹⁷

1. In Tit 1:5, Acts 6:3, Heb 2:7, and Mt 24:45, the term *Kathistemi* is used. This word means "to appoint as a ruler" over the congregation. This term speaks of a high level of administrative authority.

2. In Mk 3:14, Jesus ordained the original twelve apostles. The word used here is *poieo*, which means to make, commit, do, cause, and keep. This indicates a particular covenant relationship exists between the maker and the recipient.

3. *Tithemy*, is used in many passages associated with one being made or appointed a minister. This word means to make, appoint, lay something down, set, and put someone into a ministry or office. This term denotes a passing on of ministry from one person or group to another and a delegation of spiritual authority. It also indicates a responsibility to the ministry to which the person is ordained.

4. In Acts 14:23 and 2 Cor 8:19, *cheirotoneo* is used. This word means to ordain or to choose. This indicates that those ordained were chosen from the congregation by the Apostolic Ministry Team, based upon some criteria. This fits in with the requirements that were set for elders and bishops, who had to morally and spiritually live above reproach.

5. *Ginomai* is used in Acts 1:22 of those who would "witness with us of His resurrection." This word means to be done, or to be made. This shows that the elders and

¹⁶ Most Roman Catholic scholars incline to the view that it is not always possible to draw a clear distinction in the early Church between deaconesses and widows (*cherai*). The *Didascalia*, *Apostolic Constitutions* and kindred documents undoubtedly recognize them as separate classes and they prefer the deaconess to the widow in the duty of assisting the clergy, but how they assisted the clergy is unclear and seems to have varied from place to place.

¹⁷ Iverson, Dick, *Team Ministry*, Portland, Oregon: Bible Temple Publishing, 1984, p. 93.

bishops had a legal obligation concerning their testimony of Christ. That they were to be witnesses reveals their level of commitment since the word “witness” comes from a Greek word meaning to be a martyr. There is also an element of predestined purpose, revealed in this term. God has ordained that church leaders should be prepared (made or done) by Him.