

The Rulers of a Church of Christ (1846)

Note: This article is by W.B. Johnson, the first president of the Southern Baptist Convention. When he uses the term "Church of Christ" he is not referring to the present day denomination but rather any church that is Biblically-based and following Jesus Christ.

THE RULERS OF A CHURCH OF CHRIST

Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves, for they watch for your souls.

—Hebrews XIII: 17

In every well regulated society, rulers are necessary for the management of its affairs. The King in Zion has, therefore, provided such for his churches, whom he clothes with authority, and to whom he requires that obedience and respect be rendered. On all these points we have full instruction in his holy word, and to those portions of it which contain this instruction, I now invite your attention: "We beseech you, brethren, to know them which *labor among you*, and are *over you in the Lord*, and *admonish you*; and *to esteem them very highly in love for their work's sake*." 1 Thes. v:12, 13. "Remember them that have the *rule* over you, who have spoken unto you the word of God; whose faith follow, considering the end of their conversation; Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, and to day, and forever. *Obey them that have the rule* over you and *submit yourselves*; for they *watch for your souls*, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy and not with grief; for that is unprofitable for you. Salute all them that have the *rule* over you." Heb. xiii: 7, 17, 24.

These rulers are designated by various titles, in connection with the duties which they are to perform, as will be seen in the scriptures that follow: Paul and Barnabas "ordained them *elders* in every church." The messengers from Antioch were received of the church, and of the apostles and *elders*, at Jerusalem. "From Miletus, Paul sent to Ephesus, and called the *elders* of the church. And when they were come to him, he said to them, take heed to yourselves and to all the flock over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you *overseers, to feed*

the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood." Acts xiv: 23, and xv: 4, and xx: 17, 18, 28. "Let the *elders that rule well* be counted worthy of double honor, especially they who labor in the word and doctrine." 1 Tim. v: 17. "For this cause left I thee in Crete, that thou shouldst ordain *elders* in every city, as I had appointed thee; if any be blameless, the husband of one wife, having faithful children, not accused of riot, or unruly. For a *bishop* must be blameless as the steward of God." Titus i: 5, 6, 7. "The *elders* which are among you, I exhort, who am also an elder. *Feed* the flock of God, which is among you, taking the *oversight* thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind; neither as being *lords* over God's heritage, but being *ensamples* to the flock" 1 Pet.v: 1, 2, 3. Christ "gave some pastors." Eph. iv: 11. "Is any sick among you, let him call for the *elders* of the church; and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil, in the name of the Lord, and the prayer of faith shall save the sick." James v: 14, 15.

In a review of these scriptures, we have these points clearly made out:—

1. That over each church of Christ in the apostolic age, a plurality of rulers was ordained, who were designated by the terms *elder*, *bishop*, *overseer*, *pastor*, with authority in the government of the flock.
2. That this authority involved no *legislative* power or right, but that it was *ministerial and executive* only, and that, in its exercise, the rulers were not to lord it over God's heritage, but as ensamples to lead the flock to the performance of duty.
3. That the duties of these rulers consisted in taking heed generally to themselves and to the flock over the which the Holy Ghost had made them overseers; to feed the members with spiritual food; to watch for their souls, and to supervise the whole body.
4. That for the right discharge of these duties, there was a division of labor among them. Whilst all were *rulers*, some, in addition to the authority of office, *labored in the word and doctrine*, that is, *preached the gospel of Christ*.
5. That great responsibility rested on these rulers, for they watched for the souls of their flock, as they that must give account; and that in order to their successful discharge of so

- important a trust, the members of the flock were required to respect and obey them, and to afford them a liberal support.
6. That these rulers were all equal in rank and authority, no one having a preeminence over the rest. This satisfactorily appears from the fact, that the same qualifications were required in all, so that though some labored in word and doctrine, and others did not, the distinction between them was not in rank, but in the character of their service.
 7. That these *elders, pastors, bishops, overseers*, were made so by the Holy Ghost; that is, he gave them, in accordance with the will of Christ, their qualifications, by which they were recognized and appointed to the solemn charge by their brethren.
 8. That the members of the flock were required to follow, *imitate*, the faith of their rulers, in due consideration of the end of their conversation, Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, to-day, and forever.

For the better understanding of the terms *elder, pastor, bishop, overseer*, as having the same import in the above scriptures, I observe, that the terms *bishop* and *overseer*, are translations of the term *episkopos* in Greek. And as this term is rendered in the passages from Timothy and Titus by the word *bishop*, it would have been more proper to have rendered it by the same word in Acts xx: 28, thus, "over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you *bishops*." Now all these terms are applied interchangeably to the office of ruler, as the same qualifications are required in all. The appropriateness of these terms in designating the office of the rulers, appears from their distinctive meaning. The Greek term for *elder* is *presbuteros*, which signifies one advanced in years, who is supposed to have *dignity* and *experience*. *Episkopos* is softened from the Saxon *bichop*, by dropping the *c*, and reads *bishop* in our language, which imports *overseer*. *Pastor* is the Latin for shepherd, a term that denotes one who has *charge of a flock*, to the feeding and management of which he is specially devoted. Of all these terms I should prefer *overseer*, if it were not that it has been applied to worldly avocations in such manner, as to lessen its dignity in its application to a spiritual ruler. *Bishop*, perhaps, is on the whole to be preferred, as it is rather more a term of office than the term *elder*, and includes what is meant by the term *overseer*.

It is worthy of particular attention, that each church had a plurality of elders, and that although there was a difference in their respective department of service, there was a perfect equality of rank among them. Let us now endeavor to ascertain the respective departments of service assigned to the members of the bishopric.

In the solemn address which the apostle made to the Ephesians elders, *bishops*, he says, "take heed unto yourselves and to all the flock over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, *bishops*, to *feed the church of God*, which he hath purchased with his own blood. Therefore watch and remember, that by the space of three years, I ceased not to *warn* every one of you night and day with tears." To the Hebrews, he thus writes, "remember them which have the *rule over you, who have spoken to you the word of God.*" "*Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves:* for they WATCH FOR YOUR SOULS, as they that must give account." And the address to the same elders by Peter, is in perfect accordance with that of his "beloved brother Paul;" "*Feed the flock of God*, which is among you, taking the *oversight thereof*, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind; neither as being lords over God's heritage, but as being ensamples to the flock." "Let the *elders that rule well*, be counted worthy of double honor, especially they who *labor in the word and doctrine.*" The duties of these rulers are evidently various. Governing, not as lords, but as ensamples; *feeding*, which implies speaking the word of the Lord, from the experience of its power; *watching for souls*, warning and admonishing them; *laboring in word and doctrine*, by preaching the word, being instant in season, out of season; *taking heed unto themselves and to all the flock*. These seem to be the prominent duties of the bishopric—duties which render necessary the qualifications that are required in the epistles to Timothy and Titus; all which are fully detailed in the following scriptures: "A bishop must be blameless, the husband of one wife, vigilant, sober, of good behavior, given to hospitality, apt to teach; not given to wine, no striker, not greedy of filthy lucre; but patient; not a brawler; not covetous; one that ruleth well his own house, having his children in subjection with all gravity; (for if a man know not how to rule his own house, how shall he take care of the church of God?) Not a novice, lest being lifted up with pride, he fall into the condemnation of the devil. Moreover, he must have a good report of them that are without, lest he fall into reproach, and the snare of the devil." 1 Tim.

iii: 2–7. These qualifications most obviously fit their possessors for the various and important duties of the bishopric. The particular department of service which each shall occupy, will be determined by the talent which he has for one or the other line of duty. For example, one of the bishops may have a particular talent for *presiding* over the body, for regulating its affairs by advice, admonition, rebuke. Let such an one be the presiding bishop. Another may have a particular capacity for teaching the flock by exposition of scripture and exhortation, and in visits to the members. Let this be *his* department. A third may be endowed with the talent for superintending a Sabbath school, directing the course of studies, gathering up children for the school, and alluring them to the reading of the scriptures and religious works. To this service, then, let *him* be devoted. And a fourth may be endowed with the gift of laboring in the word and doctrine, that is, of preaching the gospel of Christ. This one should give *himself* wholly to the ministry of the word. I mean not by the above view, to determine the number of bishop for each church at four, but simply to exhibit what services the bishops might respectively render to a church.

The importance and necessity of a bishopric for each church, embodying gifts for various services, is thus most obvious for the accomplishment of one of the great ends for which Christ came into the world, and for which, when he ascended up on high, he received gifts for men. This end is stated at large in the following passage from the epistle to the Ephesian church: "For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ; till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ; that we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive; but speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the Head, even Christ; from whom the whole body fitly joined together, and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love." Eph. iv: 12–16. This is the noble end for which "*apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers* were given."

A plurality in the bishopric is of great importance for mutual counsel and aid, that the government and edification of the flock may be promoted in the best manner. At stated meetings of the bishopric, the members would report their separate doings, and confer together upon the teachings of scripture, which they would bring forth to the church for its consideration and adoption. Such a body would constitute the proper council of advisers to the church collectively, and to the members individually. Interchangeably each would aid the other in his department, and when necessary, would unite in any one department. Oh, what a blessing would such a bishopric be to a church! But ah! where are we to find men, whose gifts fit them for composing such a bishopric? The answer is given in the passage above referred to. "When he ascended up on high, he led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men,—some apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers." To the ascended Redeemer and Head of the churches, must we go for these gifts. For he *will be enquired of for them*. The churches must desire them. They must understand this part of their divinely instituted order, and must earnestly wrestle with their Lord for the gifts that are necessary to carry it out.

They must be willing to do another thing. This is to afford these gifts a liberal support. The divine command is, "let the *elders that rule well*, be counted worthy of *double honor*, especially they that *labor in the word and doctrine*. For the scripture saith, thou shalt not muzzle the ox that treadeth out the corn. And the laborer is worthy of his hire." I Timothy v: 17, 18. The principle on which compensation is here required to the elders, is obviously correct. It is payment for work done, for service rendered. For "who goeth a warfare at his own charges? Who planteth a vineyard and eateth not of the fruit thereof? Or who feedeth a flock, and eateth not of the milk there-of?" The principle of compensation for service rendered, admits of graduation in the amount, according to the extent and quality of the labor performed. The duties of those elders who do not "labor in the word and doctrine," might be attended to by some, without interfering with their avocations in life, or by others in so small a degree, that a moderate compensation would be sufficient for the service done, whilst a larger remuneration would be necessary for those, who do "labor in the word and doctrine," since such should give themselves *wholly to the work*, in a profound study of the Bible, and in actual preaching "the truth as it is in Jesus."

Whilst a plurality of bishops is required for each church, the number is not fixed, for the obvious reason, that circumstances must necessarily determine what that number shall be. In a church where more than one cannot be obtained, that one may be appointed upon the principle, that as soon as another can be procured there shall be a plurality. And when, from the poverty and fewness of the members, it may be impracticable for them to afford a support to the ruler or rulers they may have, let the members faithfully do what they can, and let the rulers imitate the example of Paul, who "ministered with his hands to his necessities, and to them that were with him."

I have said above, that of all the terms by which the *rulers* of a church are designated, I would prefer "*overseer*," if it were not that it has been applied to worldly avocations in such a manner, as to lessen its dignity in its application to a spiritual ruler. *Bishop*, perhaps, is on the whole to be preferred, as it is rather more a term of office than the term *elder*, and includes what is meant by the term *overseer*. As we are familiar with the term *overseer*, in this country, and its import is embodied substantially in the word *bishop*, I shall now point out, in some particulars, the analogy between the offices of the spiritual, and the temporal overseer. The temporal overseer has the charge of a body of laborers. The spiritual overseer has the oversight of a church of spiritual laborers in the cause of God. The temporal overseer governs the laborers, not by the laws which he or they enact, but by those which the employer lays down. The spiritual overseer governs the church, not by the laws which *he* or the *members pass*, but by those, which the *chief Shepherd and Bishop* establishes. The temporal overseer receives the compensation for his services out of the produce of the laborers' work. The spiritual overseer receives his from the same source. The office of the temporal overseer is *executive* only, not legislative. Such is also the authority of office which the spiritual overseer holds. The complete code of laws for the church is contained in the *Bible*, and neither the church nor the overseer has any authority to abrogate, alter, or add to any part of this code. Should the church and her overseers so disagree in their understanding of this code, that they cannot continue together profitably, let them separate in love.

For the spiritual as for the temporal overseer, a support is required; and upon the obvious principle of *mutual obligation*. "Do ye not know," says Paul, "that they which minister about holy things, live of

the things of the temple and they which wait at the altar, are partakers with the altar? Even so hath the *Lord ordained*, that they which preach the gospel should live of the gospel" I Cor. ix: 13, 14. "Let him that is taught in the word, communicate unto him that teacheth, in all good things." Gal. vi: 6. And what can be more reasonable? As citizens we cheerfully pay our taxes for the support of government, that its officers may give themselves to the making and the maintenance of the laws; and thus, under God, secure the prosperity of the land. And why not give our money to support the rulers of the churches, which their great Head has appointed, not for the making, but the maintenance of the laws of his kingdom, and the advancement of the prosperity of his people? We will give to overseers of our temporal property, full compensation for managing our temporal business; and why should not the churches exercise equal justice in compensating their spiritual overseers, to whose management the Holy Ghost has committed *them and their affairs*? We will spend large sums in splendid habitations, furniture, equipage, costly entertainments for carnal pleasure, all in conformity to this world; why not spend equal sums in conformity to the will of God, by sustaining the ministry of the word, the full bishopric of the churches, and thus lay up for ourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through, nor steal.

That we should not think, in thus complying with our duty, we have done a meritorious deed, the apostle asks, "if we have sown unto you *spiritual* things, is it a great thing if we shall reap your *carnal* things?" Does a man deserve any credit, who pays another a just price for the labor which that other has done for him? Christians are taught to say, when they have done all these things which are commanded them, "we are unprofitable servants; we have done that which was our duty to do." Oh! may the churches wake up to the importance of the bishopric, and the duty of its support.