

# Philippians 1:1 and Offices in the Church

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Speak Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons: (Philippians 1:1)<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

Some scholars argue that Paul didn't write the pastoral epistles (1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus). One reason they give for saying this is that this group of letters refer to people holding the offices of deacon, elder, and overseer. The argument is that such offices come later, not during Paul's lifetime. Did they?

Below I hope to show that there is ample evidence for the existence of deacons, elders, and overseers (later known as bishops) in the church, all during Paul's lifetime. In fact there were deacons prior to Paul's conversion (in Acts 6) and Paul and Barnabas chose elders on their very first missionary journey, as they traveled through Asia Minor.

## Early Church Offices

### Deacons

*The seven deacons.* As little as three years after Christ's death on the cross the church gathered to consider what to do about the widows among them and other members who needed special help. The story is recorded in Acts 6.

In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. <sup>2</sup> So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. <sup>3</sup> Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them <sup>4</sup> and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word." <sup>5</sup> This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. <sup>6</sup> They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them. (Acts 6:1-6)

Notice that one of these men was Stephen, who figures prominently in the next chapter. For whatever reason, the word "deacon" is not used here, but the seven men selected for

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special service on this occasion are commonly referred to as "deacons." The office Stephen and the other six were elected to was that of deacon.

*Philip the deacon.* Another case where the word "deacon" is commonly used looking back, but not in the text itself, is the story of Philip. This is the Philip who met and baptized the Ethiopian eunuch traveling toward Gaza (see Acts 8:26-40). Scholars debate whether this was Philip the Apostle or Philip the Deacon (also known as the Evangelist). So this Philip is sometimes called "Philip the Deacon," and yet the word "deacon" does not occur in the story.

*The present passage.* The first time in the New Testament where the word "deacon" actually appears in the passage under review.

Speak Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons: (Philippians 1:1)

Philippians is not one of the pastoral epistles, and yet it refers to the office of deacon – not in a self-conscious way, but simply in passing. Paul takes for granted that his readers will know what he means.

*Other references.* The other three places where the word "deacon" appears in the New Testament are all in 1 Timothy.

Deacons, likewise, are to be men worthy of respect, sincere, not indulging in much wine, and not pursuing dishonest gain. (1 Timothy 3:8)

They must first be tested; and then if there is nothing against them, let them serve as deacons. (1 Timothy 3:10)

A deacon must be the husband of but one wife and must manage his children and his household well. (1 Timothy 3:12)

## Elders

Just as deacons were known from the earliest days of church history, the office of elder was known as well. The first reference to elders is in Acts 11.

The disciples, each according to his ability, decided to provide help for the brothers living in Judea. <sup>30</sup> This they did, sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul. (Acts 11:29-30)

So at the time this offering was taken, there were elders in the church at Jerusalem. Actually, there were elders a lot of other places as well, because on his first missionary journey, when Paul and Barnabas went from Antioch to Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe, they visited each of their newly founded churches on the way back, putting local leadership in place as they went.

They preached the good news in that city [Derbe] and won a large number of disciples. Then they returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, <sup>22</sup> strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith. "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God," they said. <sup>23</sup> Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust. (Acts 14:21-23)

This is precisely the point at issue in 1 Timothy. Some scholars say that Paul's reference to deacons and elders in 1 Timothy is out of place when measured against the extent to which offices had been established in the church before Paul died. But where is the problem? There were deacons within about three years after Christ's crucifixion (see Acts 6) and there were elders – not just at Jerusalem, but in local Gentile house churches in Asia Minor – ever since Paul's first missionary journey (see Acts 14). Beyond these, the New Testament has a number of other references to the office of elder.<sup>2</sup> There is no shortage of references to this particular level of church office.

## Overseers

The office of overseer (later known as bishop) is a bit more challenging to document, but there are a handful of references one can point to. Apart from anything that might be said in the pastoral epistles themselves (1 Timothy 3:1, 2; Titus 1:7), consider the three following passages:

Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. (Acts 20:28)

Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons: (Philippians 1:1)

Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers– not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; (1 Peter 5:2)<sup>3</sup>

## Conclusion

It is true that there was no elaborate hierarchy of offices in the church by the time Paul died, but there doesn't have to be. The question is whether there were deacons, elders, and overseers. From the evidence we have, there were such offices. So if someone wants to doubt Paul's authorship of 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, and Titus for other reasons, that's a separate matter, but they should base their argument on some other line of evidence. The facts we have are fully consistent with believing that Paul wrote all the letters which claim that he wrote them.

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<sup>2</sup> See Acts 15:2, 4, 6, 22, 23; 16:4; 20:17; 21:18. See also James 5:14; 1 Peter 5:1; 2 John 1:1; 3 John 1:1. In between these two sets of references there are those from 1 Timothy (4:14; 5:17, 19) and Titus (1:5, 6).

<sup>3</sup> See also 1 Peter 2:25, where the reference is not to human overseers in the church, but to Christ in heaven. Peter speaks of Jesus as, "the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls."