**Local Church Leadership as God Decreed**

Colossians 1:18 tells us that Christ is the head of the body, the church. All authority in heaven and earth has been given to Him (Matthew 28:18). Any church belonging to Him will allow Him to define its mission, work, worship and organization. Furthermore, Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to guide His apostles into all truth, giving them the mind of Christ (John 16:13-15; 2 Corinthians 2:16).

The inspired writings of the New Testament clearly teach Christ’s divine will regarding the leadership of the local church. Frankly, any organizational structure that differs from what has been revealed is without Christ’s authority.

After establishing local assemblies of saved people in various locations, the apostle Paul made sure qualified elders were appointed in every church (Acts 14:21-23). He provided Titus with the qualifications for elders, then directed him to appoint elders in every city (Titus 1:5). Every indication is that each church had a plurality of elders. But what else can we ascertain about these leaders?

Toward the close of his third preaching tour, Paul called for the elders (presbuteros) of the Ephesian church to meet with him in Miletus (Acts 20:17). In verse 28, he admonished them, “Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers (episkopos), to shepherd (poimaino) the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.”

Presbuteros may be translated elder or presbyter. Episkopos may be translated bishop or overseer. Poimaino may be translated pastor or shepherd. In other words, elders and bishops and pastors are the same people. They possess perhaps more experience, wisdom and knowledge, have demonstrated management abilities and focus on tending God’s flock, thus the three Greek words.

When Paul wrote to the church in Philippi, he addressed the letter to “all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, including the overseers (episkopos) and deacons (diakonos)” (Philippians 1:1). Words mean something. Diakonos means a servant. Overseers oversee and deacons serve. Each role comes with it’s own set of qualifications and they are unique (1 Timothy 3:1-7 and 1 Timothy 3:8-13).

If the church of which you are a member claims that Christ is its head but the local church organization is different than Philippians 1:1, you should ask why that is. Christ has ordained that each local assembly be governed by a group of elders / pastors / shepherds / bishops / overseers. If you know of another English synonym, fine, but deacon is not one of them. If Christ is truly the head of the body, His church, denominational bylaws are meaningless. The New Testament of Jesus Christ is the only legitimate source of divine authority; the doctrines of men only get in the way (Matthew 15:9).

**John McKee**

**West Murray church of Christ**