

‘OFFICE’ VERSUS ‘PRACTICE’ IN CHURCH MINISTRY
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Previously Titled, “The Office of the Prophet”
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THE BIBLICAL LINGUISTICS OF THE WORD “OFFICE”.

In charismatic churches we have heard about the ‘office’ of the prophet, based on [Eph. 4:11]. When presented, this idea characterizes two supposedly different prophetic ministries. On the one hand, there is the ministry of one occupying the ‘office.’ The idea here is that such a prophet’s pronouncements are ‘official’, as in a “*Thus sayeth the Lord*”. This office idea implies that some prophets are ‘officials’ in the churches. On the other hand, there is the ministry of one just operating in the prophetic gifting. Notice that the use of the word “just” subordinates to the one exercising the office the one operating in the usual prophetic giftings (of Romans 12:6-8) or manifestations of the Holy Spirit [1 Cor. 12:8-10]. The first set of gifts are the so-called ‘charismatic’ or motivational giftings. The second are the ‘gifts’ that exhibit the (miraculous) workings of the Holy Spirit in ministry [1 Cor. 12:4-7].

Used in such a way, the English word, “office,” brings with it the context of a formal vertical authority structure. And, there was in the churches, a formal vertical authority structure, from the time of Constantine onward. The Protestant Reformation kept that authority structure, except for the office of Pope. But, what about “office” in the early Church of Peter, Paul, and the other original apostles. What does “office” mean scripturally, in the New Testament?

The King James New Testament (KJV) does use the English words “office” (8 times) and “officer” (12 times). Uniformly, the word, “officer,” is a secular title, denoting a civil servant. In [Rom. 11:13], Paul mentions his “office,” but the Greek is “*diakonia*,” which is usually translated “ministry.” In [1 Tim. 3:1], Paul mentions the “office of a bishop.” But, there is no Greek word used that translates to “office.” Rather the literal English translation of the Greek is “*If anyone oversight aspires to, ...*” That is, the Greek deals directly with the function, rather than making of it an office.

Likewise, in [1 Tim. 3:10 and 3:13], Paul is translated as “... *use the office of a deacon ...*” Literal translation gives “... *let them minister ...*,” where all three English words come from one compound Greek word, based on “*diakon*,” the stem that is variously translated as “minister” and “deacon.” The final KJV New Testament use of “office,” is [Heb. 7:5], which is translated as “... *the office of the priesthood ...*” The Greek is simply a single word, “... *the priesthood ...*” Again, there is no Greek word, present, that literally translates as “office.”

[Rom. 12:4], which is just before the listing of the seven charismatic (motivational) gifts of God, says that not all members of the Body of Christ have the same “office.” The Greek word used there is “*praxis*” from which we get the English word, “*practice*”, as in the practice of a medical doctor, lawyer, or consulting engineer. And, [1 Pet. 4:10] tells us that it is the [Rom. 12:6-8] gifts (*charisma*) that we are to minister (*diakoneo*) to each other. So, what we are beginning to see from the linguistics

of the New Testament is that a Christian office is a ministry practice, wherein we minister from our [Rom. 12:6-8] gifts. It is not a vertical organizational authority title.

WHAT THE CHRISTIAN “OFFICE” IS.

The view that “office” denotes authority structure comes from King James’ time, when the English church had just severed ties with the Pope, but kept the Roman church authority structure. That view and hermeneutical use of “office” came from New Testament exegesis that was influenced by then current church organizational structure. The idea has been carried forward in subsequent King James’ translations, as a matter of tradition. It has influenced the English-speaking peoples’ understanding, not just of the Bible, but of the English language, itself.

The use of the phrase, “office of the prophet,” does not occur in Holy Scripture. It appears to be synthesized by extending to the five “ascension gifts” of [Eph. 4:11] those uses of “office” that pertain to bishop, deacon, and priest. However, as just shown, those latter “offices” aren’t. Neither is office of the prophet an office. It is a functional practice. It is a function that obviously requires the charismatic gift of prophecy from [Rom. 12:6-8], or Holy Spirit manifestation from [1 Cor. 12:8-10].

So, how does the supposed office of prophet differ from exercise of the prophetic gift by those so gifted? In my opinion it is not a difference in kind, but only in degree. Experience shows that there is a smooth gradation in degree of prophetic gifting, as in any of the other six charismatic gifts. Those with a high degree might be supposed to occupy some authoritarian office. They might be held above their brothers. But, such differentiation is dangerous. It can lead to idolization of persons who appear prophetic and may in fact be the false prophets against whom Jesus warned [Mat. 24:11]. It is better, in my understanding, to accept all prophets equally, but to test every one according to [1 John 4:1], and as in [1 Cor. 14:32]. And, the test is on prophetic fruit [Mat. 12:33], not on supposed authority.

THE CHRISTIAN “CALLING”.

The Bible clearly shows that every Christian minister works out of his or her Romans-12 gifts [1 Pet. 4:10]. And, there are seven motivational Romans-12 charismatic gifts. Thus, there are seven ministries. So, Christians who are multiply gifted may have several different ministries, as did Paul [2 Tim. 1:11].

One understands what ministry he is suited for, according to his specific ‘calling’. And, the specific calling is from God [Php. 3:14]. And, that specific calling and its associated gift was given to us in Christ Jesus, before the world began [2 Tim. 1:9], not according to what we want to do, but according to what He wants to do. A minister of a particular charismatic gift is made [Eph. 3:7] by God, not by man [1 Tim. 1:12]. It is God who appoints (ordains or sets) ministers, not man [1 Cor. 12:28].

So, instead of occupying an authoritative office, Jesus’ ministers have a practice like doctors or lawyers, that flows from their callings and is tied to their Romans-12 giftings. Therefore, it behooves ministers to know both their giftings and their callings. A helpful aid is a gifts test, originally promulgated by the Bill Gothard Ministries, as crafted by Gary Smalley. A self-grading version of that test in Excel™ is available from this author.

THE CHRISTIAN MINISTRY PRACTICES.

Now, since the ‘office of the prophet’ isn’t, how about the other four ascension gift ministries of Apostle, Evangelist, Pastor, and Teacher? Should those ministries be capitalized, as in official titles, or are they also really practices in the churches. And, does one rank above another? If they are ministerial practices, what are their motivating Romans-12 charismatic giftings?

In considering how churches are run today, there is a lot to be thought about. The Protestant Reformation reformed many practices of the churches. The Protestants cut the links to the Pope, but they kept the priest, some literally (the English Anglican and German Lutheran churches) and others by just changing the title of priest to that of pastor (Baptist, Methodist, etc.) So, is Pastor an official rank in today’s Protestant churches? How should churches be organized and governed?

It turns out that a very detailed book has been written on biblical organization of the local church. This is the 314-page The Church in the New Testament, by Kevin J. Conner¹ It is based on meticulous research into the Scriptures, to search out the organization of the original Christian churches of the First Century. And, it is all taken from what’s in the Bible. Conner shows that local churches were governed by a combination of ‘set man’ and elder group.

The set man was set by God, not man. The set man did not have to be a pastor. He could be any of the five-fold ministry of [Eph. 4:11]. He could be any of the Apostles, Evangelists, Pastors, and Teachers, so long as he had a shepherd’s heart (As all Ascension-gift ministers must). And, the set man must jointly govern with an elders’ group, so that the church would not come under monarchical or autocratic governance.

Conner says that the Book of Revelation reveals that the ‘set man’ is “*angelos*,” or messenger of the local church. And, he functions as messenger because of his demonstrated calling, gifting, anointing, vision, and direction in leadership. Again, it is function or practice that is the determining factor, not rank or title. And, the Lord confirms this to the eldership and congregation in clear ways.

Conner concludes that church government is not government of the people, nor government of one man. Neither is it the government of a bureaucracy or a deacon-board, or eldership. Rather, it is the united governance of the set man with the eldership, under Christ’s headship, as they seek His will and mind on all things pertaining to His people. Together, this provides the ‘checks and balances’ for proper governance of the house of the Lord.

CONCLUSION.

It is hoped that this paper sheds some light on the issue of local church governance, in the context of current conditions in American Protestant Christianity.

¹ The Church in the New Testament, 314-pp., by Kevin J. Conner, 1982, BT Publishing, Portland, OR, ISBN – 1-886849-15-3, www.btpublishing.com