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NEW TESTAMENT PERSPECTIVES ON NOMENCLATURE FOR CHURCH LEADERS

Erwin Buck

In the search for appropriate nomenclature for church leaders, the title of bishop demands special attention. Not only does it have early attestation but the role which it has played in the history of the church has been prominent. The primary purpose of this essay is to examine the usage of the term bishop (*episkopos*) from a New Testament perspective. Only secondarily will attention be focused on the subsequent history of the term before assessing the suitability of the title as nomenclature for church leaders today.

EPISKOPOS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

The office of bishop is prominent in the history of the Church almost from the very beginning. Also, the term is not unusual in the Greek language of the classical and koine periods. It is surprising therefore that the word *episkopos* occurs only five times in the New Testament, most of these occurrences being in the later New Testament writings. We shall examine each of these passages in turn.¹

The earliest recorded reference (Phil. 1:1) mentions bishops and deacons (both in the plural) side by side. There is no apparent distinction and a close association with the "saints in Christ." It may safely be concluded that in the Philippian congregation there was more than one bishop (and deacon) whose task it was (as the terms suggest) to "oversee" and to "serve". Beyond that rather rudimentary observation it is not possible to be more precise regarding the rights and duties of these officials -- if, indeed, they were officials in the proper sense of the word.

In Paul's farewell address to the Ephesian elders (Acts 20:17ff), the term *presbyteros* is used in parallel to the term "bishop". The persons who are called

1. In approximately chronological order, these are: Phil. 1:1; Acts 20:28; 1 Tim. 3:2; Tit. 1:7; 1 Pet. 2:25.

“elders” (pl.) in Acts 20:17 are referred to as “bishops” in Acts 20:28. Here, then, the function of elders and that of bishops is not yet clearly differentiated, although the terms appear to be already well established. The two words can be used interchangeably and so, presumably, refer not to offices but to functions.² Again it is clear (observe the plurals) that in the congregation (at least in Ephesus) there is more than one bishop, as there is more than one elder. Significantly, the call of the bishops is understood to emanate from the Holy Spirit (Acts 20:28), although this call may well have been mediated by congregational election or by official appointment (cf. Acts 1:21ff; 6:3ff; 14:23).

The situation in the Pastoral Epistles is evidently of a more developed nature. In 1 Timothy 3:1ff a definite office of bishop (*episkope*) is in view. It is an office worthy of one’s aspirations, and a series of qualifications are outlined which the prospective bishop must be able to meet. The qualifications are of a moral and ethical nature and it is significant that celibacy is not one of them; on the contrary, it is assumed that the bishop will be a family man with wife and children, and that his family relationships are harmonious. In the selection of a bishop the focus is on his human qualifications. The agency of the Holy Spirit is not specifically mentioned as it is, for example, in Acts 20:28. Evidently the church of the Pastorals had already experienced certain problems with its church leaders and had found it necessary to pay more particular attention to their moral character.

Again we are not told what the duties of the bishop are. However, since he is expected to be an apt teacher (*didaktikon*), it would appear that teaching was at least one of his functions. Here also the bishops are closely associated with the deacons (1 Tim. 3:8). The two groups are not identical and the terms are no longer interchangeable, but the requirements for deacons and those for bishops have very much in common.

The situation in Titus 1:5ff is very similar to that in 1 Timothy. Again a series of qualifications of a moral and ethical nature (essentially the same prerequisites as those outlined in 1 Timothy) are laid down for bishops (and elders). As in Acts 20, the bishops and elders appear not to have been clearly distinguished one from the other, since the writer can begin by talking about the *presbyteroi* and then, without apparent change in subject, switch to the use of *episkopos*. Regarding the obligations of the office, very little can be said on the basis of Titus 1 beyond the fact that it is presupposed that the bishop teaches and refutes opponents.

The bishop is spoken of in the singular in both 1 Timothy and Titus. This may indicate that there is now only one bishop in charge of the congregation;³ possibly, however, the singular is to be understood as a type for all the bishops. Thus it is not possible to state categorically that in the Pastorals we are dealing with a fully developed monarchical episcopate. Yet the evidence does not definitely exclude this possibility either.

Finally, the term “bishop” is applied to Jesus as a Christological title side by side with “shepherd” (1 Peter 2:25). Very likely the term is not to be thought of as a title of majesty but as a term suggesting subordination and service. This view

2. Cf. Eduard Schweizer: *Church Order in the New Testament* (London: SCM Press, 1959), p. 11.

3. By contrast, the deacons in 1 Tim. 3:8 are referred to in the plural. Similarly, in Tit. 1:5ff the plural *presbyteroi* is picked up without embarrassment by the singular *episkopos*.

becomes all the more plausible when it is remembered that practically all the nomenclature relating to Christian ministry is in one way or another applied to Christ by the New Testament writers.⁴ Thus, the association of the term “bishop” with Christ most likely does not imply that the term stands for authority but rather that Christ is thought of in terms of pastoral ministry.

THE TERM *EPISKOPOS* AND ITS COGNATES

Since the few occurrences of the term “bishop” in the New Testament do not provide sufficient information for an adequate understanding of the term, it is necessary to broaden the scope of the investigation by pursuing also other approaches to the problem. The most promising of these appears to be an examination of the contextual associations of the term *episkopos* and an elucidation of the connotations of its cognates.

We have already observed a close linkage of the term *episkopos* with *diakonos* on the one hand and with *presbyteros* on the other. This fact already suggests that the term *episkopos* is thought of more in terms of service than in terms of authority. Most revealing, however, is the observation that *episkopos* occurs repeatedly in conjunction with the term “shepherd” and its cognates. The two expressions are practically identical in 1 Peter 2:25 and, according to Acts 20:28, a bishop is appointed by the Holy Spirit over the *flock*, it being his responsibility to *shepherd* the church. Similarly in 1 Peter 5:2, the instructions to the elders (who are elsewhere closely associated with bishops clearly underline the shepherding function as their main responsibility. If we accept the very early reading adopted by the Aland edition of the Greek New Testament, this shepherding function can also be described by the use of a cognate of “bishop” (*episkopountes*). There is sufficient evidence, then, to suggest that already at very early stages of the Christian tradition “presbyter” and “bishop” is nomenclature which is practically interchangeable and that the main function of both was understood to be that of being a shepherd (pastor) of the flock of God.

Consonant with this conclusion is the observation that the verb *episkopeo* (to visit) in the New Testament always implies much more than simply personal contact; it usually includes an active concern for the person visited and a willingness to shoulder responsibility for that person’s welfare. The term is frequently associated with visitation of the sick and needy (Mt. 25:35ff; James 1:27) and this connotation of caring concern appears to be present also in contexts where a more “official” type of visitation is in view (Acts 7:23; 15:36). Of course, this concern for the welfare of the Christian community is not a function restricted to special officials; it is the responsibility of every member of the Christian fellowship (Heb. 12:15). The noun *episkopos*, then, is a cognate of a verb which incorporates in itself the loving care which characterizes the Christian fellowship as a whole.

In a more restricted sense the root *episkopeo* is frequently employed with reference to God’s gracious visitation -- a standard concept in Old Testament and

4. Thus Christ is referred to as servant (cf. Phil. 2:7), deacon (cf. Rom. 15:8), apostle (cf. Heb. 3:1) and teacher (cf. John 13:13).

New Testament literature alike (cf. Luke 1:68, 78; Psalm 8:4; etc.), and an expression which, especially in the phrase "time (day) of visitation" (e.g. Luke 19:44; 1 Peter 2:12; Isaiah 10:3) takes on eschatological overtones. In either case the concept of God's visitation essentially conveys connotations of grace and blessing while connotations of judgement are only secondarily the concomitants of the rejection of God's gracious approach.

SUMMARY OF THE NEW TESTAMENT EVIDENCE

The term *episcopos* originally designates not a specific office but a rather undifferentiated function -- a function which is not distinctive of any one particular individual or group within the Christian community but characterizes the activity of the Christian fellowship as a whole. The connotations of the term are not those of authoritarian government or even autocratic rule, but rather those of loving care, humble service, and shepherding. Although there is evidence of a development into a more specialized office of bishop already within New Testament times (note the Pastorals), at this stage of church history the title is relatively unostentatious. Even when there are hints of the development of hierarchical structures, the bishop stands not at the head of these, but in a position below that of apostles and prophets. The bishop is at home among the deacons and elders. When the title is honoured by its application to Christ, its honour consists not in the claim of the titleholder to exercise powers of authority, but in the fact that the term can be used to describe the self-giving love of Christ.

Thus the term "bishop" in New Testament usage is invested with deeply religious significance, conveying the loving care of the Good Shepherd himself.

THE EPISCOPAL OFFICE IN POST-BIBLICAL TIMES

For our purposes, here, the development of the concept of "bishop" following the completion of the New Testament is of great importance. For if we are considering the advisability of the present day use of the title "bishop" we have to reckon with the fact that in our own day the term may carry more of the freight of its later history than of its original Christian connotations. For this reason we must give at least fleeting attention to the characteristics of the episcopal office in post-biblical times.

Already toward the end of the first century the office of bishop quickly gained the ascendancy over other offices. In 1 Clement, written in A.D. 96, bishops are distinguished from deacons and identified with presbyters and overseers, who exercise supervisory rather than servant functions (e.g. 1 Cl. 44.4f; 47.6). In the letters of Ignatius the bishop had become even more of an authority figure. Ignatius repeatedly exhorts the congregations to be subject to the bishop as the Apostles were subject to Christ (e.g. Magn. 13.2; 7.1; Trall. 2.1). He is convinced that the bishop is essential to the existence of the church (Smyrn. 8.1; Trall. 3.1), and there is now a definite hierarchy with the bishop at the top, the elders below

him and the deacons, in turn, below them (cf. Trall. 12.2; Magn. 2). Here, for the first time, we find concrete evidence of monarchical episcopate.

This trend in the development continued for several centuries. The originally unassuming term became the designation for an office of greater and greater prestige which made ever increasing claims to authority and, eventually, even to infallibility. This process was suddenly impeded by the Reformation, although the office as such was not categorically abolished; on the contrary, in 1542 Luther consecrated Amsdorf as bishop of Naumburg and on that occasion wrote his “*exempel, einen rechten Christlichen Bischof zu weihen.*” The Lutheran Confessions recognize the office of bishop as legitimate and are even willing to maintain its authority to a certain extent,⁵ but Article XXVIII of the Augsburg Confession places pastors and bishops on essentially the same level, in keeping with Luther’s dictum that every pastor is the bishop of his congregation.

Thus the Reformation in large measure recovered the New Testament meaning of the term “bishop” without, however, being able to replace the concept of the more hierarchical and authoritarian church structure of Roman Catholicism. This placed two fundamentally different concepts of the title “bishop” in competition with one another.

TOWARD AN APPROPRIATE NOMENCLATURE

The question of nomenclature obviously falls into the area of adiaphora. In New Testament times and even toward the end of the first century, there appear to have been many churches without bishops. Certainly there is no New Testament command which would make the institution of the episcopate mandatory for the Christian Church. But that fact by itself provides only a partial guideline; there is no New Testament command, either, which would make the observance of Sunday mandatory, and yet hardly anyone in the Lutheran Church would want to abolish that usage which has established itself so firmly. One is still faced with the question of some kind of nomenclature, and although all questions of nomenclature may be of the nature of adiaphora, some terms are more suitable than others. Among these the term “bishop” has indeed much to commend itself.

In general there is the fact of New Testament precedent for the use of this term. Also we have here a title with more specifically religious connotations than have most of the other terms on the market. More specifically, since the term “bishop” refers in its original New Testament sense not to authoritarian or even autocratic rule but is synonymous with care and shepherding, it becomes clear that this term is consonant with some of the deepest Christian convictions and sentiments. Obviously there is no definite New Testament model of leadership on which church government can be patterned. Yet, although it cannot supply the blueprint for church administration, the term “bishop” nevertheless can and does convey the principle of the Gospel which must be determinative for everything the church does.

If the term “bishop” seems too closely associated with authoritarian

5. Augsburg Confession, Article XXVIII, 77 (Tappert, p. 94): “It is not our intention to find ways of reducing the bishop’s power, but we desire and pray that they may not coerce our consciences to sin.”

government, it should be noted that this association is a result of subsequent church history and not an integral part of its original usage in the New Testament. Furthermore, as a result of more recent developments, this situation is gradually changing. Since 1945 even Lutheran Synods in North America have been adopting this nomenclature more readily and the younger churches in developing countries particularly are attracted to this terminology. In the process, the term "bishop" is losing its traditional authoritarian connotations in favour of its more original New Testament meaning.

The adoption of the term "bishop" does not, of course, necessarily entail the introduction of the paraphernalia which have traditionally been connected with the office (such as clerical garments, protocol, appointment for life, apostolic succession, etc.). These two issues should not be confused in the present discussion. Of course, there may be some question whether it is possible in practice to keep these two issues separate -- whether the term "bishop" can be introduced without at the same time conjuring up all the authoritarian connotations which it has acquired at one time or another.⁶ Here it may help us to note that before this term was introduced into Christian terminology, it had exactly such authoritarian connotations in classical and koine Greek. There it commonly designates secular officials with some considerable degree of authority. Nonetheless, the early church did not hesitate to adopt this tainted term and to invest it with new content expressing the spirit of Christian fellowship. Certainly, as church history proves, the introduction of the term was somewhat less than successful. Very soon the title again stood for an excessive degree of authority and for a hierarchical structure. Yet the problem of maintaining church government in accord with true Scriptural principles will be a perennial concern, no matter what terminology is eventually chosen to designate church leaders.

All things considered, the evidence of the New Testament suggests that to call our church officials "bishops" is not only entirely appropriate, but theologically very meaningful as well.

6. It may not be without significance that it is the title "bishop" appears so attractive, in preference to the titles "deacon", "elder", or "shepherd" which in New Testament usage are practically identical with "bishop." Could it be that the title "bishop" is preferred precisely because of its historical rather than its New Testament connotations?