

SABBATH THOUGHT 2023-07-01—BOND-SERVANTS

May God bless you on His Sabbath day!

I have recently heard several disturbing stories of ministers who have rebuked or disfellowshipped members of their organizations. Apparently the ‘offenders’ organized a campout and other gatherings without obtaining permission from their minister or failed to include someone who was ordained. The results were worse if brethren from other organizations were included.

Over the decades, I have heard a number of similarly upsetting stories. Some have been disfellowshipped simply for questioning a tenet of their organization that does not align with the Bible. (I often wonder how many of those topics were salvational?) I have also witnessed several disconcerting situations myself. One was older gentleman who, it seemed to me, was sincerely searching for the truth. He came to services with questions about God and salvation. He was single, of a very small stature, poor, and obviously not well educated so the ministry and much of the congregation were standoffish and avoided him. Some were even offended merely because he did not have ‘appropriate’ Sabbath apparel! The elders gave him the usual booklets but, as far as I know, no one ever counseled with him so he only visited a few times. I think about him from time to time.

Another case was someone who asked for financial help from the organization where they attended. In order to receive it, they were required to hand over proof of income, tax records, itemized lists of expenses, etc. Only then MIGHT they be ‘approved.’ While organizations must be good stewards of any donations, why did it require the entire organization to approve it? The local minister should have been engaged enough to be aware of the situation and evaluate their needs without those outrageous and invasive methods. There are also many similar abuses in cases of marriage and divorce.

Then there were those who left an organization and, almost before the door shut behind them, I heard all manner of evil-speaking that spread doubt about their conversion, lies, and false rumors. If a person subsequently returned to the organization, they were immediately showered with hypocritical displays of ‘love.’

Many ministers tell someone at baptism that they are not baptized into any organization but into the Body of Christ as part of the ceremony. The fact that they have to mention this as part of the most important act of entering into a covenant with God says a lot about how organizations truly operate and what is in their hearts¹. Who has not also heard organizations proclaim something to the effect that “there are God’s people in other groups but ours has the most truth”? I have never heard any of them ever say they regard other organizations as equals when it comes to God, the Bible, and salvation. In fact, has anyone ever heard of organizations *merging* together in unity? All I hear are of splits. Unreconciled offenses² continue to be the way of life in this age but it seems ministers can be the catalyst for much of it.

¹ Matt. 24:12.

² Matt. 18:6-7.

I hope it is obvious that none of the stories I mentioned involved people who were *intentionally* causing division or offenses³. Rather, they were well-meaning and faithful brethren as far as I could tell. But this has been the way of every organization for many decades. As upsetting as they are, they are also expected. You probably have not only heard similar stories, but may have been a victim, too.

Most of these things happen because the relationship between ministers and brethren is not a biblical one. What has been socialized into the minds of all who have been involved with organizations under the banner of a ‘church of God’ name is one of authority and control. Where do ministers get the authority to control God’s people? Why do they think they are the earthly judges of the saints? I have yet to find any such authority or judgment given to a minister by God the Father or Jesus Christ⁴. So, what exactly does the Bible say about a minister?

1 TIMOTHY 3:1 This *is* a true saying, If a man desire the **office of a bishop**, he desireth a good work.

Desiring the “office of a bishop” (FV says, “to be *an* overseer”) is a good WORK. What do good works have to do with ruling over others? In fact, the Greek noun for *bishop* (or *overseer*) is *episkope*, meaning “inspection for relief.” The verb form means to *inspect, see, visit, relieve*. That means *episkope* describes someone who “**inspects or observes others for the purpose of providing relief.**” In that regard, *bishop* and *overseer* are poor English substitutes, because both describe a supervisory position. Who is a supervisor? He is “one who observes **and directs** others.” That is not the same as “one who observes (inspects) **and relieves** others.” While I have not yet thought of an appropriate substitute, I think that *episkope* describes a ‘relief worker’—certainly not a supervisor.

To even be considered for such a position requires certain mental and moral qualities, i.e., character. Take a look at the prerequisites for a minister—the list is not a suggestion, it is MANDATORY and COMPULSORY:

1 TIMOTHY 3:2-16 **A bishop then must be [FV = obligatory] blameless**, the husband of one wife, **vigilant, sober, of good behaviour, given to hospitality, apt to teach; 3 Not given to wine, no striker, not greedy of filthy lucre; but patient, not a brawler, not covetous;** 4 One that ruleth [Gk. *proistemi, lit. “to stand before; preside; practice”*] well his own house, having his children in subjection with all gravity; 5 (For if a man know not how to rule his own house, how shall he take care of the church of God?) **6 Not a novice**, lest being lifted up with pride he fall into the condemnation of the devil. 7 Moreover **he must have a good report of them which are without [the ekklesia];** lest he fall into reproach and the snare of the devil. 8 Likewise *must* the deacons **be grave, not doubletongued, not given to much wine, not greedy of filthy lucre;** **9 Holding the mystery of the faith in a pure conscience.** **10 And let these also first be proved;** then let them use the office of a deacon, being **found blameless.**

³ Rom. 16:17.

⁴ Matt. 28:18; John 5:21-30.

2 TIMOTHY 2:24-25 And the servant of the Lord **must not strive**; but **be gentle** unto all *men*, **apt to teach**, **patient**, 25 **In meekness instructing** those that oppose themselves ...

All who desire to be a minister SHALL be blameless, circumspect (cautious), self-controlled, modest, hospitable, able to teach, sober, peaceable, not greedy, not a novice, have a good report from those OUTSIDE of the Body of Christ, honorable, not double-tongued, faithful, have a pure conscience, gentle, able to endure wrongdoings, and meek. (Note: Several of these words differ from the various Bible translations because they were taken directly from a Greek-English dictionary for clarity.)

In addition, verses 4-5 say a man must “**rule well** his own house ... if a man know not how to **rule** his own house, how shall he take care of the [*ekklesia*]?” What does it mean to “**rule well**” a household? *Well* means in a good way, honestly, and virtuously. The main problem is that many completely misread the last part of verse 5! It says that a man who does not “**rule well his own house**” will not be able **to care for** the *ekklesia*! It does **not** say he is to rule over the Body of Christ, but TO CARE FOR THE *EKKLESIA*!

However, just in case some might still believe ministers are given authority over the *ekklesia*, lookup the Greek word *proistemi*, which is translated *rule*. It means “to stand before” in the sense of a *leader*⁵. It is **not** a position of authority as an overlord. In all regards, ministers are to lead the brethren by being an EXAMPLE! The proof is in Phil. 3:17; 1 Thess. 1:7; 2 Thess. 3:9; and especially:

1 PETER 5:3 **Neither as being lords over God’s heritage, but being ensamples to the flock.**

NOTE: The FV says, “over your **possessions**.” *Possessions* is categorically wrong! The Greek word is *kleros* means “those given into someone’s care,” i.e., an *inheritance* or *heritage*.

After taking all of this into account, how did the APOSTLES view their roles?

2 CORINTHIANS 4:5 For we preach **not ourselves**, but Christ Jesus the Lord; and ourselves **your servants** for Jesus’ sake.

GALATIANS 1:10 For do I now persuade men, or God? or do I seek to please men? for if I yet pleased men, I should not be the **servant of Christ**.

PHILIPPIANS 1:1 Paul and Timotheus, the **servants of Jesus Christ**, to all the saints in Christ Jesus which are at Philippi, with the bishops and deacons:

COLOSSIANS 4:12 Epaphras, who is *one* of you, a **servant of Christ**, saluteth you, always **labouring fervently for you** in prayers, that ye may stand perfect and complete in all the will of God.

⁵ *Proistemi* is similarly used in Rom. 12:8; 1 Thess. 5:12; 1 Tim. 3:12; 5:17. A different Greek word (*hegeomai*) is translated *rule* in the KJV of Hebrews 13:7, 17, 24 and it also means to *lead*. Interestingly, *hegeomai* is missing from these scriptures in the FV (which was largely based upon the *Interlinear Greek NT* translated by George Berry). This conflict in the Greek manuscripts lends uncertainty to *hegeomai* being original text.

2 TIMOTHY 2:24 And **the servant of the Lord** must not strive; but be gentle unto all *men*, apt to teach, patient

TITUS 1:1 Paul, a **servant of God**, and an apostle of Jesus Christ, according to the faith of God's elect, and the acknowledging of the truth which is after godliness;

JAMES 1:1 James, a **servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ**, to the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad, greeting.

2 PETER 1:1 Simon Peter, a **servant** and an apostle **of Jesus Christ**, to them that have obtained like precious faith with us through the righteousness of God and our Saviour Jesus Christ:

JUDE 1:1 Jude, the **servant of Jesus Christ**, and brother of James, to them that are sanctified by God the Father, and preserved in Jesus Christ, *and* called:

Every apostle claimed the title, “**servant** of Jesus Christ”. Paul even said he was “**your servant**,” referring to the saints. *Servant* is *doulos* in the Greek and means a **bond-servant**. Unlike a slave, a bond-servant usually entered into service to a master to repay a debt. But masters were required to treat bond-servants well, providing food and board and sometimes even a wife. There was even an option to remain a bond-servant out of love for the master⁶. The role of a minister as a bond-servant was even a command of Jesus Christ:

MATTHEW 20:25-28 But Jesus called them to *Him and* said, “You know that the **rulers of the nations exercise lordship** over them, and the **great ones exercise authority** over them. 26 However, **it shall not be this way among you**; but whoever would become great among you, **let him be your [bond-]servant**; 27 And whoever would be **first among you, let him be your [bond-]servant**; 28 Just as **the Son of man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life** as a ransom for many.”

Can it be any clearer? “IT SHALL **NOT** BE THIS WAY AMONG YOU”!!! Ministers are **not** given authority and rule over others nor are they to be overseers or overlords of the saints of God! Any man who desires to be a ‘relief worker’ is a **bond-servant** who voluntarily devotes his life to serving the Body of Christ through **good works** in the same manner as Jesus Christ and the apostles. A true minister serving in this manner is both blessed by God and a blessing to God’s people!

May God’s grace and peace be upon you!

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⁶ Exod. 21:5.