

Dear Pastor _____,

Thank you for your letter! We always love hearing of your labors in the Gospel of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ - Who purchased men for God from every tribe, and nation, and tongue (Revelation 5:9). What a beautiful truth that we are His and belong to Him!

Regarding our letter on the Death Penalty - we also wanted to stress that this is our understanding according to God's Word. It is not a core Gospel issue, so we should not get too uptight about differences in opinion – and no Christian should break fellowship with another over this issue. It is an important one in regard to society and justice, but it is not a Gospel issue.

If you are interested in learning more about Biblical ambassadorship, Devotionals 98 and 99 on our website speak specifically to that.

CHURCH AUTHORITY

Thank you for your question on positions of authority in the Church. This is a challenging question because there is a strictly Scriptural answer, but there might also be a practical answer. As you know, our Church and ministry seeks to base everything we believe and teach strictly on God's Word as revealed by the guidance of the Holy Spirit. So, on this question, we look to Scripture. In Scripture, we find only the titles of Elder (or Bishop or Overseer), Pastor (or Shepherd), and Deacon in regard to positions of authority and function in the Church. I do not believe there is a Scriptural foundation for the term “reverend,” but in practice it is often the same in function as Pastor. The word “reverend” means the person with the title is deserving of reverence (honor, respect, deference – deep respect with awe; veneration), but the only one truly deserving of reverence in the Church is Jesus Christ – no man should seek to be given reverence in the Church – all honor and glory should go to Jesus Christ. The leaders of the Church are servant-leaders.

JESUS AS THE HEAD

The ultimate authority in the Church is Jesus Christ:

“Wives, be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord. 23 For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church, He Himself being the Savior of the body. 24 But as the church is subject to Christ, so also the wives ought to be to their husbands in everything” (Ephesians 5:22-24).

“He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. 16 For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created through Him and for Him. 17 He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. 18 **He is also head of the body, the church;** and He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything. 19 For it was the Father’s good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him” (Colossians 1:15-19).

Therefore, no Church belongs to the Elders, Pastors, or Deacons. The Church belongs to Christ and the ultimate authority over everything in the Church is Jesus. Therefore, Church leaders should be sober about their management of the Church, for they will give an account of their management to Jesus Himself:

“Obey your leaders **and** submit *to them*, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will **give an account**. Let them do this with joy **and** not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you” (Hebrews 13:17).

ELDERS AND PASTORS

Elders are the human servant-leaders of the Church. They are responsible for overseeing the Church functions to make sure everything is operating as it should, and their primary task is to provide a healthy environment in the Church for the Body of Christ to grow up in knowledge and understanding. This is a great responsibility and should not be taken lightly. Scripture speaks of Elders in the plural (there is generally more than one serving in a Church). Not all Elders teach or serve as Pastors (many manage the responsibilities of the Church, meet with members of the Body, pray with them, etc). A Pastor is generally an Elder who teaches and preaches. Scripture speaks of each Church having a plurality of Elders (more than one). So, one Elder might be more focused on meeting the individual needs of the Body (ministering to the sick, the afflicted, those needing direction and correction), while the other Elder may serve as Pastor, teaching and instructing the Body as a whole. They are equals in authority, but not in duty:

“The elders who rule well are to be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching.” (1 Timothy 5:17)

For many years our Church had two Elders until one went to be with the Lord. A Church may very well only need one Elder who also serves as Pastor, but as the Church grows, the need for additional Elders may be needed to meet the needs of the Body. However, choosing Elders to serve is a very weighty decision and should not be made lightly as Scripture makes it clear that it is very difficult to remove an Elder once chosen.

“Do not receive an accusation against an elder except on the basis of two or three witnesses. ²⁰ Those who continue in sin, rebuke in the presence of all, so that the rest also will be fearful of sinning.” (1 Timothy 5:19)

So, this decision should be made with caution and wisdom, as you do not want unworthy men entering service beside you and steering the Church in directions it should not go.

The Scriptural qualifications for an Elder (or Overseer) are simple, and here we also see Elders are appointed by other Elders in general.

“For this reason I left you in Crete, that you would set in order what remains and appoint elders in every city as I directed you, ⁶ namely, if any man is above reproach, the husband of one wife, having children who believe, not accused of dissipation or rebellion. ⁷ For the overseer must be above reproach as God’s steward, not self-willed, not quick-

tempered, not addicted to wine, not pugnacious, not fond of sordid gain, 8 but hospitable, loving what is good, sensible, just, devout, self-controlled, 9 holding fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, so that he will be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict.” (Titus 1:5-9)

“It is a trustworthy statement: if **any man** aspires to the office of overseer, it is a fine work he desires to do. 2 An overseer, then, must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, prudent, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, 3 not addicted to wine or pugnacious, but gentle, peaceable, free from the love of money. 4 He must be one who manages his own household well, keeping his children under control with all dignity 5 (but if a man does not know how to manage his own household, how will he take care of the church of God?), 6 and not a new convert, so that he will not become conceited and fall into the condemnation incurred by the devil. 7 And he must have a good reputation with those outside the church, so that he will not fall into reproach and the snare of the devil” (1 Timothy 3:1-7).

Ultimately, however, Elders are appointed by the Holy Spirit:

“Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which **the Holy Spirit has made you overseers**, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. 29 I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; 30 and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. 31 Therefore be on the alert, remembering that night and day for a period of three years I did not cease to admonish each one with tears” (Acts 20:28-31).

So, Pastor _____, if you meet these criteria and serve as a Pastor or Elder in your Church, there is no Biblical reason why you would need to go to a seminar to get a “letter of commendation” – a piece of paper that says you are an Elder, Reverend, Bishop, etc. However as we discuss a little later in this letter, many Christians will not accept a Pastor or Elder unless he has received titles from schools. This is a sad and unfortunate reality today.

DEACONS

Deacons serve under Elders and help implement and facilitate the Elder's direction in the Church. Thus, Deacons might be in charge of managing finances, managing the Church building (making sure the lights work, the heat works, etc), assisting the Pastor by leading Communion, leading the worship (hymn or psalm singing), etc. Deacons would generally be selected by the Elders with an opportunity for the Body to lay any charge that they are disqualified from being a Deacon. The qualifications for a Deacon are simple:

“Deacons likewise must be men of dignity, not double-tongued, or addicted to much wine or fond of sordid gain, 9 but holding to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. 10 These men must also first be **tested**; then let them serve as deacons if they are beyond reproach. 11 Women must likewise be dignified, not malicious gossips, but temperate, faithful in all things. 12 Deacons must be husbands of only one wife, and good managers

of their children and their own households. 13 For those who have served well as deacons obtain for themselves a high standing and great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus” (1 Timothy 3:8-13).

THE CHURCH IS ABOUT DISCIPLINING THE BODY OF CHRIST TO MATURITY AND TESTING THEM

Every Believer has been given gifts by the Holy Spirit and the purpose of the Body of Christ is to share and exercise these gifts to nurture and build up the Body. It is the Elder’s job to oversee this and nurture and encourage them to use their gifts to benefit the Body of Christ.

When it comes to leadership, the important thing to note in Scripture is that there is no instruction to go to a school or institution to learn how to become an Elder, Pastor, or Deacon. Scripture clearly teaches that Elders were members of the Body who desired to lead in the Church. Paul says that this desire is good: *“It is a trustworthy statement: if **any man** aspires to the office of overseer, it is a fine work he desires to do”* (1 Timothy 3:1).

The Church is supposed to be disciplining all the members of the Body into maturity: educating, training, preparing them to serve in the Church with their Spiritual Gifts from the Holy Spirit.

In our Church, for example, we ask one member of our Body to select and read a passage of Scripture for each Service during our Scripture Reading time. One week, it may be a boy of 15 years, the next week a man in his 60’s. This is intended to challenge the men of our congregation to grow comfortable in positions of leadership, one step at a time. If they make mistakes in their interpretation of the passage, the Elder will talk to them after Service and clarify the passage for them. This is testing and disciplining them. The Elders will often also take time to meet them for lunch or coffee to get to know them better and test them by their conversation – further sharing, instructing, disciplining, teaching, and correcting them as needed. Sometimes this may reveal pride, arrogance, false ideas, immaturity, or ignorance. The Elders work desire to mature them. Sometimes this is not possible and the individual may not be asked to serve in this way until he works these things out. Other times, these times of fellowship may reveal wisdom, understanding, a love for the Lord, a love for God’s people, discernment, servant love, humility, etc. Over time, those members who show these traits with an understanding for God’s Word and a desire to learn and grow through this Scripture Reading time are generally offered the responsibility of leading the Communion time once and a while (we observe Communion at the end of nearly every Church Service). During this time, they read a passage of Scripture and lead the observance of the taking the bread and the cup in remembrance of Jesus’ sacrifice.

If they show they can bear the responsibility and are faithful to God’s Word and have a desire to continue serving in this way, they may be offered an opportunity to preach a message when the Pastor is away or needs a break. In this way, we seek to raise the Body up to responsibility and leadership to become mature in the exercise of their faith in their own church. Those members who prove faithful in their preaching over the years will be nurtured and disciplined by the Elders to potentially join them in their responsibilities as servant leaders (Deacons or Elders) in the Church. We believe that this is a Biblical approach to the positions of authority in the Church.

No schooling is required as the Holy Spirit teaches from God's Word and the Elders help shepherd, teach, and instruct the Body into greater and deeper understanding of God's Word and service in the Church.

FEW CHURCHES ACCEPT PASTORS WITHOUT A DEGREE

However, in practice, there are very few Churches in the world that share our Biblical approach to Eldership and Deaconship, and almost all Churches require some sort of formal education at a Seminary or school to get a degree with a title, such as pastor, reverend, bishop, etc. So, if a Biblical Elder planned to leave his Church and serve in another, it may be very difficult without a degree or a certificate to find a Church that will accept him. For example, although it is not required Biblically, our Elder took some classes when he was a younger man and received a letter of commendation. This surely helped our Body accept him initially all those years ago, and the education did provide him with helpful knowledge concerning the Scriptures. So, seeking outside education and getting a letter of commendation is not necessarily bad. HOWEVER, our position is that these "letters of commendation" are not needed or required by God's Word for men of God to become Elders, Pastors, or Deacons. They are completely meaningless and worthless in and of themselves. Paul explains:

"Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, as some, letters of commendation to you or from you? 2 You are our letter, written in our hearts, known and read by all men; 3 being manifested that you are a letter of Christ, cared for by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts. Such confidence we have through Christ toward God. 5 Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God, 6 who also made us adequate as servants of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life" (2 Corinthians 3:1-6).

THE DANGERS OF CLERGY

Since Catholic times, there has been a separation in the Church between the people and the leadership called "clergy," and this has unfortunately continued into Protestant times. Christians who wanted to serve in the church had to go away to a teaching institution to get a degree (letter of commendation) to become part of the clergy – a separate body of authority and leadership over the Church who are to be given "reverence" by the Body. We see no mention of anything resembling schools, seminaries, or the clergy in the New Testament Church. However, we DO see in Scripture that the Elders, Pastors, and Deacons came directly out of the Body of the Church to serve in THAT church. They were not sent away to schools to receive a degree or letter of commendation – they were instead disciplined in their own church by their own Elders and Pastors. The clergy makes a dangerous "special class" of so-called "more spiritual" people who are elevated above the Body. This is not Biblical.

SERVANT LEADERSHIP

The leadership of the Church is not to be some special class of people who are set apart from the Body as special and deserving of reverence. They are to serve the needs and interests of the Body as if they are their own needs and interests. In this we imitate Jesus:

“Calling them [the disciples] to Himself, Jesus said to them, “You know that those who are recognized as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them; and their great men exercise authority over them. 43 But it is not this way among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant; 44 and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be slave of all. 45 For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many” (Mark 10:42-45).

IN CONCLUSION

Dear Pastor _____, if you are asking for our opinion, we would not necessarily discourage you from taking this Seminar, as long as you understand the directions of the Word of God concerning these things, and do not look to the “letter” but to the Spirit for your commendation and growth into a higher position. So, if you were to take this seminar for learning purposes, that may be good (**BUT only IF they are teaching sound Biblical doctrine**), but if you were to take this seminar purely to receive for yourself a piece of paper that supposedly gives you a position of authority in God’s Church, we don’t feel that this is good. We say the same thing to all of our Body. This is our opinion on the matter from the Scriptures, but ultimately you will have to decide for yourself what the Lord wants you to do. We will be praying for you and your decision, Brother!

We humbly pray that this letter finds you encouraged and strengthened in the knowledge and understanding of Christ. If you have any questions about it, please don’t hesitate to ask us, as our heart goes out to you in your labor of love for the Lord Jesus.

Love in our great God and Savior,
Berean Lamp Ministries