

# Ordained Servant Online

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## Do the Minister and the Elder Hold the Same Office?

Alan D. Strange

All Presbyterians agree that there are at least two special offices in the church—elder and deacon. The question that divides good Presbyterians, however, is this: Do the minister and the ruling elder hold the same office or is the office of minister, while sharing governance with the ruling elder, a distinct office in its own right? Let's begin our exploration of this question by focusing on the nature of "office."

Insofar as office denotes duty (Lat. *officium*, duty), all believers might be said to have a general office in that they have a duty to serve the Lord Christ in his church. All believers have vocations and are to pursue the whole of their lives as unto the Lord (Eph. 6:5–8). As well, all believers have their place of service within the body (1 Cor. 12:12 ff.), often referred to as the "general office of believers." "The power of believers in their general office includes the right to acknowledge and desire the exercise of the gifts and calling of the special offices."<sup>[1]</sup>

Special office exists under both testaments—prophets, priests, and kings in the Old, as well as elders, Levites, etc. In the new covenant, we see two kinds of offices: extraordinary and temporary—as were the foundational offices of apostle and prophet (though they also had an ordinary and perpetual aspect to them); ordinary and perpetual—as are the offices of minister, elder, and deacon, given to furnish the church with the gifts of teaching, ruling, and serving. Rome would tend to emphasize special office to the detriment of the general office of the believer. The Radical Reformation would tend to emphasize the general office of the believer to the detriment of special office. The Reformers demonstrate their genius in upholding both general and special office.

With respect to the offices of minister and elder (or ruling elder, as commonly put) a question is often raised as to the distinctness of the ministerial office. Specifically this question: Do the minister and the ruling elder hold the same office? The historic Presbyterian (if not to say Calvinist) answer is *sic et non*. Yes, inasmuch as the minister is also a church governor, or, to put it another way, the minister is everything that the ruling elder is (the latter "join with the minister"<sup>[2]</sup> in the government of the church). No, insofar as the ruling elder is not a minister of Word and sacrament but rather, primarily, a governor of the church together with the other ruling elders and the minister(s).

## Historical Considerations

This distinction in office between the minister and elder was recognized, from all the evidence, in the apostolic and post-apostolic church. Bishops and presbyters had parity of rule, apparently, in the apostolic church, though even at this point there is heated debate as to the range of meaning of "presbyter." The debate is over whether "presbyter" was restricted to preaching presbyters or could also

include ruling (lay) elders. And then the question is what the role of the bishop was vis-à-vis that of presbyter. Differentiation clearly occurred, distinguishing bishop and presbyter—perhaps beyond the New Testament distinction of minister and elder—at least by the early second century (Ignatius), witnessing the establishment of the supremacy of the bishop in the late second century (with the rise of the diocesan bishop, as seen in Irenaeus and Tertullian).

By Cyprian's time in the mid-third century, presbyter had come to mean entirely the parish priest over against the diocesan bishop. There are multiple reasons for this hierarchical development: the church mimicked the political structure of the empire in a measure, to be sure, but the notion of apostolic succession, though unbiblical (the foundational office of apostle not admitting of a successor and there being no evidence of such in the Pastoral Epistles), was helpful. The Lord, in his providence, makes all things work together for the good of his people and the glory of his name: the episcopacy was useful in developing the *regula fidei* (and what Oberman called Tradition 1), serving to preserve orthodoxy against heresy at a time when the canon was still in formation. There was no biblical warrant for such, however, and Calvin and others in the time of the Reformation sought to return to a more biblical pattern of church government as they had come to understand such.

When the Reformers argued for parity of office they meant two things: a complete parity between presbyter (as it had come to be understood as the parish priest) and bishop—rejecting the distinction between higher and lower clergy—and a parity of rule between the minister and the newly-recovered office of lay governor (elder), which office had, in the development of prelacy, fallen out of the church, with the diaconate itself being a first step in attaining priestly office. The Reformers retained special office, though, even after having suffered under Rome's abuse of office. Whatever differences the Reformers might have had about lay offices—was the office of ruling elder lifetime or temporary?—they all recognized such office (at least the Reformed did) as well as the central importance (and indeed, indispensability) of the office of minister of Word and sacrament. This is understandable, since the Word, particularly the preached Word, had brought about the Reformation. Thus the Reformers (all, including Lutherans and Anglicans as well as Reformed) were zealous to maintain a high view of the office that, through Word and sacrament, the Spirit was pleased to act for the gathering and perfecting of Christ's church.

## Exegetical Considerations

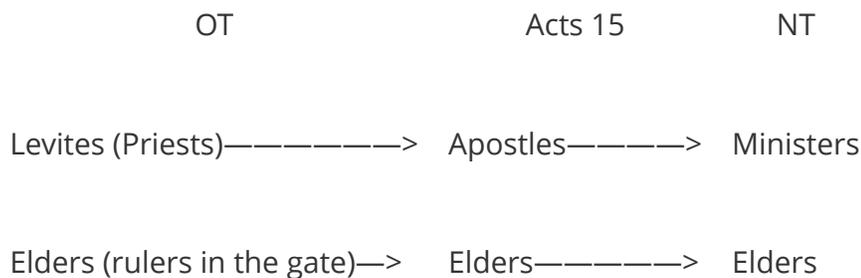
With respect to the New Testament, Edmund P. Clowney is right: the Pastorals in particular and the New Testament in general are not a book of church order.<sup>[3]</sup> Lest we be dispensationalist in our polity, we must see the foundation and origins of church office in the Old Testament. Lee Irons has an excellent discussion of the eldership in the Old Testament, in his paper arguing for a three-office view, bringing a plethora of relevant texts into view and clearly demonstrating that the elders were leaders of the people who represented them and on whose behalf they held session in the city gate, ruling together with Moses and the Levites, who served as courts of appeal. Irons argues:

The case for the three-office view rests in large part on the office of elder as it is found in the Old Testament. The collective entity of leaders known as "the elders" (*hazzekenim*) is referred to more than 100 times in the OT and about 60 times in the NT (*hoi presbyteroi*). According to Holladay, in the OT it refers to "the totality of men (with full beard) of mature years with legal competence in a community." As a collective unit in each village, the elders had governmental authority to rule and judicial power to function as judges in the community. The senior male heads of each household

met at “the gate of the city” to deliberate in council regarding disputes that had arisen within the community (Gen. 23:10, 18; 34:20; Deut. 25:7; 2 Sam. 15:2–4; Job 29:7ff; Amos 5:10–15). For example, if a man married a woman and later thinks that she was not a virgin, then her parents are to bring the tokens of virginity “to the elders of the city at the gate” in order to refute the husband’s allegations (Deut. 22:15). The levirate marriage of Boaz and Ruth was a legal transaction that took place in the gate of the city in the presence of the elders (Ruth 4:1, 10–11). In fact, “the gate” functions as a court and is so translated by the New American Standard Bible. The gate becomes a virtual synonym for the session of elders: “Her husband is known in the gates, when he sits among the elders of the land” (Prov. 32:23). It was the center of social, economic, civic, and judicial decision-making.

According to Numbers 11, however, the Israelite eldership was no mere sociological phenomenon but an institution of divine sanction that had ecclesiastical power as well. In response to Moses’s complaint that the burden of single-handedly hearing all the judicial cases of the people was becoming unmanageable, the Lord said, “Gather for me seventy men from the elders of Israel, whom you know to be the elders of the people and their officers and bring them to the tent of meeting” (v. 16). The Lord then took of the Spirit that was upon Moses and the Spirit on the seventy elders as well, who prophesied once but never thereafter (sic). The implications of this narrative are twofold. First, the eldership of Israel is of divine right—that is, it was sanctioned and authorized by divine revelation. It was not merely a human institution. This seems to be the overriding point of the Numbers 11 etiology (i.e., a narrative explaining origins). Second, the elders were anointed by the Spirit to perform their task of judging cases, yet they only prophesied once. [4]

With respect to the New Testament, the Apostles, having replaced the Levites as teachers of the Law—whose office was rendered nugatory by the superior Melchizedekian priesthood of Jesus Christ of the tribe of Judah—are seen in the First Council (Acts 15) meeting together with the elders. After the canon is complete, there are no more Apostles, but there is an office that carries on the ordinary aspects of the apostolate (the extraordinary having ceased with the close of the canon)—the New Testament ministerium. The Apostles spun off diaconal duties and retained ministerial ones (the Word and prayer—Acts 6), including rule. The ministerium is the ordinary successor to the apostolate even as the lay eldership is retained from land and synagogue. One may schematize it this way:



Irons then takes up the question: Are all presbyters bishops? Certainly we must look here at 1 Timothy 3. Several positions have emerged: presbyters and bishops are the same, with both referring to pastors/preachers (Charles Hodge); presbyters can refer more broadly to lay elders as well as ministers, though bishop always refers to ministers (Calvin); in the apostolic church there were only elders “with the office of preacher being a superadded function [in post-Apostolic times] to the Presbyterate”[5] (James Henley Thornwell); and presbyters and bishops both refer to elders and ministers alike (Thomas

Wetherow; Douglas Bannerman). The view that the minister and the ruling elder hold the same office (not simply that they share certain duties and not others) is a distinctly nineteenth-century Scottish and American innovation with respect to the recovered office view of the Reformation (the view that there are three, or four, offices: minister, doctor or teacher, ruling elder, and deacon).

The meaning of 1 Tim. 5:17 is also a component of this discussion. How one approaches this—and whether one hangs the whole of one’s office view on this verse—is key: all the views, save the consistent two-office view, have certain difficulties in interpreting this. Irons has an interesting proposal with respect to this verse, given its context of the care of the church for the aged: he thinks that this refers to superannuated ministers vis-à-vis those that continue active in service. No persuasive case has been made, in this writer’s estimation, that 1 Timothy 5:17 teaches a two-office view *simpliciter* and solves all the issues surrounding the two- vs. three-office debate. There remain considerable exegetical differences in interpreting this verse.

## Church Order Considerations

In the *Ecclesiastical Ordinances* of Calvin (1541), Calvin sees the “governors” as assistants to the minister and implies term limits for elders. His primary texts (though he does cite 1 Tim. 5:17) seem to be 1 Cor. 12:28 and Romans 12:8. The *First* (1560) and *Second* (1578) *Book of Discipline* in Scotland also address these questions. In the *First*, Knox and company use the term “seniors” rather than presbyters and limit the term to one year. The *Second*, drafted by Andrew Melville, is more mature: three-office and yet a higher view of the elder, including the view that the ruling elder is ordained to life-time service (one can have both a high view of the minister and the elder, protestations to the contrary notwithstanding).[6]

The *Westminster Form of Presbyterial Church-Government* (1645), part of the complex of documents comprising the work of the Westminster Assembly of Divines, makes the classic Calvinistic connection between the Levite of the Old Covenant and the minister of the New Covenant.

1. That the priests and Levites in the Jewish church were trusted with the public reading of the word is proved.
2. That the ministers of the gospel have as ample a charge and commission to dispense the word, as well as other ordinances, as the priests and Levites had under the law, proved, Isa. lxvi. 21. Matt. xxiii. 34. where our Saviour entitleth the officers of the New Testament, whom he will send forth, by the same names of the teachers of the Old.[7]

With respect to the ruling elder, Westminster refers to them as “other church governors” and says the following about them:

As there were in the Jewish church elders of the people joined with the priests and Levites in the government of the church; so Christ, who hath instituted government, and governors ecclesiastical in the church, hath furnished some in his church, beside the ministers of the word, with gifts for government, and with commission to execute the same when called thereunto, who are to join with the minister in the government of the church. Which officers reformed churches commonly call Elders.[8]

The view of the Westminster Assembly of Divines is classically three-office and well articulates the position of historic Presbyterianism.

The *Form of Government* for the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (2011 edition) in chapter 5 (“Offices in the Church”) sets forth three offices: “The ordinary and perpetual offices in the church are those given for the ministry of the Word of God, of rule, and of mercy.... Those who share in the rule of the church may be called elder.... Those who minister in mercy and service are called deacons. Those elders who have been endued and called of Christ to labor also in the Word and teaching are called ministers.”<sup>[9]</sup> Chapters 6, 10, and 11 are, respectively, devoted to the offices of ministers, ruling elders, and deacons. Chapters 7–9 are devoted to several expressions of the ministerial office, notably those of evangelists (chapter 7), pastors (chapter 8) and teachers (chapter 9). Chapter 6 summarizes the duties of ministers as follows:

Every minister of the Word, or teaching elder, must manifest his gifts and calling in these various aspects of the ministry of the gospel and seek by full exercise of his ministry the spiritual profit of those with whom he labors. As a minister or servant of Christ it is his duty to feed the flock of God, to be an example to them, to have oversight of them, to bear the glad tidings of salvation to the ignorant and perishing and beseech them to be reconciled to God through Christ, to exhort and convince the gainsayer by sound doctrine, and to dispense the sacraments instituted by Christ. Among those who minister the Word the Scripture distinguishes the evangelist, the pastor, and the teacher.<sup>[10]</sup>

It is true logically and inferentially that one is pushed either to episcopacy, on the one hand, or to congregationalism, on the other hand, in the rejection of the historic three-office position. If the minister and elder hold the same office, Hodge argues, this means that there is only one order of governors in the church—thus the leadership of the church is only clerical and does not properly include lay leadership, which is what the ruling elder is. The exclusion of lay leadership amounts to a practical episcopacy. Contrariwise, the genius of Presbyterianism in this regard involves the ruling elder (as representative of the congregation, as was the elder in the gate) joining with the minister in the joint rule of the church, a rule that is neither exclusively clerical nor exclusively congregational.

With respect to Reformed polity, over against Presbyterian polity, the shape of this discussion about the number of offices is somewhat different. Minister and elder in the continental schema came to be viewed as two different offices, with the ruling aspect separated from the pastoral one as if the office of minister does not entail the offices of ruling elder and deacon. In the Presbyterian view, the office of minister entails that of the elder and the deacon, even as the office of elder entails that of the deacon.

## **The Primacy of Preaching and the Place of the Preacher**

As we address the question of the distinctness of the ministerial office, it is helpful to recognize that there is a distinct office of preacher because there is a distinct call to preach. Preaching, accompanied by the sacraments, is the central activity of the church in the gathering and perfecting of the saints. This carries on the ordinary aspect of the office of the apostles as they gave themselves to the ministry of the Word and prayer. To be sure, the apostles delivered the Word of God in its inscripturated form as only the apostles and prophets could (Eph. 2:20): under the direct, immediate control of the Spirit of God—verbal, plenary inspiration. Being God-breathed, the Scripture was fully authoritative. Given its inspired and thus authoritative character it was infallible, inerrant, in a word—unique. We affirm the veracity (truthfulness), sufficiency (for doctrine and life), and perspicuity (clarity) of the Holy Bible.

The same Holy Spirit, who inspired the apostles and prophets—imbuing the Word with all of its marvelous attributes—has illumined the church through the ages to receive the inspired Word of God. The Spirit who gave the Word works in, with, and through the Word to apply to us all the benefits of the redemption purchased for us by our Lord Jesus Christ (WLC 154–155). And the chief way (WLC 155) that the Spirit makes use of the Word is through *its being preached*. For instance, Paul delivered the Word of the Lord to the Thessalonians in the power of the Holy Spirit, both as an inspired apostle *and* as a faithful preacher.

While many readers may assume that what the Thessalonians welcomed from Paul as the Word of God was the divinely inspired Word of an apostle, that does not seem the implication of 1 Thessalonians 2:13. To be sure, as an apostle Paul spoke, as noted, on occasion, divinely-inspired Words. But not always. *More often than not he preached*. Certainly the vast majority of Paul's teaching is not inscripturated. As an apostle, Paul was also an evangelist, a pastor, an elder, and a deacon. Much of what he did in ministry is to be associated with the ordinary continuing offices that we find described first in the Old Testament in the Levitical priesthood and then as modified in the New Testament.

I take 1 Thessalonians 2:13 as referring to preaching: the Word of God which they heard from Paul, and which they welcomed/received as the Word of God, was the *preaching* of the Apostle Paul. The most significant commentators (both Luther and Calvin) regard this as referring to Paul's preaching. WLC 160 cites this as a proof text that we are "to receive the truth [preached] . . . as the Word of God." According to the Second Helvetic Confession of 1566,<sup>[11]</sup> there is a sense in which the "the preaching of the Word of God is the Word of God." Thus all preachers who faithfully preach the Bible engage in the same sort of activity that Paul describes in 1 Thessalonians 2:13 and for which reception as the Word of God Paul commends the Thessalonians.

A high view of preaching entails a high view of the office of preacher, which is to say, the minister of the Word and sacrament. Historically, there was in Protestantism a high view of the preaching office. Among the magisterial Reformers (Luther, Zwingli, Calvin, Knox), the Protestant affirmation of "the priesthood of all believers" did not mean to them what it did to the Anabaptists and what it has also come to mean to many evangelicals: the leveling of all Christians and the assertion of the superfluity of special office in the church. The concept as adduced by the magisterial Reformers was anti-sacerdotal, not anti-office, even as *sola scriptura* meant that the Bible alone is God's Word not that the Bible only is to be consulted in our theological work (and creeds and confessions rejected).

Among the English and American Puritans there was also this conviction, what might be called a high view of the preaching office. The Westminster Assembly of Divines in its *Form of Presbyterial Church-Government*, as noted above, as well as in its *Directory for the Publick Worship of God* reflected such a high view of the preacher and his task (in its qualifications for preachers and in its description of preaching). The colonial New England parson, for instance, was looked to as the man in town to go to when seeking guidance, being, often, the only university trained man there. The witness of E. Brooks Holifield in *Theology in America*<sup>[12]</sup> to the place of pastor/theologians before the American Civil War is striking. There was a real appetite for serious theological teaching and preaching before the war, and it was met in the pulpits and in the writings of ministers in parish service. Unlike the years since the Civil War, those that preceded it enjoyed a higher view of the preacher and preaching. The theologian was not so much a "pure academic" as he was to become in the years following the war in which, having ravaged Germany and England, higher criticism finally took hold here. The "academic theologian" (if not the historian of religion) replaced the pastor as leading theological voice. But even more than this, the perceived need for any theological voice whatsoever faded.

What we have seen, beginning in the Enlightenment (which did not take its fuller effect in America until after the Civil War) and increasing in recent years, is a downgrade of the preaching office and of theological instruction in preaching (Bible reading becoming increasingly focused on reader-response and preaching becoming increasingly seeker-sensitive).

This downgrade was concomitant with the rise of the Intellectual, which occurred earlier in Europe than America. As McGrath notes in *The Twilight of Atheism*:

The emergence of the intellectual as a recognized social type is one of the most remarkable developments of recent centuries. Intellectuals became a secular priesthood, unfettered by the dogmas of the religious past, addressing a growing audience who were becoming increasingly impatient with the moral failures and cultural unsophistication of their clergy. At some point, perhaps one that can never be determined with historical accuracy, Western society came to believe that it should look elsewhere than to its clergy for guidance. Instead, they turned to the intellectuals, who were able to portray their clerical opponents as lazy fools who could do no more than unthinkingly repeat the slogans and nostrums of an increasingly distant past. A new future lay ahead, and society needed brave new thinkers to lead them to its lush Promethean pastures.

[13]

The modernism that developed after the Enlightenment witnessed the enthroning of naturalism and the secularization of the sciences; the post-modernism that arose in the wake of the evident failures of modernism saw the rejection of propositional truth and the embracing of epistemic skepticism. Both of these post-Enlightenment developments meant further marginalization of the office of minister and the replacement of that office with the scientist or therapist or spiritualist, with the laboratory and the couch shoving aside the pulpit. The response of the church and the ministry has varied, ranging from a call to return to pre-modernism, the re-embrace of rationalism, to the embrace of post-modernism in movements like the Emergent Church. What is needed, I believe, is a recovery of preaching and thus of the office of preacher.

The democratization of American religion would seek to separate the two questions, with some agreeing that preaching is the need of the hour but arguing that any committed Christian is called to and competent for such a task. Such a denial of the preaching office can be seen in a measure to flow out of both Great Awakenings but far more out of the Second, which denied man's inability and thus had an across the board effect of wiping out distinctions. Jacksonian democracy, Restorationism, and the whole American ethos of self-reliance contributed to what is sown after the Civil War when the office of preacher is low-rated. It is not only the Intellectual and the expert (the scientist, philosopher, psychiatrist, etc.) who shove aside the minister, it is also, on the other end of the spectrum, the anti-Intellectual who senses no need for the minister in the grip of a "Jesus, my Bible, and me" mentality.

The needed recovery of preachers and preaching will not come about through manipulative techniques (drama in worship, musical productions, etc.). It will only come about through the Church recognizing men who fit the bill of 1 Timothy 3, of giving such men solid theological training, and of placing such men in office, willing to receive with meekness and joy the Word of God from their lips. The cure for our spiritual ills can never be anything other than what God himself has prescribed. If our post-modern situation is rightly understood we have come full circle, in our neo-paganism, back to the pre-modern paganism of Paul's world, the world of Acts 17, to which world the Apostles, and those who followed them in the ministerial office, preached.

Preaching is not, as some post-modernists have claimed, passé, but as relevant as ever, particularly in a post-Christian world that has come more to resemble Paul's world than that of Christendom. The call to preach the gospel is a distinct call to which one is to give one's life, and it is a call that still goes out. We need to recover a high biblical Presbyterian view of both the office of preacher and the central activity to which that office is given: the preaching of the Word of the Lord, which God is pleased to use to gather and perfect the church, through the lips of those called to preach the gospel.

## Endnotes

- [1] *The Book of Church Order of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church*, Form of Government 3.1 (2011), 4.
- [2] *Book of Church Order*, Form of Government 10.3 (2011), 13.
- [3] Lectures on the doctrine of the church, Westminster Theological Seminary, 1988.
- [4] Lee Irons, private paper formerly published but no longer available on the Internet. Citations omitted.
- [5] James Henley Thornwell, *Collected Writings*, vol. 4 (1875; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1986), 119.
- [6] All references in this paragraph are from Lee Irons, private paper formerly published but no longer available on the Internet.
- [7] *The Confession of Faith* (Inverness: Free Presbyterian Publications), 399–400.
- [8] *Ibid.*, 402.
- [9] *Book of Church Order*, Form of Government 5.3 (2011), 8.
- [10] *Ibid.* 6.2, 9.
- [11] Jaraslov Pelikan and Valerie Hotchkiss, eds., *Creeds and Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition: Reformation Era*, vol. 2. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 460.
- [12] E. Brooks Holifield, *Theology in America: Christian Thought from the Age of the Puritans to the Civil War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).
- [13] Alister McGrath, *The Twilight of Atheism: The Rise and Fall of Disbelief in the Modern World* (New York: Random House, 2004), 49.

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