

The Role of Elders and Deacons

We cannot stand still in our Christian life. We either go forward or gradually slide backward. This is also true of the church. The church ought to go forward in its spiritual journey, but too often it resembles a comfortable museum. A church on the move must have leadership with vision and spiritual vitality. It needs praying leaders, men with a concern for the suffering, the wayward, the lost. The pastor simply cannot do it all, nor can he get the job done if the church leaders do not work with him. Obviously, no church can exist in this world for long, much less flourish, without some form of order or government. But who determines what kind of leadership and government the church should have? According to the Reformed faith, the Holy Scripture is the all-sufficient rule for our faith and practice. Therefore, a church on the move must major on the Word of God, teaching and preaching the Word and (most of all) obeying it. The church of all ages is exhorted that "everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way (1 Cor. 14:40). This order, so we believe and confess, our Lord has taught us in his Word. To maintain order and provide leadership, the Lord gave the church pastors, elders, and deacons. Scripture has very definite statements to make about qualifications or characteristics of people chosen to be office-bearers (1 Tim. 3).

Delegated Authority

Who gives the office-bearers the authority to serve in the church? All government of the church belongs properly to the Lord Christ alone. No one may rob Him of His crown rights (Eph. 5:23). In the Reformed tradition, there is no hierarchy, as it cannot do justice to the Kingship of Christ. By fulfilling their task the office-bearers may not lord it over each other but subject themselves to the Lordship of their only Master – Christ Jesus. They are elected with the approval of the congregation, but derive their authority solely from Jesus Christ.

John Calvin notes that Christ provided the church with office-bearers by which the true religion may be preserved. But preserving true religion means more than protecting the church from false teachings. Preserving true religion also means reaching out to the community with its spiritual and physical needs. The office-bearers encourage the congregation to reach beyond the walls of their church building. A church on the move must meet people where they are. Jesus was the friend of publicans and sinners. Jesus was crucified outside Jerusalem, where the crowd was so cosmopolitan that the inscription on the cross had to be written in three languages. Many churches today have abandoned the marketplace and spend their time reminding their membership of the Gospel.

The Call

The three offices in the church are the ministers of the Word and Sacraments, the elders and the deacons. No one can serve Christ in any of these offices unless he is lawfully called and ordained. When Christ, the King of the Church, calls someone to office, he is bound to obey the call, unless he has lawful objections. He may not take lightly the call to office. It is not a function he may pick up or lay down at will (1 Cor. 6:19b). Ordination is the confirmation of the call he has received from the congregation.

God will give him whatever is necessary to carry out his tasks. By their ordination vows, all office-bearers are pledged to minister according to the holy Word of God. The stress always falls on service. They follow in the footsteps of the Saviour, who wants all of them to taste and see that the Lord is good. Office-bearers, don't ration spiritual food or practical help and don't let the congregation go spiritually hungry or neglect their physical needs!

Encouragement

A newly elected office-bearer may wonder: How can I do the work? I feel so inadequate! One day a man who was nominated for elder came to see me. He told me, "Pastor, I feel totally inadequate." I said to him, "I am glad you feel inadequate. If you say, I can do it, then you are not equipped for your task." The Lord equips and encourages. Christ has promised abundant life, and He has given each of us certain abilities to use for furthering His Kingdom and to participate in building His Church. We do have the parable of the talents to instruct us. You can only fulfill your calling in faith. It has been given to you. You minister in the faith that the Lord will be with you until the end of the age (Matt. 28:20). This promise is not merely for all Christians but a special one for office-bearers. Jesus Christ commanded them to go and teach. And He gives them the assurance, "To Me has been given all power in heaven and earth. And afterwards I am with you always" (Matt. 28:19-20). So when you make a difficult pastoral visit or you think your task is never done, take comfort in the words of our Lord. Christ is with you. He gives you the words you need to say. The call to service is all about Jesus. He says, "Come, follow Me. I will make you fishers of men." Not "Go and make," but "I will make you." Take His ministry as an example to follow. He had a ministry of powerlessness. The verse in Zechariah, "not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord Almighty" (4:6) certainly applies to the life of Christ. He gives His followers a spiritual power to overcome evil, to resist temptation, to serve Him.

An office-bearer means to be a servant. The apostle Paul does not hesitate to speak of himself and his colleagues "as your servants for Jesus' sake" (2 Cor. 4:5). In other words, to be an office-bearer in the church is not a glorious, powerful, and successful position by the standards of the world. The opposite is true. Office bearers must die to dreams of relevance and success. They must let all that be crucified. They are followers of Jesus who had no influence, riches, or power. He was in human terms a loser. Christian service calls for self-sacrifice, discipline, commitment, caring more for others and God than we care for ourselves. And these qualities invigorate and strengthen those who practice them.

Love

The love for Christ should motivate office-bearers. Jesus asks of everyone who has been asked to serve as elder or deacon – "Do you love Me?" When they do not love the Lord and His church, they are not ready to serve in any office. When they can answer, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you", they are ready to serve. When the love for Christ shines through them, they are then showing "the most excellent way" (1 Cor. 13:1). Without an apology, they may love others in many ways. What did love look like as practised by Jesus? He fed people. He touched the untouchables. He healed their

infirmities. He never dismissed their frailties. He ate with his enemies – that is, he accepted hospitality from them. He was deeply concerned about their eternal welfare.

The Elders

Not everyone is called to become an office-bearer. A part of the congregation has special gifts for pastoral work. Another part of the congregation is in need of this care (1Cor. 12:7). What is the role of the elders? They have a pastoral task (Heb. 13:17). They are the good shepherds who oversee their flock (Acts 20:28). They minister to the doubting and the hurting. They help the congregation to understand their calling to care for and encourage each other. They exercise discipline when necessary for the good of the church. A church hurts when one of the members no longer walks in the way of the Lord or neglects the assembly of the saints on the Lord's Day. Each Christian is a letter of Christ which is read by the world. When one member lives and acts in conflict with the Gospel, the whole congregation and the Lord of the Church are being discredited (1 Peter 2:11-12). And when the elders see a member who does not know the Lord, they will seek to introduce him or her to the Saviour, the Lord of the Church. They welcome strangers after the service, offer them the opportunity to speak with them. They also want to find out who is missing in the service and why. The apostle Paul urged the elders "to warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone. Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always try to be kind to each other and to everyone else" (1 Thess. 5:14-15).

The Deacons

The Gospels describe our Lord's great concern and love for the poor, the outcasts and the suffering. Early Christians were instructed to have the same compassion for the poor, the needy and the sick. This ministry to the poor made a great impact in the ancient world. Showing mercy was not a Greek or Roman virtue. The principle of love as motivation for doing good was not known in ancient pagan civilization. Rome's pagan religions provided no motive for charity. Compassion was rare. In Stoic philosophy it was disrespectful to associate with the weak, the poor, and the downtrodden. Pagan generosity was not motivated by the love of God or a spirit of self-denial. The giver expected a favour in return. Tertullian (d. ca. 220), the Latin church father in northern Africa, informs us that the early Christians had a common fund to which they gave voluntarily, without any compulsion, on a given day of the month or whenever they wished to contribute. This fund supported widows, the physically disabled, needy orphans, the sick, prisoners incarcerated for their Christian faith, and teachers requiring help; it provided burials for poor people and sometimes funds for the release of slaves. To Christians the individual, regardless of his social or economic status, was valuable because he was created in the image of God. Thus, the difference between Christian and Roman charity in regards to motivation and practice were profound.

In Acts 6 the apostles call upon the congregation to point out men filled with the Holy Spirit and wisdom who can assist the apostles in caring for the widows, the poor, and the needy. John Calvin comments: "Scripture specifically designates as deacons those whom the church has appointed to distribute alms and take care of the poor, and serve

as stewards of the common chest of the poor" (Institutes, IV, III, 9). The deaconate, therefore, is a continuing spiritual ministry to assist the physical needs of God's people. Deacons must guide, encourage, and comfort when ministering to their physical needs. When deacons carry out their delegated authority to serve, they must be aware of or must know what the needs of the household of faith are first of all, as well as the needy in general. Don't wait when confronted with a need and then help. Deacons should have a prevention strategy for maintaining or improving the health and well being of the membership. Crisis intervention strategy should reflect plans in dealing with emergency situations, hospitalization, extreme needs, and deaths in a Christ-like manner. It is important to prevent poverty. That's why family visitation and knowing your community are important.

The deacons offer help when natural caregivers are unable to do so (2 Cor. 12:14; 1 Tim. 5:4,8). Deacons don't offer aid in the narrow sense only. They don't operate like a government welfare agency and give handouts. They aim to realize the high ideal that all children of God can rejoice in the riches of Christ. They keep in mind that giving aid is more than providing for the basic necessities of life; it should be accompanied by prayer and words of comfort from Scripture. The deaconate is a continuing spiritual ministry to assist the physical needs of God's people. Deacons must guide, encourage and comfort the needy when ministering to their physical needs, also when seeking to meet the needs of victims of disasters in communities. Deacons encourage the congregation to be generous in giving. When they visit families, they make known the needs that are present in the congregation, and if necessary warn against the love of money which is the root of all evil.

The funds needed to provide help come from the offerings collected during the worship service (Heb. 13:16). A part of the worship service, therefore, is to remember the poor through our offerings. In Lord's Day 33, Q.A.103, we confess that it is God's will for us in the fourth commandment "to bring Christian offerings for the poor." When the need is great and the ordinary means are not available, a special collection may be held (2 Cor. 8:1,19, Rom. 15:26f.) The important fact is not that we offer money for causes, but that our neighbour receives the necessary help (Rom.13:8-10).

The Role of Elders and Deacons

All power in the church is rooted in Jesus Christ alone – to teach doctrine, to proclaim the Gospel, to govern the congregations, and to care for the poor. Our Lord sets the agenda of the church. He gave the church leaders various tasks. The church at Philippi had both "elders and deacons" (Phil. 1:1). The apostle Peter addressed the elders in the church as a group in reminding them of their God-given calling (1 Pet. 5:1,2). Although the Lord gave three separate offices for the sake of His church, the underlying unity of all three offices – pastor, elder, and deacon – may never be obscured. Yet the distinctive contribution of each office ought not to be forgotten either. For example, the deaconate is at times regarded as a training school for future elders. Some even treat deacons as "junior" elders. But this is wrong. A deacon is an office-bearer called to a unique function, the same as the pastor and the elder. The three offices exist for the spiritual welfare of the church. This demands the closest possible cooperation while preserving the unique character and contribution of each. On this basis, elders and

deacons, together with the pastors, form the council of the church. No minister or elder or deacon exercises his office in the congregation as an individual. All decisions are taken by the council properly constituted and recognized in the church.

What is required by the office-bearers is faithfulness to Christ in their assigned task. The minister of the Word is charged to be faithful in his proclamation of God's truth and the administration of the sacraments. In this he is a minister of Christ, and steward "of the mysteries of God" (1 Cor. 4:1). In his preaching he should also urge practical Christianity, how to apply the Gospel to daily life without neglecting to point out that there is a heaven to be gained and a hell to be shunned.

Although their offices are separate in function, elders, deacons, and pastors interact. They consult each other for the welfare of the congregation and to foster outreach into the community. Elders are called to govern churches. When the ruling elders meet, they discuss concerns about catechism instruction, family visiting reports, discipline matters, and the Lord's Supper supervision. Deacons have their own meetings where they discuss the ministry of Christian mercy. The office-bearers in the church work together. They are co-workers with Christ. They plant or sow, but not one of them can give the increase. The Holy Spirit alone can give life. When office-bearers believe in the Triune God who can perform miracles, they can carry out their task with confidence and hope. When they see results, they give thanks to the Lord.

Why did Christ provide the church with office-bearers and order? He did this so that our union and communion with Him and each other may be preserved. Only in obedience to His way can one experience that full and fragrant life of which believers sing:

"Blest be the tie that binds
Our hearts in Christian love:
The fellowship of kindred minds
Is like to that above."

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