

# The Gospel Displayed in the Office of Deacon

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## INTRODUCTION

One might rightly wonder why it is we ordain deacons in the Presbyterian Church of America (PCA). That is, not that we have deacons, but why is it we lay hands on them and ordain them to office just as we do with elders? After all, deacons do not sit on church courts nor exercise any judicial power within the church. Why then should they be considered officers and does it really matter? Is anything lost if we have deacons but do not actually ordain them as church officers?

Based on this, some might even be tempted to suggest Christ gives to His church only one perpetual office, that of elder. The thought would be that since only elders exercise ecclesiastical authority in the church courts, that they alone can be considered officers of Christ. Deacons, whatever else they might be, are not actual officers in His Church. Deacons serve an important function and must be scripturally qualified, cf. I Timothy 3 and Titus 3, but they do not exercise ecclesiastical authority and are therefore, not officers. Even in Acts 6, the authority given to these first apparent deacons is one of managerial authority, not one of actual ecclesiastical authority to whom God's people must yield obedience, cf. Hebrews 11:17 and Acts 20:28. Moreover, within the Reformed faith, the Westminster doctrinal standards also appear to support that only elders are officers in Christ's church, cf. Westminster Confession of Faith 30.2 and Westminster Larger Catechism 45.

That is an argument which might be heard in some circles. Obviously, this claim runs counter to the vast majority of the Reformed tradition throughout its history, as well as current practice in every major Reformed body of our day.<sup>1</sup> But if true, this causes serious problems for the PCA and its Book of Church Order (BCO), which clearly declares deacons to be officers in Christ's Church, cf. BCO 1-4, 4-2, 7-2, 9, 12-5b, 20-7, and elsewhere.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> As a small sampling, see John Calvin, *Christian Institutes*, 4.3-4., ed. John T. McNeil (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960 ed.), pp. 1061ff; Thomas Smyth, *An Ecclesiastical Catechism of the Presbyterian Church* (New York: Leavitt & Trow, 1843), pp. 470-471; James Bannerman, *The Church of Christ* (Edmonton, AB: Still Waters Revival Books, reprint 1991; original 1869), Vol. II, pp. 297-8; John L. Girardeau, *The Importance of the Office of Deacon in The Southern Presbyterian Review*, Vol. 32.1 (January 1881), pp. 1-29; and in our day, Don K. Clements, *Biblical Church Government* (Narrows, VA: Metokos Press, 2003), pp. 97-108; Edmund P. Clowney, *The Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), p. 213; Sean Michael Lucas, *On Being Presbyterian* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2006), pp. 142-3; and L. Roy Taylor, *Who Runs the Church?: four views on church government*, ed. Stephen Cowan (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), p. 82. And no one should neglect the very helpful index of historical resources on the study of the diaconate assembled by Wayne Sparkman at the PCA Historical Center, available online at <http://www.pcahistory.org/topicalresources/index.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Likewise, if this claim is true, it has certain implications as to who may serve as a deacon regarding the women's issue. Even though this paper is not addressed to that question specifically, we do not wish to ignore the implications involved. If deacons are not actually to be ordained to office, but are merely persons entrusted with the task of service within a local church, then one theological reason for limiting the diaconate to men only is possibly mitigated. That is, that officers are to be male only after the

How are we to evaluate this argument? It certainly raises some excellent questions as to the nature of church authority and those who are to exercise it. It clearly highlights some important distinctions between elders and deacons. But can we say that Christ officially rules and represents Himself to His Church only through elders and not through deacons? And while this may seem like a highly technical question – whether to ordain or merely commission deacons – it reflects how we believe Christ wants Himself represented to His Church. And that in turn has large implications for the nature of Christian ministry and the health of the Church – whether Christ will be represented in all His fullness and whether the structure of the Church will reflect that fullness in her officers. How we answer may also reveal whether our understanding of true leadership and power is shaped more by the patterns of this world or by Christ and the economy of the Gospel which reverses the patterns of this world, cf. I Corinthians 1:18ff; James 1:9-10.

At the start, as we consider whether deacons are officers or not, we look to the New Testament. On the face of it, deacons appear to be equally officers in the New Testament church along with elders. Their qualifications are listed side by side in I Timothy, with the only substantive distinction that of the elders' ability to teach, cf. I Timothy 3:2 and Titus 1:9. In Philippians 1:1, Paul writes to “all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons.”<sup>3</sup> And in Acts 6, when the Seven are set aside to serve, the apostles “prayed and laid their hands on them,” an almost certain reference to ordination, cf. I Timothy 4:14 and 5:22.<sup>4</sup>

And yet those who contend that deacons are not quite officers will readily concede that the function of deacon is important. But they reiterate that none of this proves that deacons hold ecclesiastical authority, that they are actual officers of Christ. Therefore, they argue, the laying on of hands in Acts 6 must not be ordination but some sort of non-ordaining empowering or commissioning like we see in Acts 8:17 or Acts 13:3. And so the question turns on the nature of authority within the Church and what it means to be an officer of Christ. Surprisingly, many of our historical resources do not address this question thoroughly. For instance, two 19<sup>th</sup> century Presbyterians known for their ecclesiology, Thomas Smyth and James Bannerman, simply assert

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pattern of Christ and His apostles, and so that the Church, “the household of God” (I Tim 3:15) may reflect and harmonize with the family order, in which husbands are to be head of their wives, even as Christ is head of the Church. This order applies to deacons as well, who are to lead the Church in service which accords with a husband's duty of servant-leadership towards his wife. Thus to open the deaconate to women, but not the eldership, may in fact have the unwitting effect of communicating to men in the Church that the truest form of Christian leadership is one of rule, not service. Of course, as this is first and foremost a spiritual issue, this may well be a problem whether or not we ordain women to the deaconate.

<sup>3</sup> It need not be reiterated here, we trust, that *episcopos*, or overseer/bishop is the same office, Biblically, as that of *presbytos*, or elder, cf. Acts 20 and Titus 1.

<sup>4</sup> James Wilson cites I Corinthians 12:28 (the gift of “helps”) and I Peter 4:10-11 (“administer God's grace in its various forms: if anyone speaks... if anyone serves...”) as other references to the office of deacon. While possible, we find these texts less convincing. See James M. Wilson, *The Deacon: an Inquiry into the Nature, Duties and Exercise of the Office of Deacon in the Christian Church* (Philadelphia: Wm. S. Young, 1869), p. 6.

that deacons are spiritual officers without any discussion of what it means that they are *officers* of Christ.<sup>5</sup>

And so we must back up and ask, what does it mean for Christ to represent Himself in an official manner in the Church? How does Christ rule and serve the Church today? And what does the Gospel itself tell us about the nature of Church authority and how Christ's ministry is to be represented in the Church? And so before we can look at the various proof texts concerning elders and deacons, we must begin theologically and Christologically. We must develop a theology of office.

#### CHRIST AS PROPHET, PRIEST AND KING IN HIS CHURCH: ELDERS

Based on a rich Biblical theology, our Westminster Standards tell us that Christ rules His Church as our Prophet, Priest and King (WLC 42-45). We need not cite the numerous Biblical texts which make this case. But this summary of Christ's offices is clear and profitable: as Prophet, Christ brings us God's Word and is God's Word; as Priest, Christ intercedes for us at God's right hand; and as King, Christ rules over us and protects us, defeating all our enemies.

We might also note from our Biblical theology that in a lesser sense, all Christians share these offices with Christ. We are all, in one sense, prophets, priests and kings. We are to teach and admonish one another (Colossians 3:16). We are all to pray directly to God as a holy priesthood (I Peter 2:9). And we will all one day rule with Christ, even over angels (I Corinthians 6:3). That Christ's power is given to the whole church, and not just to one set of men is recognized in the PCA's BCO, which states,

The power which Christ has committed to His Church vests in the *whole body*, the rulers and *those ruled*, constituting it a spiritual commonwealth. This power, as exercised by the people, extends to the choice of those officers whom *He has appointed* in His Church" (BCO 3-1; emphasis added).

This statement from the BCO is helpful for many reasons. On the one hand, it guards against spiritual tyranny by an oligarchy of self-appointed men. Christ's power resides in the "whole body," and all believers are equally brothers and sisters. On the other hand, it guards against the tyranny of democracy, since it states that officers chosen by the people are in fact "appointed" by Christ, not the local church itself. These officers, once elected and ordained, are to represent Christ's rule, not necessarily the wishes of the people. But Christ's power is given to both.<sup>6</sup>

In other words, Christ gives men as gifts to the Church to rule as His stewards in His physical absence (Ephesians 4:8-13; I Corinthians 4:1). It therefore follows that as under-shepherds, these officers are to represent Christ in all His offices as they lead the church. This is very clear in the case of elders. They are prophetic insofar as they teach the Word of Christ, cf. Acts 6:2; I

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<sup>5</sup> Smyth, op. cit., pp. 470-471; Bannerman, op. cit., Vol. II, pp. 297-8.

<sup>6</sup> See Bannerman's discussion of this dual granting of church power to both officers and to the church as a whole, op. cit., Vol. I, pp. 262-275. So also Lucas, op. cit., pp. 140-1.

Timothy 3:2, Titus 5:9.<sup>7</sup> Elders are priestly in that they are especially to pray for the church, cf. Acts 6:4; I Timothy 2:8.<sup>8</sup> And they are kingly in that they rule over God's people as shepherds of the flock, cf. Acts 20 and I Peter 5:1-4. And in all of this, they do so in an official manner. Christ has appointed them as elders, and so they are particularly called to teach, pray and rule.

Therefore, since elders represent Christ's offices of Prophet, Priest and King to His Church, they are properly called officers of His church. They are called to teach and preach the Gospel of grace and to assure and seal to all true believers the eternal favor of God (cf. Matthew 16:19; John 20:23). They are to comfort the weak, discipline the unrepentant, and decide controversies troubling the Church, cf. Acts 15. They are given real authority to represent Christ in all His manifold grace to the Church.

### CHRIST IN HIS HUMILIATION IN THE CHURCH: DEACONS

However, we must continue to explore the offices of Christ and how they are represented in His Church today. When we reflect upon Christ as our Prophet, Priest and King, we tend to focus upon the glory of His rule, of Jesus in His victorious resurrection and ascension. And that is certainly one side of the redemptive story, the full consummation of which we all eagerly await (Romans 8:23).

And yet, immediately after the Westminster Larger Catechism describes Christ executing the offices of Prophet, Priest and King, it asks an interesting question: "What was the estate of Christ's humiliation?" (WLC 46). It answers:

The estate of Christ's humiliation was that low condition, wherein He for our sakes, emptying Himself of His glory, took upon Him the form of a servant, in His conception and birth, life, death, and after His death, until His resurrection.

In other words, Christ is not just our Prophet but the One who obeys the Word of God in our place. Christ is not just our Priest but the very sacrifice offered up for us. Christ is not just our King but our servant. Christ brought about our salvation not through the estate of His glory, which He laid aside, but through the estate of His humiliation.

And so the question is, does that humiliation of Christ continue in His church and her mission? Indeed, throughout the New Testament we see its writers putting forth the model for the Christian life and the Church to be that of Christ in His first coming, not His second; of Christ in His humiliation, not His glory. That we are to be servants before we are kings. Among many places, we see this in Philippians 2, I Corinthians 4, II Corinthians 1 & 12, James 1, and throughout I Peter. Indeed, there is hardly a page in the New Testament where we do not see this theme. Jesus Himself drives this point home on the night of His betrayal when He washed His

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<sup>7</sup> Once again, for the purposes of this paper, we assume we need not prove that the revelatory office of prophet ceased with the apostolic era and the close of the Scriptural canon.

<sup>8</sup> Note the use of "lifting up holy hands," a clear sign of official leadership, cf. Exodus 9:29; I Kings 8:22; Psalm 28:2; 63:4; 134:2; 141:2; Isaiah 1:15.

disciples feet, setting for them an example and telling them “to do as I have done for you” (John 13:15; cf. Mark 10:42-45; Luke 22:25-27).<sup>9</sup>

And so it is clear that in the same way all Christians share in the offices of Christ in a sense as lesser prophets, priests and kings, so we are equally called to share in His sufferings as sacrificial servants. Indeed we learn that it is only as the Church shares in Christ’s humiliation that the Gospel truly goes forth. And surely elders themselves are especially called to share in Christ’s sufferings, to be those who serve the Church in humility even as they rule as Christ’s stewards, cf. Philippians 2, II Timothy 2:3-4; I Peter 5.

But the question then arises, if Christ appoints elders who represent His rule as Prophet, Priest and King in the Church, does Christ also appoint men who particularly represent His humiliation in these offices? In other words, are any of us truly capable of representing Christ in all of His richness to the Church? The Apostles did not think so. That is why they state so plainly in Acts 6 that, as important as distributing food to the needy within the Church was, they themselves were not called to do so. They were called to “prayer and the ministry of the Word.” Thus they authorized the selection of seven men, “full of wisdom and the Holy Spirit,” to represent Christ to the Jerusalem church in this more practical way.

In other words, in this passage, God is showing us that He cares for both body and soul and that care for physical needs is indeed a spiritual ministry (cf. BCO 9-3). It is in fact, according to James 1:27, what “true religion” looks like, and a reminder that heaven itself will be a very “earthy” place. Why then, should this ministry be any less “official” or “authoritative” than that of elders? Both elders and deacons represent the ministry of Christ within His church. Their functions are different, but together, both offices minister Christ in all His fullness. If the Apostles thought that one office could represent Christ fully, they would not have called for the selection of the first deacons nor ordained them to table service.

Thus, as elders are called officially to represent Christ as Prophet, Priest and King, so deacons are called to officially represent Christ in the “humiliation” form of these same offices. As elders are called to teach, pray and rule, so deacons are called to act, sacrifice and serve. Elders, in one sense, represent Christ’s office in His heavenly glory, binding on earth what the Gospel has already sealed in heaven. Deacons, in another sense, represent Christ’s office in his earthly humiliation, ministering to the lowly in their need, caring for their bodies, even as the elders care for their souls. But both are of Christ!

And so we are not surprised then when we see Paul list overseers and deacons side by side in Philippians 1. We are not surprised when he lists both offices’ qualifications together in the

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<sup>9</sup> As Clowney puts it, “Our understanding of the government of Christ’s church must begin with the Lord himself and his *kingdom authority*. He is the Head of the church; his rule is unique and incomparable. A second principle derives from the first. The church shows the *organic life* of Christ’s body: it lives as an organism, not just an organization. The third principle is no less essential. The church is not like the kingdoms of this world, for it is organized for service, not dominion. All government in the church is *stewardship*: *i.e.* its leaders are servant-managers, who use their authority only to advance the interests of those they represent and serve,” *op. cit.*, p. 202.

Pastorals. And we are not at all surprised that when the first deacons were chosen, the apostles laid their hands on them ordaining them to this high office of serving in Christ's stead.<sup>10</sup> We are not surprised because Jesus describes Himself as a "table server," a deacon in Luke 22:27: "Who is greater, the one who is at the table, or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is at the table? But I am among you as one who serves (*diakonos*)."<sup>11</sup>

Deacons are no less officers of Christ than are elders. To lose this would truncate Christ's true authority in the Church, and we would lose a very important aspect of Christ's ministry to us. To ordain elders but merely to commission deacons unintentionally communicates that teaching and praying are altogether superior to deeds and service, despite Acts 20:35, Galatians 2:10 and James 1:27. It communicates that God cares for souls more than bodies, when we know that our resurrection will be bodily, as was Christ's. It communicates that Christ's humiliation is something that is past and not the model for the Church today as represented in the office of deacon.<sup>12</sup>

However, ordaining deacons to office maintains the fullness of Christ's ministry in the Church, in both His estates, in His glory and in His humiliation.<sup>13</sup> And that can only lead to a healthier church – and the spread of the Gospel. It is surely not insignificant that the first thing which Luke records after the selection of the first deacons was that "the Word of God spread," and "the number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly" (Acts 6:7). This was because Christ had raised up both elders (the Apostles) and deacons (the Seven) to teach and demonstrate the Gospel in His Church. Surely, we would want to continue such health and fullness in the Church today by continuing to ordain both elders and deacons as stewards of Christ's ministry.

## TRUE CHURCH AUTHORITY IN ALL ITS FULLNESS

And yet that raises one last issue which must be settled. Part of the objection to deacons being ordained to office is that they do not sit in on church courts, that they do not hold the keys to the kingdom, as do elders, cf. WCF 30.2. And yet, as we have been arguing, Christ's authority in

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<sup>10</sup> We might also note the high calling two of the Seven received later in Acts. Stephen becomes the first martyr of the Church in Acts 7. Moreover, his defense before the Sanhedrin takes the form of a sermon on the history of redemption. Then in Acts 8, Philip proclaims Christ in Samaria and is then directed by God to the Ethiopian eunuch. And while it can be argued that both these men were no longer acting as deacons but rather in the special apostolic office of Evangelist, cf. Acts 21:8, Ephesians 4:11 and II Timothy 4:5, we find it nonetheless significant that God chose two of the seven "table-servers" to fulfill these high callings in the early church.

<sup>11</sup> So Timothy J. Keller, *Ministries of Mercy*, (Phillipsburg: NJ: P&R Publ., 1997), p. 137.

<sup>12</sup> See Keller's argument for the importance of this dual-fold ministry of Word and Deed together for the spread of the Gospel, *ibid.*, pp. 106-119.

<sup>13</sup> This is not to argue that the diaconate is not still subordinate to the Session in its activities, cf. BCO 9-2, nor that a diaconate is essential to the existence of a local church, but rather to its health and good order. This distinction may explain why there is a good bit more material on the office of elder than on that of deacon, cf. Acts 20, Titus 1, I Peter 5 and BCO 8.

the Church is manifold. He has the authority to discipline, in His glory as it were; but also the authority to serve, in His humiliation.<sup>14</sup> But both are authoritative. And both require official leadership. Deacons are no less official simply because they serve rather than adjudicate matters of discipline. And just because WCF 30.2 and BCO Preliminary Principle 3 state that church discipline belongs to the “officers,” that in itself does not preclude the possibility of another kind of officer who does not exercise church discipline.

Nor does it mean that deacons do not have other kinds of real authority as they represent Christ in His Church. In fact, the BCO makes plain that there are different kinds of church power:

Ecclesiastical *power*, which is wholly spiritual, is twofold. The officers exercise it sometimes severally, as in preaching the Gospel, administering the Sacraments, reproofing the erring, *visiting the sick, and comforting the afflicted, which is the power of order*; and they exercise it sometimes jointly in Church courts, after the form of judgment, which is the power of jurisdiction (BCO 3-2, emphasis added).

This description of two-fold power in the Church may at first appear to be an unscriptural or artificial distinction. However, it is simply a way to understand the two kinds of power we see Christ giving His church in the New Testament; one of individually “ordering” the church by ministering through ordinances, cf. Acts 20:18-35; and the other of jointly “judging” the church by the proclamations of church courts, cf. Acts 15; 20:28-31.

Now, clearly the second kind of church power which is described, the joint power of jurisdiction, belongs only to elders. And if that were the only kind of church power that the Scriptures and the Book of Church Order recognized, then deacons would not be officers. But this paragraph explains that there is another form of church power, the “power of order.”

The power of order is that church power which Christ gives to His officers to exercise severally (which means individually, though of course, it can be done in groups). And this power involves all sorts of different ministries – the ministry of the Word and Sacrament for instance, which belongs to elders. But it also mentions as examples, “visiting the sick” and “comforting the afflicted,” a ministry which is precisely suited to deacons (BCO 9-2). And this kind of ministry also is a form of “ecclesiastical power.” It does not look like power to us because it does not involve judicial decisions or debates or voting. And yet this kind of mercy ministry is called, “power.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> See Paul in I Corinthians 4:21 for a possible demonstration of this two-fold authority, when he states, “Shall I come to with a whip, or in love and with a gentle spirit?” As an apostle, Paul had the authority to do both, but he greatly preferred that the Corinthians yield, so that he might be their servant rather than their judge. But both approaches would be Christ’s ministry through Paul to the church at Corinth.

<sup>15</sup> Morton Smith confirms that this power of order belongs to deacons as well as to elders. At the same time, he explains that the vow from BCO 24-5 which the congregation makes to its officers is worded that the obedience promised is only to elders, not deacons. Morton Smith, *Commentary on the PCA Book of Church Order* (Greenville, SC: Greenville Seminary Press, 1990), pp. 3-2; 24-5. However, one might ask if such obedience is only formally required when elders exercise the power or jurisdiction jointly, rather than in their several exercise of the power of order.

Visiting the sick and comforting the afflicted is ecclesiastical power precisely because it is the power of the Gospel. It is the power of Christ going forth through the Church in His humiliation to minister to those in great need, as Jesus Himself described His ministry:

The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach Good News to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor (Luke 4:18-19, quoting Isaiah 61:1-3).<sup>16</sup>

This power of order, of ministering the Gospel, is just as much true ecclesiastical power as judicial discipline. And since this kind of ministry of mercy is power, it is fitting that those who minister this kind of power are ordained to do so. Deacons may not exercise judicial authority, but their power to represent Christ is real. Deacons are officers of Christ precisely because He appoints them to represent Himself, and He gives them “ecclesiastical power” to do so, the power of order, the power of mercy.

And this brings us to our conclusion. If we truncate church authority to be only that of the judicial kind, that of “jurisdiction,” then we have lost part of Christ’s official ministry within the Church. We have lost the power of order, the power of mercy, the power of ministering in Christ’s name, even when it involves no debates or votes. We have misunderstood the nature of Christ’s authority in our midst. That He came not only to rule over us, but to serve us. Not only to pray for us, but to die for us. Not only to teach us, but to be the One who obeyed for us. And it is those who are ordained to the office of deacon who best illustrate this side of Christ’s ministry.

It is the deacon who best demonstrates the mercy and service of Christ which the elders teach. It is the deacon who thus fills out the Gospel which the elders proclaim. It is the deacon who best reminds us that power in the Church is not to be like power in the world, because true power is first and foremost the power to serve. And thus it is the Gospel which compels us to ordain deacons in the Church so that Christ, our “table-server,” may be seen in all His fullness. We ordain deacons to office so that service is given its proper place of honor next to teaching. That Word and Deed may stand together. We ordain deacons because of the Gospel of Jesus Christ who came not to be served but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many.

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In that case, one might argue that deacons’ leadership in service is to be followed in a general sense in the same general manner as the congregation follows the elders’ leadership in prayer and doctrine. But this type of obedience is of a general benevolent nature, rather than that specific obedience which can be required of a member by a church court, acting jointly with the power of jurisdiction.

<sup>16</sup> Note how Jesus leaves out the next phrase from Isaiah 61:3, “and the day of vengeance of our God,” indicating that the time of this kind of power had not yet arrived.