

The Doctrine of the Church (Elders and Deacons)

*Derek Berry
Calvary Baptist Church
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[What follows is the transcript of a sermon. It was initially intended to be heard, not read, so the tone is more conversational than academic. It has only been loosely edited, so forgive any grammatical, syntactical, or spelling errors. If you have questions, please contact Pastor Derek at dberry@calvarybaptist.church.

Isn't it interesting how we can know the title of a role but have no idea what that job actually entails? When I was a juvenile probation officer, people legit believed I had the authority to take their kids to jail if they broke the law! When my job mainly consisted of paperwork. Perhaps you've had similar stories.

How often do people possess an erroneous description of both pastors and deacons? One that is more informed by their present tradition than it is from Scripture. Traditionally, particularly in Baptist circles, deacons have been seen as the final court of appeals in any matter within the local church. And contemporary ideas of the pastor have more to do with being a CEO of a Fortune 500 company rather than a shepherd to the people. Is this the correct understanding of these offices? Are churches free to define the office as these, please? Or are there written instructions that provide us with all we need to define the office of deacon and elder? It should be no surprise to you that I argue the latter.

So, we'll continue our doctrine of the church series this morning by addressing the offices of pastors and deacons. We've addressed the authority God gives the local church, namely, to decide who's in and out regarding membership and leadership. And the members are wholly responsible for protecting the gospel within the local church. Opponents of congregationalism often criticize this interpretation of church polity as abdicating pastors of their authority and leadership. And you may be asking, if the congregation is responsible for so much, how does the Bible describe the role of the pastors and deacons? Well, let's open God's Word and see.

Take your copy of God's Word and meet me in Acts 6.

*Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution.
-Acts 6:1*

Notice that as the church grows, so does the administrative complexity. There arises a conflict between two ethnicities. So, what's the response of the Apostles?

² And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. ³ Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. ⁴ But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word." -Acts 6:2-4

So, the Apostles don't look to immediately solve the problem themselves. As a matter of fact, they mentioned that it would be detrimental for the Apostles to give up preaching the Word to attend to this matter. Instead, they advise the church to choose equipped men to devote themselves to this work. And what is the result of the local church following the instructions of the Apostles?

⁷ And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith. -Acts 6:7

The result is that the ministry continued to flourish. In short, the Apostles were adamant about devoting themselves to preaching and prayer. This isn't to say that these other matters weren't necessary; widows needed to get fed! But what we see here is a division of labor between pastors, who are now the primary preachers/teachers of the Word, and deacons. We'll find this pattern throughout the remainder of the New Testament.

Let's begin by considering deacons, and then we'll spend most of our time on elders. What does the office of deacon entail? In other words, what does the Bible say that deacons do? Well, first, we need to make clear that we're addressing the official office of the deacon. The word simply means servant. So, in one sense, every Christian is called to deacon.

⁴³ But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant...-Mark 10:43

And even Jesus came to deacon.

⁴⁵ For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." -Mark 10:45

But then there's the official office of deacon, one of two offices that God has established within the local church.

Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons... -Philippians 1:1

And then, Paul provides Timothy with the deacon qualifications in his first epistle. To be clear, we're addressing the official designation of a deacon. What do they do? Although the Bible

doesn't give us great detail, Acts 6 provides at least three deacon responsibilities. First, deacons care for physical needs. In Acts 6:2, the work is described as deaconing tables. In other words, they cared for the people's physical demands, which contributed to their spiritual and physical well-being. Secondly, they strive for unity in the church. By caring for the widows, the deacons helped cut off the ethnic disunity harming the church. The physical neglect was causing spiritual conflict within the body. Thirdly, deacons support the ministry of the elders/pastors. In Acts 6:3, the Apostles acknowledge the importance of meeting physical needs within the local church. Therefore, by the ministry of the deacon to the widows, they supported the teachers of the Word in their ministry. So, in this sense, deacons are fundamentally encouragers and supporters of the ministry of the elders/pastors. And I feel privileged to say that here at Calvary Baptist Church, our deacons do just that. Because Ray serves this church regarding our facilities, I can allocate my time to studying the Word. Because Joshua serves this church regarding our technological side of things, I can devote time to prepare to teach and preach the Word. Because Edwin serves this church through benevolence and Sunday morning technical issues, I can assign spend time praying for the church. And because Samuel leads our praise team, I can craft sermons. This is the biblical office of a deacon. Which may or may not look much different than you may have experienced growing up in a Baptist church. This is what we find in the Bible, nevertheless. And what about the qualifications for deacons? We find them in 1 Timothy.

⁸ Deacons likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain. ⁹ They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. ¹⁰ And let them also be tested first; then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless. ¹¹ Their wives likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things. ¹² Let deacons each be the husband of one wife, managing their children and their own households well. ¹³ For those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves and also great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus. -1 Timothy 3:8-13

In the future, when you vote on receiving a new deacon, these are the qualities you should be looking for in said candidate. Now, let's consider verse 11. Can women serve as deacons? Well, I believe the Bible teaches that they can for several reasons. We could spend much time here, but we must examine the role of the pastor; therefore, I'll try to build a quick yet tight case for deaconesses.

First, the Greek word for women and wife are the same. So in 1 Timothy 3:11, the translators of each particular English Bible are making an interpretive choice by using the word wife or woman. You see where the translators of the ESV stand on this topic, as they've translated the word as a wife. However, the NASB translates this word as women. Since they aren't two different Greek words for wife and woman, it's up to us as interpreters of God's Word to allow the context to help us discover what Paul had in mind here. I'll give a few reasons why I think he's saying women and not wives of deacons.

First, it seems odd that Paul would list the characteristics needed in a deacon's wife but not do the same for overseers. This seems a bit backward. If elders are the primary teachers and leaders of the church, shouldn't we examine their wives and not the deacons?

Second, in the middle of a discussion concerning the qualifications of deacons, Paul uses the term "likewise" or "in the same way." The most natural reading suggests that Paul now refers to women deacons instead of the wives of male deacons.

Third, although you see the word *their* at the beginning of the ESV translation, it isn't found in the original language. And there is a Greek word for their; Paul just doesn't use it. So if he wanted to refer to the deacon's wives, one would surmise that Paul would like to clarify that by saying "their wives." However, the sentence simply starts with the Word women.

Fourth, Phoebe is called the deacon of the church at Cenchrae.

I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church at Cenchrae...-Romans 16:1

The word here is literally deacon. Now one could argue that the word is employed as the general term for "servant" instead of the official office. However, I don't think that's the case. The reference to the church and the congregation suggests an office that Phoebe held within the church.

Fifthly, and lastly, when you come to a biblical understanding of what a deacon is and does, it's clear that women can serve in this role. Now if a church has deacons functioning as pastors/elders, that's another story. But if the role of a deacon is one of a servant that helps care for physical needs, promotes unity, and aids the pastors in getting their work done, then this doesn't contradict God's design for male eldership within the church.

So, if this is the role of the deacons, how about pastors? This brings us to our second point this morning. From the jump, it's crucial that you understand that the Bible uses the terms pastor, elder, and bishop interchangeably; therefore, I'll be doing the same. Churches that delineate between pastor and elder do themselves and their members a real disservice. If we use the same terms and hold the same offices the Bible contains, then we must align our language. Now some churches get away with this by having directors—a director of discipleship, and so and so. I don't mind that as much. However, a pastor is an elder, and an elder is a bishop.

⁵This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you—⁶if anyone is above reproach, the husband of one wife,^[d] and his children are believers^[e] and not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination. ⁷For an overseer,^[f] as God's steward, must be above reproach. He must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or a drunkard or violent or greedy for gain...-Titus 1:5-7

So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: ² shepherd the flock of God that is among you...-1 Peter 5:1-2a

¹⁷ Now from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church to come to him....²⁸ Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. -Acts 20:17, 28

So, when you hear elder, hear the pastor, and vice versa. Remember that in Matthew 18, Jesus authorizes the local church to bind and loose members. It's always a good question to ask who is authorized to do what. Does God authorize pastors? If so, what are they to do? To answer the first question, yes, the Scriptures teach that God authorizes elders.

Let's reread what we read earlier.

²⁸ Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. -Acts 20:28

Here we find that the elders possess authority directly from the Holy Spirit. He authorizes them with oversight. Now let's dive deeper into what kind of authority the elders possess and what it should look like. In other words, what is the job of the elders?

First, pastors are called to gather and protect. This is why the biblical authors often use the shepherd metaphor, originally derived from the Old Testament. Shepherding is at the heart of what God has been doing throughout redemption history and is what Jesus came to do as well. God condemns the leaders in Israel for scattering his sheep.

⁶ "My people have been lost sheep. Their shepherds have led them astray, turning them away on the mountains. From mountain to hill they have gone. They have forgotten their fold. -Jeremiah 50:6

"Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture!" declares the Lord...⁴ I will set shepherds over them who will care for them, and they shall fear no more, nor be dismayed, neither shall any be missing, declares the LORD. -Jeremiah 23:1,4

If you were here when I preached on congregationalism and the keys of the kingdom, you'll remember that we went on a journey of biblical theology to land on the kingly priest office of church members. We don't have time to go on that journey for the pastor's office, but you see a glimpse of it here. The role of the pastor didn't just show up, but this is an office that we can

trace from the Old Testament, particularly passages such as this, to the New Testament church. Jesus arrives as God's good shepherd who gathers his flock and will not lose any of the sheep the Father gave him. And so, as under-shepherds, elders must use their God-given authority to ask questions like, "I haven't seen you at church. Is everything okay?"

²⁸ Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. -Acts 20:28

Pastors are responsible for the whole flock. One of the ways pastors delegate in caring for the flock is by equipping members to care for one another. So, it's a both/and regarding the discipleship of the members in a local church. Pastors are responsible for the entire flock, and members are responsible for one another. The same goes for authority within the local church. The membership has the authority of one kind, and pastors have the authority of another, which we'll learn more about in a moment.

So, pastors gather and protect. What's taking place during the gathering? And how do pastors protect the flock? Through the authoritative teaching and preaching of God's Word. A pastor's equipping ministry centers on his faithful teaching of God's Word. I recall working as a discipleship pastor at a rather large church. The primary preaching pastor, or senior pastor, knew I aspired to become the primary preaching pastor one day, so he took me under his wing occasionally. And this is not meant to disparage the man because although we have vastly different ministry philosophies, I respect and love him to death. But his day-to-day pastoral life consisted of meetings. He once told me there would be many weeks in so many meetings that you barely have a few hours to prepare the sermon for that week. But I knew what the Bible had to say about pastoral ministry; therefore, I couldn't accept what he told me. Any local church structured in such a way that the pastors cannot emphasize their primary teaching role is in error. This is literally the point of Acts 6.

² And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. ³ Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. ⁴ But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word." -Acts 6:2-4

The one quality that sets bishops apart from deacons, and Christians in general, is that they must be able to teach. A good exercise would be to read the entirety of Paul's three pastoral epistles and underline every reference to teaching. Let's quickly consider his second letter to Timothy.

Paul says in his second letter to Timothy that Timothy must hold on to the pattern of sound teaching that he has heard from Paul (2 Tim. 1:13). What he has heard from Paul he should commit to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also (2:2). He is to be diligent in

correctly teaching the word of truth (v. 15). He is to avoid empty speech that deviates from the truth (vv. 16, 18). And he must teach and instruct only as God would have him teach, knowing that repentance will lead to a knowledge of the truth (vv. 24–25). Paul concludes by commanding Timothy to persist in preaching the Word, correcting, rebuking, and encouraging with great patience (4:2).

This is my quibble with the pressures of pastors to be experts in every area of life. That's not the biblical call. Pastors must know the Bible well and teach it to God's people. This is why Ezra 7:10 is one of my favorite passages in all of Scripture.

¹⁰ For Ezra had set his heart to study the Law of the LORD, and to do it and to teach his statutes and rules in Israel. -Ezra 7:10

This is the heart and the call of every pastor. Through the preaching of the Word, God equips his people for ministry. This is what we've read in Ephesians 4:11.

¹¹ And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, ¹² to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ... -Ephesians 4:11-12

Elders not only teach, but they provide an example to imitate.

So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: ² shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, ^[a] not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; ^[b] not for shameful gain, but eagerly; ³ not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. -1 Peter 5:1-3

So, shepherding includes living out those godly characteristics in the flock's lives that they may imitate. What are those godly characteristics? Well, we can find them in 1 Timothy 3.

The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. ² Therefore an overseer ^[a] must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, ^[b] sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, ³ not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. ⁴ He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, ⁵ for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church? ⁶ He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil. ⁷ Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil. -1 Timothy 3:1-7

D.A. Carson has said about this list that the only thing extraordinary here is how ordinary it is. Aside from being able to teach and not being a recent convert, every Christian should strive for these characteristics. This is why an elder is to be a mature Christian so that others can see this fruit on display and may follow him as he follows Christ. Another way of summing this all up in an alliteration is that pastors are called to be present, protect, and provide. Presence refers to pastors in the life of the congregation providing an example. Protection and provision occur through teaching and preaching God's Word.

Now to the elephant in many people's rooms, the Bible reserves this role for men. Which, by the way, is in line with most of Christian history until just recently.

¹² I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet. ¹³ For Adam was formed first, then Eve; ¹⁴ and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. -1 Timothy 2:12-14

Notice that Paul roots this command in the creation and not culture. This was a part of God's design. But don't believe the lie that differing roles mean different values. The Trinity proves this false!

³ But I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a wife is her husband, and the head of Christ is God. -1 Corinthians 11:3

So, although the Son submits to the Father's authority, he's of no less value than His Father. In the same way, men and women have equal value. This is also not to say that women cannot participate in ministry. Women can teach, just not in the authoritative context of the pastorate. Much more can be said, but we'll save that for the question and answer at the end of this month.

So, God has appointed a plurality of men to shepherd and lead local churches. Notice that I say a plurality here. Perhaps you're here, and you've only seen the solo pastor model in the churches you've attended. The New Testament never tells us how many elders a church should have, but it consistently refers to the "elders" of a local church in the plural, as when Paul "sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church" (Acts 20:17), or when James wrote, "Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church" (James 5:15).[1]

Since there aren't any commands regarding a plurality of elders, churches aren't in any disobedience that only has one pastor. However, since this is the consistent picture we're given in the New Testament, we should strive to have a plurality of elders in our local churches. And this is the beauty of lay elders. Men who have regular jobs yet have vowed to serve a church as a pastor that doesn't have the finances to have multiple pastors on the payroll. This is the direction that many Baptist churches are going, and I believe this is a good sign.

There are many benefits of having a plurality of elders. To name a couple, it helps to balance pastoral weaknesses. No pastor has every gift. Other godly men will have complementary gifts, passions, and insights. And it aids in being able to properly shepherd a people if pastors are indeed responsible for every member.

For our last point, I'd like to consider the authority that pastors have been given. As stated earlier, the Holy Spirit himself authorizes pastors. Here are a few passages that confirm this truth.

We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. - 1 Thess. 5:12-13

Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith. -Heb. 13:7

Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account." -Heb. 13:17

But to be clear, pastors have the authority of counsel and not the authority of command. The Bible gives examples of both. For instance, the government and parents have the authority of command. If you disobey in either instance, those authoritative figures can punish you. Husbands have the authority of counsel. As leaders, their wives should follow their lead; however, if they don't, it's up to God to deal with that.

Similarly, pastors have the authority of counsel regarding members. You should follow the lead of your pastors; however, we have no place to punish you if you don't. That'll be something you'll have to take up with God. But I would instruct you from Scripture to allow the pastors to lead well. Consider the rest of what the author of Hebrews has to say.

¹⁷Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you. -Hebrews 13:17

So, it's not advantageous to buck the authority and leadership of the pastors. It only makes both of our lives harder.

In closing, I have said that the discipleship program of this church is elder-led congregationalism. In other words, the elders authoritatively lead the church by gathering and equipping them through the Word, while the membership receives the Word and does the work of the ministry by disciplining others and utilizing their authority through the keys of the kingdom. Consider a few workout classes. In one, the instructors do all the working out, and the class watches. In another, the class doesn't pay any mind to the instructors; therefore, there's no true established leadership. But in the last class, several instructors worked out while the class members carefully observe. And then, the members begin to work out while the instructors walk the aisles to encourage each member. Which class will be the healthiest? Let's strive to be a healthy elder-led congregational church.

Let's pray.

[1] see also Acts 14:23; 16:4; 21:18; Titus 1:5