

Equipping the Saints

Introduction

Brothers, one of the discussions here in Abbotsford over the past few years has been the work of elders and deacons: what needs doing and who should do what. I'm sure it's a discussion point elsewhere too. Hence it's good to take the time this morning to reflect on the work of elders and deacons.

Not all of it, though. I've been asked by the organizing committee of Yarrow to speak to you on office bearers equipping the saints. I'll be doing that primarily with the Pastoral Epistles in hand. The idea is that during the speech you will receive insight into the Reformed view of the offices of elder and deacon in theory and practice.

In the next 50 minutes or so I will be speaking on a number of topics.

- We will first explore the reason for office: they are to equip the saints.
- Next we will reflect on what determines how things are done in the church.
- We will then consider the distinction between elders and deacons.
- Finally we will consider what elders and deacons actually do.

The reason for office

A key passage of Scripture where the teaching of "office" is concerned is Ephesians 4:11-13. There has been much debate over what this text is actually telling us. One of the points of debate is the question whether there should be a comma between "God's people" and "for works of service". Older translations would have a comma. It implies that "works for service" or "ministry" is something only office bearers do. However, Reformed scholars felt the whole church is to be involved in the work of ministry. It's not just the elders who exercise discipline, the whole church should. It's not just the deacons who extend care, the whole church should. For that's what Ephesians 4:16 makes clear. "The whole body ... builds itself up in love." Not just the office bearers, the whole body does, "each part does its work". Scholarship has become convinced of this truth, and thus the comma has been dropped from Ephesians 4:12.¹

Why all this fuss over a comma? Because removing the comma has us understand what office bearers are to do. Office bearers are given by Christ to the congregation to prepare or equip God's people for service. God's people have to do works of service, and the office bearers are those who have to equip the church members to do so. (By the way, it's this phrase that gave the Reformed Outfitters app its name.)

What might we compare the office bearer to, to make this aspect of his office and calling clear? To mind come two pictures.

The first is that of a gardener.² What does a good gardener do? A good gardener takes care that the plants grow so as to meet their purpose. They'll stake tomato plants to make them grow tall and be strong enough to support tomatoes. They'll prune the fruit trees. They'll weed the garden beds. They'll do what needs doing so that a plant does its job and looks good. A gardener doesn't actually produce

¹ See, for example, W. Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Ephesians* (Edinburgh: Bannor of Truth Trust, 1968, 1969) on Ephesians 4:12.

² For this illustration I am indebted to those who organized the Kerkenradendag 2002 for office bearers in the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (liberated).

the tomatoes or that beautiful flower. He creates conditions that will make it happen. Or, to say it more precisely, that will have God cause it to happen. Paul planted, Apollos watered, God gave the growth.

The second image is that of a coach. In relation to church members, an office bearer is like a coach. A coach improves the activity of players by verbal instruction and by having them practice skills. When it comes to the type of coach, I'm not thinking of a coach for a professional sports team, such as the Canucks, the Lions, or the White Caps. But more of a coach for a friendly sports league such as the Christian Hockey Leagues or our Soccer Leagues where the aim is to play and enjoy oneself, and 'winning' is a benefit. For this image the central text of Titus (2:15) comes to mind: "[Teach these things.] Encourage and rebuke with all authority."

The office bearer is someone who equips the saints for works of service. He is like a gardener nurturing plants to produce flowers or fruit, like a coach making sportspeople better at their sport.

Organizing the Church

When it comes to office bearers equipping saints the picture is a little more complex than a gardener in his veggie patch or a coach with his children's soccer team. In a church we have a variety of office bearers. That implies a division of labour and the question, who does what? How do we structure it? We'll first consider how to answer such questions, before actually considering a response.

I find that people often think a question concerning church government or church practice is simply answered by turning to Scripture. But it's not that simple. If we did that, we'd find Scripture vague or even contradicting itself.

One illustration: Why is it that Timothy is given separate instructions for qualified elders and qualified deacons while Titus is only given instructions regarding elders? Why deacons in Ephesus and no deacons in Crete?

In seeking answers to church political questions we need to consider three things. They are:

- Hermeneutics. This is the basic question concerning how to read Scripture on church government issues. Does Scripture simply describe a reality or is it also prescriptive?
- Then there's exegesis. That's determining what does Scripture exactly say on a certain matter.
- Practice is the final consideration. You'll be surprised how much of what we do actually has no direct roots in Scripture but in our context and Dutch heritage.

Hermeneutics, exegesis, and practice, these three combine to determine church government and practice.

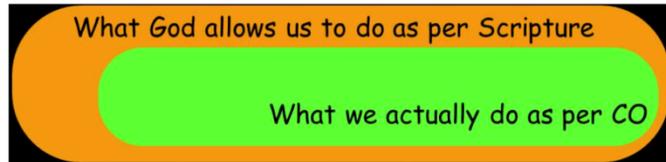
Hermeneutics

While the old covenant institutions are no longer in force, we have no New Testament equivalent for the books Exodus through Deuteronomy. This suggests that, where church organization is concerned, things are out in the open. And that makes sense. After all, during the old covenant era, the working of the Holy Spirit was limited to just those called to office. Had Ephesians 4:12 been written for an old covenant era, there *would* have been a comma! But in the New Testament, all church members share in the office of Christ. We speak of the priesthood or office of all believers. One consequence of receiving God's Spirit is a large measure of freedom where the organization of the church is concerned.

We find this proven by the descriptions we have of local church life. We know that all the churches had elders. Acts 14:23 tells us how Paul and Barnabas appointed elders in all the churches that had formed as a result of their missionary activity. Titus has to appointed elders in all the newly formed

churches on the island of Crete. But Titus did not appoint deacons while Ephesus was to have them. We also see how in the Jerusalem church deacons are not ordained until the apostles find themselves so involved with diaconal work that they find insufficient time for prayer and preaching. This suggests that Scripture is not *prescriptive* where the number of offices is concerned but *descriptive*. Which also implies that not Scripture but context and culture determines how exactly things are done. This is what we would call the contextual or cultural factor in church organization.

Of course, any structure put into practice would have to be within the boundaries of God's Word. This adjoining diagram shows how it is. We uphold what we confess with Article 32 of the Belgic Confession: "We believe that, although it is useful and good for those who govern the church to establish a certain order to maintain the body of the church, they must at all times watch that they do not deviate from what Christ, our only Master, has commanded." The point is that God has given us broad commands, and within the boundaries set by the principles, we may "establish a certain order". Different churches are allowed to do things differently.



Another question with a hermeneutical bent to it is the question whether Scripture actually prescribes *offices* or simply prescribes *tasks*. Taking the "tasks" approach means there would be more wiggle room when it comes to deciding who does what. This matter has been a subject for debate in The Netherlands. For more see the article "Offices in the Congregation" on Reformed Outfitters.

Finally, a survey of current practice indicates that there are a variety of views that are held. One point of debate is whether there are two permanent offices—that of elder and deacon—or three permanent offices—that of minister, elder, and deacon. The three office approach is typically Presbyterian, the two office approach is typical for the Reformed in The Netherlands today, and is very common in our midst too. However, it's noteworthy that respected scholars within either tradition will argue a view opposite to their tradition and are allowed to do so.³ Clearly the matter of the number of offices and thus the division of labour is in fact not one determined as precisely by Scripture as people tend to think. The contextual or cultural factor plays a big role.

Exegesis

This is not to say the Scripture has nothing to say on the matter and we may simply do things as we want. Scripture does present us with broad guidelines. We still need to do exegesis.

The most basic of all not-negotiable prescriptions of Scripture is found in 1 Corinthians 14. There the apostle Paul is giving directives on how a church worship service should and should not go. During his argument he appeals to a very basic truth: God is not a God of disorder but of peace. Paul ends his instructions with a brief exhortation. The ESV translates: "Everything should be done decently and in order." 1 Corinthians 14:33 & 40 are foundational to church government and practice. Whatever the "certain order" established by a local church looks like, it will have to promote order, respect, and peace.

³ G.W. Knight III, *The Pastoral Epistles in the New International Greek Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 175-177; C. VanDam, *The Elder* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2009), 111-118; P.H.R. Van Houwelingen, *Timoteüs Titus: Pastorale Instructiebrieven in Commentaar op het Nieuwe Testament Derde Serie* (Kampen: Kok, 2009), 29-32. See also R.C. Janssen, "Wellspring of the Offices" in J. Van Vliet (ed.), *Living Waters From Ancient Springs: Essays in Honor of Cornelis Van Dam* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 169-184.

I don't have time to expand on another foundational point made by Scripture. I'll suffice with just mentioning it. And that's "accountability". Pervasive throughout the New Testament is the fact that office-bearers, even apostles, are accountable to the churches.⁴

We zoom in on the matter at hand, the number of offices and who does what. If we survey Scripture we discover that the terminology is not very systematic. Limiting ourselves to just the permanent offices, the offices that continued to exist beyond the first generation of the new church, we see: presbyters, overseers, evangelists, shepherd-teachers, leaders, shepherds, and deacons. Tough to define here are the terms "presbyters" and "deacons". "Presbyters" is difficult, as overseers and even apostles are also called elders.⁵ That raises the question, is "elders" a collective term that subdivides into a number of offices, or does it designate a separate office? The term "deacon" is also vague, as it is actually simply the Greek word for "servant". How does one determine when the term is used generally and when it is used technically?⁶ Both "presbyter" and "deacon" are not precisely definable.

Let's dig a little further where the elder and the deacon are concerned. We turn first to the elder. In Acts 20 and Titus 1 the terms "overseer" and "elder" are used interchangeably, suggesting they are two words for the same person, like "dad" and "father".

As Reformed we generally speak of two types of elders: the minister, or teaching elder, and the elder, the ruling elder. For the past 50 odd years 1 Timothy 5:17 has been used in our circles to defend this approach. We find the argument for it in our Form for the Ordination (or Installation) of Ministers.⁷ But the exegesis that saw our Forms changed is being questioned today,⁸ in my opinion, rightly so. But we won't look at the differences between elders and ministers.

Our focus is on elders and deacons. Regarding elders, the question can also be asked whether "deacons" are a subset of "elders". This touches the matter: to what degree are deacons members of the council? Do we follow the Belgic Confession here, which states that pastors, elders, and deacons "together ... form the council of the church"? This follows the practice of the French Churches in the 16th century. Or do we follow the line set out by the Church Order, which does not even recognize the "council" as a church assembly and holds the deacons accountable to the consistory? This follows the practice of the Dutch refugee churches in England.⁹ This question cannot be answered with a simple Scripture text. Paul and Timothy addressed their letter to the Philippians (1:1) with "To all the saints ... with the overseers and deacons". This suggests the overseers and deacons formed the council of the church. However, comparing Acts 6 and Acts 15, it would seem the deacons were not part of the council of the church in Jerusalem. It's not all that clear.

We turn to the deacons themselves. The first question we face is whether the deacon is actually an office-bearer. That may sound odd but it's a fair question. Office is a term not defined by Scripture—one barely finds it in Scripture¹⁰—but by ourselves. We define it as a position with authority in the church, a position to which one is ordained. But being a "deacon" could also simply be a ministry, as was that of the administrator or the visitor, who are both mentioned in Romans 12.

⁴ For example, note how Peter's visit to Cornelius took place with the involvement of six brothers from Joppa, Acts 10:23, 47 (plural "we"), 11:12.

⁵ Elders=overseers: Acts 20:17&28. Apostles are elders: 1Peter 5:1.

⁶ Compare Ephesians 3:7 with 1 Timothy 3:8.

⁷ *Book of Praise, Anglo-Genevan Psalter* (Authorized Provisional Version), (Winnipeg: Premier Printing, 606.

⁸ Van Houwelingen, 132-133.

⁹ P. Biesterveld, J. van Lonkhuijzen & R.J.W. Rudolph, *Het Diaconaat. Handboek ten dienste der Diaconieën* (Hilversum: J.H. Witzel, 1907), 122-149.

¹⁰ Strictly speaking Acts 1:20b quoting Psalm 109:28 is the only place.

We consider the deacon an office-bearer, because the two are mentioned in one phrase in Philippians 1:1 and the conditions for serving in these two offices are found in 1 Timothy 3. But is this argument strong? If the elder and the deacon are office bearers, should not the women of 1 Timothy 3:11 also be office bearers? And what about the widows of 1 Timothy 5? And if we then compare Scripture with Scripture, do we make everyone in the lists of Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12 office-bearers? It's not so clear cut. That's why the question of female deacons is such a tough one.

Finally, Acts 14:23 and Titus 1 speak of the appointment of elders in newly formed congregations. No mention is made of deacons. Newly formed churches did not have deacons. This suggests deacons are not essential to the make-up of a local church. Elders are, you can't have a local church without elders. But it seems you can have a local church without deacons. The impression I have is that initially elders are doing deacon work, and when elders find they are spending too much time doing deacon work, the office of deacon is created. Acts 6 hints in that direction.

Practice

We looked at the hermeneutics and exegesis. Finally a brief look at Reformed practice. The Great Reformation of the 15th century was in part about church government: the Reformers objected to hierarchy. The Reformers did discover that Scripture does not really give a blueprint for church government in the new covenant era. With a view to our own heritage and context I note four approaches. Calvin had a 5 office position (pastors, teachers, elders, finance-deacons, visit-deacons). The Belgic Confession had three (ministers, elders, deacons). The Synod of Dort and the Westminster assembly had four (ministers, teachers, elders, deacons). With the revision of the church order in 1978 and 1983, we now have three (ministers, elders, deacons).¹¹ However, already some forty years ago scholars felt a two office approach would be better.¹² That thinking made it into our Form for Ordination but not into our Church Order. And in the line of a two office approach, it has even been suggested that a minister is simply a full-time elder,¹³ allowing for the blessing elder and even elders who administer the sacraments.

Much could be said on this topic. For this moment I simply want to point out that it's not as clear as we may wish it were.

How do we determine who does what? We've considered the following:

Hermeneutics: we've noted that Scripture must receive priority but there is much room during the new covenant era for cultural factors. We confess churches may establish "a certain order".

Exegesis: Scripture presents to us various ways in which local churches were structured. Non-negotiable is the principle outlined in 1 Corinthians 14: what we do has to promote peace and have things happen decently and in good order; and there has to be accountability.

Practice: currently we have a three office system that is within Scriptural bounds and suits our culture as Canadians with Dutch roots.

¹¹ J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, IV.iii.4,8,9. Belgic Confession article 30. Church Order of Dort, article 2. Westminster Assembly Directory for Church Government, "Of the Officers of the Church". Kerkerde van de Gereformeerde Kerken (vrijgemaakt) adopted in 1978 and Church Order of the Canadian Reformed Churches adopted in 1983.

¹² E.g. C. Trimp "De ouderling: herder-opziener" in *De Reformatie*, Feb 19, 1973, republished in C. Trimp, *Zorgen voor de Gemeente* (Kampen: Van den Berg, 1983).

¹³ E.g. J. van Bruggen, *Ambten in de apostolische kerk. Een exegetisch mozaïek* (Kampen: Kok, 1984).

One cannot simply find a proof-text for everything that we do. In the new covenant era God has given us great freedom and a great responsibility. Broad lines are obvious, principles are clear, but the details are for us to work out in our own situation.

Elders and deacons

We've already concluded that Scripture does not present us with a very detailed description of the offices. While elders and deacons did exist, it would seem deacons did not exist everywhere. I also note that we also do not find a comprehensive task description for elders or deacons. We began with Ephesians 4:11-12, but neither "elders" nor "deacons" are explicitly mentioned in verse 11. One could argue that only "ministers" (the pastor-teachers) are to equip the saints for works of ministry. However, I don't. For when comparing Scripture with Scripture we discover that elders and deacons are indeed into equipping the saints. We can deduce this from the conditions which elders and deacons are required to meet, conditions outlined for us in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1.

I'd like us to turn to those passages now. We'll first read Titus 1:5-9 as it deals with just the elders, and then 1 Timothy 3:1-13, which deals with elders and then with deacons. These conditions tell us something about the work these office-bearers do, and also how their work might be distinguished.

Titus 1:5-9 (ESV)

This 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— if anyone is above reproach, the husband of one wife, and his children are believers and not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination. For an overseer, 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, but hospitable, a lover of good, self-controlled, upright, holy, and disciplined. He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.

1 Timothy 3:1-13 (ESV)

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

Deacons likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain. They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. And let them also be tested first; then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless. Their wives likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things. Let deacons each be the husband of one wife, managing their children and their own households well. 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.

Let's briefly review the conditions for elders. On the screen you have the various conditions outlined as they appear in the lists. Those that are in white are found in both Titus and 1

Conditions for elders	
Above reproach	Not quarrelsome / arrogant
One-wife-husband	Not a money-lover / greedy
Sober-minded	Good household management
Self-controlled	Submissive / faithful children
Respectable	Not a recent convert
Hospitable	Respectable to outsiders
Able to teach	Lover of good
Not a drunkard	Upright & holy
Not violent but gentle	Sound in doctrine
Both 1 Timothy 3 Titus 1	

Timothy, the orange/brown ones just in 1 Timothy, the green ones just in Titus. As you can see, the lists are almost identical. Some differences in the list can be explained by the fact that Timothy is dealing with an established church while Titus is dealing with new churches. For example, if Titus was not allowed to appoint a recent convert, there would be no one for him to appoint. But in Ephesus it would not be wise to appoint a recent convert.

The list of conditions for deacons, we only have one, looks like this. I'd like us to compare this list for deacons with that for elders. I begin by noting the point "tested". Because the elders' list was drawn from 1 Timothy 3 we didn't see that point. However, you will find it in 1 Timothy 5:21-22,24. Thus every item on the list for deacons is also found on the list for elders.

Conditions for elders & deacons	
Above reproach	Not quarrelsome / arrogant
One-wife-husband	Not a money-lover / greedy
Sober-minded	Good household management
Self-controlled	Submissive / faithful children
Respectable	Not a recent convert / tested
Hospitable	Respectable to outsiders
Able to teach	Lover of good
Not a drunkard	Upright & holy
Not violent but gentle	Sound in doctrine

Elders only - Elders & Deacons

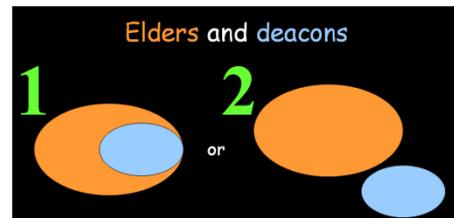
The same is not true if we make the comparison go the other way. Not all the conditions that are listed for elders are also found for deacons. Two matters are notably absent. A deacon does not have to be "able to teach" nor should a deacon be "not violent but gentle."

The implications of being "able to teach" is obvious: elders teach and deacons do not.

The meaning of "not violent but gentle" is not immediately obvious. We need to realize this is not a reference to physical violence but to one's approach in speaking. The flavour of this is "a person should not be contentious but gentle in interpersonal relationships."¹⁴ This suggests that elders have a calling to counsel church members entrusted to their supervision. Deacons do less "communicating" about points of doctrine.

Now, we've noted that deacons did not necessarily exist in churches just established. But the poor are always there. This suggests that in principle elders can do the work of deacons. And as deacons are appointed to take over some of the work of the elders, the task of the deacons is more restricted than that of the elders. The question is, how should this work out in practice, once a church has both elders and deacons? Historically our approach has been that elders have delegated some of their duties to the deacons but retain oversight. You'll find a reference to this oversight in Church Order article 42. However, more recently there has been a tendency to see elders and deacons as each having their own duties and sharing some responsibilities.

To put that in a picture, we have either scenario one: deacons serve as assistants to the elders. If one presses this to an extreme, the deacons would be on par with, say, a Finance and Property Committee. Or we have scenario 2, where elders and deacons work very separately, maybe even to the point that an elder is not even aware that a member of his ward is receiving diaconal support.



As churches we seem to swing between these scenarios with a preference for 2. I'm often asked why our practice is what it is, and how it should be. I've done some research in this area but not sufficient to tell you "this is why". Allow me to pass on my findings and my suspicions.

Where the offices are concerned, during the Reformation Reformers differed strongly on the role of deacons. Martin Bucer advocated the equality of the permanent offices. But most saw a more restricted

¹⁴ Knight, p. 167 (on 1 Timothy 3:8-13).

role for deacons. During the centuries that followed the Great Reformation the Puritan affiliated movement known as the Second Reformation furthered the downplay of the office of deacon. A monumental study on Deacons at the beginning of the twentieth century pushes in a new direction. The ideas of Bucer became popular in Holland during the twentieth century through a well-written dissertation on his view of office and subsequently a handbook for deacons published in our sister churches.¹⁵

Thus far my research. I think there are some other, more cultural factors, in play as well that could be mentioned.

1. We don't like saying that someone is "only a deacon". We live in a time of self-worth and egalitarianism.

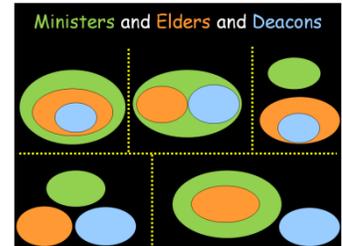
2. The Dutch are notorious for not wanting to talk about money. Being a deacon in a Dutch cultural setting is not easy. As such there's a lot of respect for the work deacons do. I've had a number of people tell me over the years: "I'd rather be an elder than a deacon."

3. I believe the professionalization of care is also a factor, it certainly has been in Holland. In Holland, deacons today rarely help the needy out with actual monies. Rather, deacons serve as guides for people looking for help. It has been thought that people who are more practical than academic are better suited for deacons than for elders. That's no longer so.

We've been looking at elders and deacons but, of course, there's more. I point to two closely related matters:

First, how does Helping Hands or Sister Help fit into the picture? Calvin knew of female deacons, and the early in the 20th century the Reformed Church in The Hague had a regulated organization called "Diaconal Sisterhelp".

Secondly, besides elders and deacons we also have ministers. To show you how complicated it then becomes, this slide shows approaches in existence or argued in Reformed circles. We'll not explore this now, maybe another time.



So far we have seen that Scripture is not as clear cut as we may wish.

This means that we should not be too dogmatic about our way of doing things. God Himself allows us to be pragmatic and gives us the Holy Spirit to enable us to decide on a division of labour that promotes peace and sees things done decently and in good order, a structure in which accountability is present.

I believe it is thus more appropriate to focus more on what needs doing and then creating a way in which to do it, rather than focus on who has to be there and then finding that person something to do. I find there's a tendency in our midst to be blind-sighted by existing structures and operating only within those confines, treating them as if set in stone. That's not right. Our Church Order is not a confession, but a document of agreements we shall endeavour to keep.

One thing I would really plead for is that responsible office-bearers are in the know.

I myself have the habit, once I've done a visit, to write a brief report and e-mail it to the ward-elder and ward-deacon. Sometimes there will be a second e-mail to just one of them, as I figure there's something the elder needs to know but the deacon not, or the other way around. But that's just with the ninth commandment in mind.

¹⁵ W. van't Spijker, *De Amben bij Martin Bucer* (Kampen: Kok, 1987); Biesterveld, 149-185; M. Assink, *Diaconaat met Perspectief* (Goes: Oosterbaan & le Cointre, 1995).

In Abbotsford we also have a sizeable segment of the congregation that has its peculiar needs. That segment is divided over two elder wards and also two deacon wards so that we can actually have a “mini” council meeting once or twice a year where the elders and deacons can inform each other of concerns, policies, and approaches with regard to this segment. When such a meeting is held, it is reported at a regular council meeting. Remember the need for accountability! This structure creates a time-efficient way of dealing with a time consuming issue in a large congregation such as ours. I mention it, as it is an example of how church structures can be flexible, not only within Scripture, but even within the adopted agreements outlined in the church order.¹⁶

What elders and deacons do

I come to the final point of this presentation, what elders and deacons do. I'm not going into deep detail here. Time does not allow it. Besides, it's context that determines a lot, and so dealing with situations will vary. The workshops will focus on that side of things and you can benefit from each other's wisdom.

For the elder we turn to Titus 1:9. *“He [an elder/overseer] must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it.”*

The “trustworthy message” is the preaching as brought by Paul and his co-workers, men like Timothy and Titus. In our day, God has completed recording revelation for all ages and the canon is closed. Scripture is the Word of God as brought to people by prophets and apostles, with Christ as the keystone. As such, “the trustworthy message” today is Scripture.

“Sound doctrine” is an expression found in all three Pastoral Epistles. Doctrine refers to the derivative of Scripture, it is the substance of what Scripture teaches. The adjective “sound” indicates that this teaching is good for life, it is both “healthy” and “healing”. In our circles “doctrine” tends to be limited to statements about how things are. We should however, expand it to include statements about what one should do. Both “Christ is God and man” and “You shall not defraud your neighbour” are “sound doctrines”. For us in our time such “sound doctrine” is outlined in our confessional statements.

An elder is to hold firmly to Scripture as summarized in the confessions. Already in the 4th century the church decided that having office-bearers sign a creedal statement would be an appropriate way to do this. As such our practice of using a Form of Subscription puts into practice the kind of thing Titus 1:9 is looking for.¹⁷

“Holding firmly” has two purposes:

There's the positive purpose of equipping a saint to believe the truth and to do what is right. It is the primary task of elders to have church members understand what Scripture teaches and help them live it out.

There's also the negative task of preventing a saint from believing falsehood and doing what is wrong. For example, elders are to help church members understand that reincarnation is not true or why they should not practice intimacy before marriage.

¹⁶ During the summer of 2013 it was decided to divide the 9 addresses over as many deacons wards as possible so as to lighten the workload for the deacons. As deacon wards align with elder wards, it meant the number of elders involved increased as well.

¹⁷ Cf. R.C. Janssen, *By This Our Subscription: Confessional Subscription in the Dutch Reformed Tradition Since 1816* (Kampen: Theologische Universiteit Kampen (broederweg), 2009), 316-327 (chapter 3.2). – Also available at: <http://igitur-archive.library.uu.nl/theol/2009-0618-200551/UUindex.html>.

We turn the deacon. For a summary statement of his work I've had to go beyond the Pastorals. Acts 6 states it best. Here we read how the responsibility for waiting on tables is turned over the Seven.

It has been debated in the past whether the Seven of Acts 6 are to be considered similar to our deacons.¹⁸ I'm not spending any time on that debate now. The Belgic Confession and the Form for Ordination assume a link between Acts 6 and the office of deacons, so we'll go with that.

The work of the deacons is described as "waiting on tables". That is an expression relating to provisions for the needy. The deacons were to ensure that all the needy in the church of Jerusalem were adequately provided for. As "need" was generally measured in terms of "food", consider the Seven of Acts 6 to be operating a soup kitchen of sorts. For deacons, reference is often also made to Galatians 6:10: the duty of all believers to do good to all men, especially the household of faith. This is not just for deacons to do, but deacons do facilitate this ministry.

A question one can raise is whether Acts 6 is limiting the work of the deacons to just providing for the poor? I think back, for a moment, to the task elders were given as per Titus 1:9. If you accept that the elders on Crete were to do the work of deacons too, the question is legitimate whether what we find in Titus 1:9 is also applicable to deacons, within the context of their activity. May I put it this way: should deacons just give assistance to the poor or should they also encourage generosity and prevent money mismanagement among those who are not needy?

We've looked at a Scripture passage for elders and for deacons. However, given that Scripture paints with a very broad brush, let's also look at how, within the confines of Scripture, we give it shape.

In general one can say that elders deal with spiritual matters and deacons deal with material matters. Of course, there's a material side to spiritual matters and there's a spiritual side to material matters. And sometimes the combination of spiritual and material leads to the involvement of both an elder and a deacon.

When it comes to being more specific, the outlines of the duties of elders and deacons as found in (CanRC) Church Order articles 22 & 23 are helpful. These lists are also found in the Form for the Ordination of elders and deacons.

For elders I point out that their task is summarily described as "comforting, instructing, and admonishing". Elders have the duty to encourage, inform and warn the members of the church. That's why meeting with members, visiting them in their homes or meeting them in other places, is so important.

Deacons too, are to "encourage and comfort". They are also to "promote unity and fellowship". The work of the deacons is not just limited to collecting and distributing funds, it goes much further. The question is, how much further should it go?

Conclusion

In conclusion, office bearers are like gardeners and coaches, given by Christ to the church to equip the saints for works of ministry. We cannot be too dogmatic about the division of labour, but it is important to ensure that the work which needs doing also gets done. The Seven were appointed as deacons because the Apostles could not manage the work load any longer. It is our calling to have things done decently and in good order, so that peace is promoted in the Church of God. The tasks of elders and deacons are determined in broad lines by Scripture, but more specifically by context. The way we

¹⁸ Van Bruggen, *Ambten*. See also J. Van Eck, *Handelingen: De wereld in het geding* (Kampen: Kok, 2003), 153-158.

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outline it in our Church Order and practice it, elders deal with the more spiritual matters while deacons deal with the more material matters. It is my plea that we recognize it's more important to get something done than to get something done in a certain way. Let's be wise by God's Spirit to have the church governed by a certain order so that saints indeed are equipped to works of ministry.