

# Shepherds and Servants: the two offices Christ appointed in his Church

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## **Introduction: Church government and the gospel-centered mission of the Church**

The phrases “church government” and “gospel-centered mission” aren’t often put together. The *Westminster Confession of Faith* (WCF), however, sees a strong connection between the two. It affirms that “The Lord Jesus, as king and head of His Church, has therein appointed a government, in the hand of Church officers”, and then almost immediately affirms that Christ has committed to these officers “the ministry of the Gospel” (WCF 30.1-2). The Reformed churches are universally agreed on this point: the Lord Jesus alone is “the king and head of His Church”; he has appointed the “government” of his Church, under which the Church pursues its gospel-centred mission in the world; and he has appointed this government in two stages – the “extraordinary” ministry of the apostles, and the “ordinary and perpetual” ministry of those he appointed to lead his Church after them.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> WCF (1646) §30.1-2; cf. 25.1, 6; *Westminster Larger Catechism* (WLC 1647) §45. For other Reformed confessions on this point: *First Helvetic Confession* (1536) §18; *Gallic Confession* (1559) §29-30; *Belgic Confession* (1561) §30; *World Reformed Fellowship Statement of Faith* §8.2. For classic discussions, see Calvin, *Institutes* §4.3.1; H. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: Vol. 4 – Holy Spirit, Church and New Creation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008): 329. The language of “extraordinary” and “ordinary and perpetual” offices is drawn especially from *The Form of Presbyterial Church Government* (1647), Preface, and §3.

There has, however, been a long-running discussion regarding the number of “ordinary and perpetual” offices. The discussion has generally involved three alternatives. The *four-office* view, taking its lead from John Calvin, identifies the offices of “pastor” (= “minister”), “doctor” (= “professor” or “teacher”), “governor” (= “elder”), and “deacon.”<sup>2</sup> Despite the influence of Calvin, the majority of the Reformed churches, while recognizing that the Lord gifts his Church with “teachers”, have not been convinced of the biblical basis for the *office* of “doctor.” The *three-office* view identifies as offices only the roles of “minister”, “elder”, and “deacon”. This view was affirmed in a number of the early Reformed confessions,<sup>3</sup> received its classic defense from C. Hodge and T. Smyth,<sup>4</sup> and has been developed more recently by a number of Reformed scholars and pastors.<sup>5</sup> This view, however, relies on a strong distinction between the offices of “minister” and “elder,” which is difficult to demonstrate from the Scriptures. The *two-office* view recognizes only the offices of “elder” and “deacon”. This seems to have been the position of the early post-apostolic churches,<sup>6</sup> and was perhaps first recognized in the Reformation period by Johannes à Lasco (d. 1560).<sup>7</sup> It became the consensus position among the “presbyterians” at the Westminster Assembly,<sup>8</sup> and was

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<sup>2</sup> Calvin, *Institutes* § 4.3.3-5. For Reformed confessions that adopt this view, see: *Synod of Middelburg* (1581) §2; *Synod of Gravenhage* (1586) §2; *The Form of Presbyterian Church Government* (1647) §3.

<sup>3</sup> *Gallic Confession* (1559) §29; *Belgic Confession* (1561) §30-31; *Synod of Wezel* (1568) §2, 4–5; *Synod of Emden* (1571) §13–14.

<sup>4</sup> C. Hodge, *Discussions in Church Polity: From the Contributions to the “Princeton Review”* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1878), 118-33, 262-99; T. Smyth, “The Name, Nature and Function of Ruling Elders,” “Theories of Eldership (I),” “Theories of Eldership (II),” “Ecclesiastical Catechism,” in J. W. Flinn, ed. *Complete Works of Rev. Thomas Smyth, D.D.*, 10 vols. (Columbia SC: R.L. Bryan, 1908), 4:13-164; 167-275; 277-358; 435-519.

<sup>5</sup> R. S. Rayburn, “Three Offices: Minister, Elder, Deacon,” *Presbyterian: Covenant Seminary Review* XII: 105-14; M. R. Brown, ed. *Order in the Offices: Essays Defining the Roles of Church Officers* (Duncansville, PA: Classic Presbyterian Government Resources, 1993); E. P. Clowney, *The Church*, *Contours of Christian Theology* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1995), 210-12; D. Macleod, *Priorities for the Church: Rediscovering Leadership and Vision in the Church* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus Publications, 2003), 41-56; C. Van Dam, *The Elder* (Philipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2009); D. D. Gebbie, “Two or Three Office: A Slash at the Gordian Knot,” *Haddington House Journal* 18 (2016): 137-49.

<sup>6</sup> See esp. 1 Clem 42.4-5; 44.1-3, 5; 47.6; 57.1; cf. 1.3; *Did.* 15.1; Polycarp, *Phil.* 1.0; 5.2-3; 6.1; cf. Jerome, *Letter CXLVI to Evangelus*; *Letter LXIX to Oceanus* §3 (in D. W. Hall and J. H. Hall, eds., *Paradigms in Polity: Classic Readings in Reformed and Presbyterian Church Government*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 57-60); *Commentary on Titus* (in J.-P. Migne, ed. *Patrologia cursus completus: Series Latina*, 221 vols. (Paris: 1844–1864), 26: 596B–597AB).

<sup>7</sup> See J. à. Lasco, *Opera* (Amsterdam: F. Muller, 1866), II.51.

<sup>8</sup> C. Van Dixhoorn, “Presbyterian Ecclesiologies at the Westminster Assembly,” in *The Keys of the Kingdom of Heaven: Church Polity in the English Speaking World c.1636-1689*, ed. H. Powell and E. Vernon (Manchester: 2016), 17: “Where the assembly’s presbyterians eventually found themselves most unified was in the realm of church polity, or practice. They

subsequently developed in Britain by T. Witherow and J. Bannerman,<sup>9</sup> on the European continent by H. Bavinck,<sup>10</sup> and in the United States by J.H. Thornwell, R.L. Dabney, and T.E. Peck.<sup>11</sup> The two-office view has also been championed by a number of scholars and pastors in recent years.<sup>12</sup>

The question of the number of offices is significant for the life and mission of the Church, but has not been satisfactorily resolved. My goal in this paper, therefore, is to re-examine the question, and to argue that the Lord has appointed two, and only two, offices in his Church: “Shepherds” (= elders / overseers / pastors) to lead, teach, and pray for God’s people, while modeling life in Christ for them; and “Servants” (= deacons), to facilitate the church’s mission, to manage the practical and material needs of the church, and especially to care for those who are vulnerable, weak, and poor.<sup>13</sup> There is not space here to explore a number of important related questions. My goal is

were united: the New Testament held out only two offices in the church: varieties of elders, and deacons.”

<sup>9</sup> T. Witherow, “The New Testament Elder,” *British and Foreign Evangelical Review* (1873): 201-28 and J. Bannerman, *The Church of Christ: A treatise on the nature, powers, ordinances, discipline and government of the Christian Church* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1869), Part IV.

<sup>10</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: Vol. 4*, 327-89.

<sup>11</sup> J.H. Thornwell, “The Ruling Elders,” “The Ruling Elder a Presbyterian,” “Resolutions as to the Eldership,” and “Presbyterianism and the Eldership,” in J. B. Adgar and J. L. Girardeau, eds., *Collected Writings of James Henley Thornwell*, 4 vols. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1974 (1871-73)), 4: 43-142; R. L. Dabney, “Theories of the Eldership,” in *Discussions: Evangelical and Theological* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1967 (1891)), 2: 119-57; and T. E. Peck, *Notes on Ecclesiology* (Greenville, SC: Presbyterian Press, 2005 (1892)), 179-86.

<sup>12</sup> G. W. Knight III, “Two Offices (Elders/Bishops and Deacons) and Two Orders of Elders (Preaching/Teaching Elders and Ruling Elders): A New Testament Study,” *Presbyterian: Covenant Seminary Review* XI (1985): 1-12; “Two Offices and Two Orders of Elders,” in *Pressing Toward the Mark: Essays Commemorating Fifty Years of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church*, ed. C. G. Dennison and R. C. Gamble (Philadelphia: Committee for the Historian of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 1986), 23-32; *The Pastoral Epistles: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 175-77; W. D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, WBC (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 306-07; B. L. Merkle, *The Elder and Overseer: One Office in the Early Church*, StBL (New York: Peter Lang, 2003); B. L. Merkle, “Ecclesiology in the Pastoral Epistles,” in *Entrusted with the Gospel: Paul’s theology in the Pastoral Epistles*, ed. A. J. Köstenberger and T. L. Wilder (Nashville: B&H, 2010), 173-98; G. P. Waters, *How Jesus runs the church* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2011), chpt 4.

<sup>13</sup> I adopt the terms “Shepherd” and “Servant” for these offices for two reasons: (i). “Shepherd” and “Servant” are good biblical terms for the two biblical offices (“Shepherd”: Eph 4.11; cf. Acts 20.28; 1 Pet 5.2; “Servant”: Phil 1.1; 1 Timothy 3.8, 12; cf. Acts 6.1-6); (ii). “Shepherd” and “Servant” are less familiar than the customary “Minister”, “Elder”, and “Deacon” and so may help us think about the offices in biblically faithful ways rather than merely defaulting to our traditional understandings. I’m not suggesting that any particular church should necessarily adopt these titles for its officers.

simple: to lay out the biblical vision for the basic elements of the Church's government at the level of the particular church, and to argue that the Church's gospel-centered mission is best served by teams of Shepherds and Servants working together, leading and serving according to God's design. The argument proceeds in two parts: Part 1 makes a brief argument for recognizing a biblical form of church government; Part 2 examines the evidence for the two-office view.

## 1. The biblical form of church government

The Reformed discussion regarding the number of offices, of course, assumes that the Scriptures teach on this question. The long-held Reformed conviction is that the central matters of the Church's government – about which the Lord speaks in his Word – are neither ἀδιάφορα (“disputable matters”), nor even *de jure humano* (established “by human right”), but *de jure divino* (established “by divine right”). They are part of the Lord's revealed will for his people.<sup>14</sup> This is why the *Presbyterial Form of Church Government* (1647) speaks of the “ordinary and perpetual” offices: “ordinary” in the sense that they are *ordained* by the Lord, and therefore the regular form that leadership should take in his Church; “perpetual” because they are the form that the Lord intends pastoral leadership to take in his Church not only in the first century, or in the sixteenth century, but until his return.<sup>15</sup>

This conviction has not been shared by other branches of the universal Church. On the one hand, the Roman Catholic Church has tended to downplay any distinction between the “extraordinary” and the “ordinary” offices. In the words of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, “the Apostles left bishops as their successors” and “gave them *their own position* of teaching authority”.<sup>16</sup> On the basis of this strong continuity between the apostles and the bishops, Rome asserts that faithfulness to the God-given apostolic constitution of the Church is guaranteed by an unbroken chain of “apostolic succession.” On the other hand, the churches of the Anglican

<sup>14</sup> cf. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: Vol. 4*, 386-87: in the Reformed churches “it was the general conviction that the government of the church must substantially rest on a divine law.”

<sup>15</sup> The Bible doesn't use the language of Church “government” or “offices” (but note Acts 1.20 (citing Ps 109.8 = LXX 108.8) and 1 Timothy 3.1: “oversight” (ἐπισκοπή)). It does, however, teach that the Lord has appointed leaders for his Church, and present a consistent pattern of people being formally appointed to public leadership roles, usually through the laying on of hands and prayer (Num 8.10-11; 27.18, 23; Deut 34.9; Acts 6.6; 13.3; 1 Tim 4.14; 1 Tim 5.22; 2 Tim 1.6; cf. Heb 6.2). I use the term “office” as a shorthand for *formally established public leadership roles* in the Church. cf. J. Murray, “Office in the Church,” in *Collected Writings of John Murray* (Edinburgh: 1977), 2: 357-58

<sup>16</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church* § 77 (emphasis added).

Communion, and of the evangelical and pentecostal movements, have tended to reject the apostolic institution of the ordinary offices.<sup>17</sup> Those who hold this position often argue that the New Testament (NT) texts are *ad hoc* documents, which reflect a multiplicity of governmental forms, and conclude that the apostolic form/s of church government, reflected in the NT, are not *prescriptive* for the Church but only *descriptive*.<sup>18</sup> On this understanding, faithfulness to the God-given apostolic constitution of the Church is secured by faithfulness to the apostolic gospel in the Scriptures, and may therefore be pursued without reference to the concrete forms of government that the apostles established.<sup>19</sup>

Nevertheless, the Scriptures do provide firm support for the classic Reformed conviction that the “ordinary and perpetual” offices are *prescriptive* for the Church. To be sure, the distinction between prescriptive and descriptive authority is a necessary and important implication of the divine authority and God-given multififormity of Scripture: all of Scripture is “the rule of faith and life” (WCF 1.2), but not every passage rules us in the same way.<sup>20</sup> Bavinck is certainly correct that since “the revelation recorded in Scripture is a historical and organic whole ... a dogma that comes to us with authority and intends to be a rule for our life and conduct *must be rooted in and inferred from the*

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<sup>17</sup> e.g. The *Thirty-Nine Articles* §36 does not seek to provide a positive biblical basis for episcopalian polity, but is content that “The Book of Consecration of Archbishops and Bishops, and Ordering of Priests and Deacons” contains nothing “that of itself is superstitious and ungodly.” More recently, J. Webster, “The Self-Organizing Power of the Gospel of Christ: Episcopacy and Community Formation,” in *Word and church: essays in Christian dogmatics* (Edinburgh; New York: T & T Clark, 2001), 191-201 provides an argument that God’s Church is created by the Word through the Spirit, and also given “oversight” or “office” as a gift, but that this office is not given in any specific form – the form is ἀδιάφορα (“a disputable matter”).

<sup>18</sup> In recent scholarship, see, for example, E. Käsemann, “Unity and Multiplicity in the New Testament Doctrine of the Church,” in *New Testament Questions of Today*, New Testament Library (London: SCM, 1969), 256-57; G. Fee, “Reflections on Church Order in the Pastoral Epistles, with Further Reflection on the Hermeneutics of Ad Hoc Documents,” *JETS* 28 (1985): 141-51 (142-43); M. J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed., 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 1094-95; M. Bockmuehl, “Is There a New Testament Doctrine of the Church?,” in *Scripture’s Doctrine and Theology’s Bible: How the New Testament Shapes Christian Dogmatics*, ed. M. Bockmuehl and A. J. Torrance (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 35.

<sup>19</sup> e.g. R. T. Beckwith, *Elders in every city: the origin and role of the ordained ministry* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2003), 11 recognizes that “Earlier in the apostolic age, as is well known, the presbyter-bishop seems to have been one and the same person”, but argues, on the basis of tradition, for an episcopalian form of church government.

<sup>20</sup> H. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: Vol. 1 – Prolegomena* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 459 traces the prescriptive/descriptive distinction to intramural debates within the Protestant churches of the seventeenth century.

*entire organism of Scripture.*"<sup>21</sup> I don't have space here to make a detailed argument for the prescriptive authority of biblical teaching on the offices. Such an argument, however, might well develop the following five brief observations.

- i. *Divine institution*: God himself gave to the Church not only the apostles, but also a range of other leaders, including elders, overseers, and pastors. Indeed, all three members of the Trinity are involved in this gift as God the Father appointed leaders in his Church (1 Cor 12.28), God the Son gave the "pastors and teachers" (Eph 4.11-12), and God the Holy Spirit appointed the Ephesian elders as "overseers" to shepherd God's flock (Acts 20.28).
- ii. *Continuity across the covenants*: The unity of one people of God in the one covenant of grace means that we are right to expect a fundamental continuity between the forms of the old covenant Church and the new, even as we also expect a real "newness" to accompany the advent of Christ and the eschatological outpouring of the Spirit.<sup>22</sup> It is significant, then, that the Lord has always led his Church by "elders". There is, in fact, no period in biblical history, from the Exodus onwards, in which God's people are not led by elders.<sup>23</sup> In this context, the book of Acts introduces the elders in the new covenant Church without explanation (Acts 11.30), and indicates, by means of a contrastive parallel, that the "apostles and elders" of the new covenant Church have taken up the role of the "chief priests and elders" of the Jews and replaced them as the leaders of God's new covenant people (Acts 4.5, 8, 23 with Acts 15.2, 4, 6, 22-23).<sup>24</sup> The book of Revelation also seems to indicate that "elders", in some form, remain a part of God's people in the eschatological consummation.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> *Reformed Dogmatics* 1, 460 (italics added).

<sup>22</sup> For the unity of the one people of God in Scripture: Gen 12.3; Isa 2.1-4; Jn 10.16; Matt 8.11; 28.18-20; Rom 11.13-32; Eph 2.11-22; Heb 11.1-40; Rev 5.9-10; 7.1-12. In the Reformed Confessions: *Scots Confession* (1560) §16; *Belgic Confession* (1561) §27; WCF (1646) §7.3, 5-6; 25.1-2.

<sup>23</sup> The Hebrew adjective *zēn* occurs 174 times in the Hebrew Old Testament (MT) and means either "old/er man" or "elder" depending on its context. The LXX regularly translates *zēn* with the Greek adjective *πρεσβύτερος*, which is regularly used as a substantive, and occurs 202 times in the LXX, of which approximately 140 refer to leading officials in Israel ("elders"). The Gospels and Acts include 32 references to the "elders" (*πρεσβύτερος*) of the Jews.

<sup>24</sup> cf. G. K. Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), 819-23, esp. 822: "the function of the Jewish Elders in Acts 4 and the Christian Elders in Acts 15 appears virtually identical. Both are in an official position in their respective covenant communities to adjudicate whether a new theological teaching is valid."

<sup>25</sup> οἱ εἴκοσι τέσσαρες πρεσβύτεροι: Rev 4.4, 10; 5.8; 11.16; 19.4; cf. πρεσβύτεροι: Rev 5.5-6, 11, 14; 7.11, 13; 14.13.

- iii. *Consistent apostolic practice*: The apostles appointed “elders in every church” (Acts 14.23; Tit 1.5). This approach was not idiosyncratic to any one apostle, but common to Paul (Tit 1.5), Peter (1 Pet 5.1-4), and James (Jas 5.14). Moreover, the apostles appointed elders / overseers not only in Jewish churches, but also in Gentile and mixed churches (Phil 1.1; 1 Tim 5.17; 1 Pet 5.1-4), and across a wide range of geographical regions, so that there were elders / overseers leading the churches in Jerusalem (Acts 11.30; 15.2-6, 22-23; 16.4), in Ephesus (Acts 20.17; 1 Tim 5.17), in Philippi (Phil 1.1), in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia (1 Pet 5.1-4 with 1.1), and in the whole of the dispersion addressed by James (Jas 5.14 with 1.1). While some NT churches were not yet fully ordered (e.g. Corinth), the apostles’ concern was to appoint elders in *every* church.<sup>26</sup>
- iv. *Universal and enduring regulations*: Paul provides universal and enduring regulations for elders and deacons. In 1 Timothy, Paul’s regulations for the offices come at the heart of a discrete section the letter (1 Tim 2.1-3.16) which emphasizes, in various ways, the universal and enduring significance of the instructions it contains: they are grounded in creation (1 Tim 2.8-15), apply to “all people” (1 Tim 2.1, 4-5), and are “how people *ought to conduct themselves* in God’s household” (1 Tim 3.14-15). More particularly, Paul introduces the regulations regarding the offices with the formula “here is a trustworthy saying” (1 Tim 3.1), which he otherwise reserves for summaries of the universal and enduring gospel itself.<sup>27</sup> Similarly, in Titus, Paul’s command to “appoint elders in every town” (Tit 1.5), who “hold firmly to the trustworthy message” (Tit 1.9), flows directly from Paul’s own apostolic commission to announce the gospel in fulfillment of God’s eternal purpose (Tit 1.1-3).
- v. *Safeguarding and promoting the gospel*: the apostles appointed elders to promote the gospel in the midst of opposition, and to guard the

<sup>26</sup> cf. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*: Vol. 4, 343: in the early churches “the office of elder was a familiar, universally present apostolic institution.” Note also the more generic descriptions of Christian leaders, which could possibly refer to elders, in the churches in: Rome (Romans 12.8); Thessalonica (1 Thess 5.12); and the churches addressed by Hebrews (Heb 13.7, 17, 24).

<sup>27</sup> 1 Tim 1.15; 4.8-10; 2 Tim 2.11-13; Tit 3.5-8. It is possible that πιστός ὁ λόγος in 1 Tim 3.1 refers backwards to 1 Tim 2.15. More likely, however, it refers forwards to 1 Tim 3.1b. See G. W. Knight III, “1 Timothy 3:1 and Its Saying,” in *The Faithful Sayings in the Pastoral Epistles* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979 (1968)), 50-61; P. Ellingworth, “The ‘True Saying’ in 1 Timothy 3:1,” *BT* 31 (1980): 443-45.

gospel against false teaching.<sup>28</sup> Since persecution from without, and false teaching within, will characterize the Church's life for the whole period between Jesus' resurrection and return,<sup>29</sup> the apostolic institution of elders is designed for the mission and condition of the Church in the whole of the inter-advent age.<sup>30</sup>

Together, these observations provide a strong cumulative case that the Scriptures, taken as "an historical and organic whole" do not merely describe apostolic practice, but reveal the Lord's enduring will for the government of his Church. Faithfulness to the apostolic constitution of the Church involves not only faithfulness to apostolic gospel and its written promulgation in the Scriptures, but also faithfulness to the apostolic pattern of ministry. There *is* a biblical form of church government.

It is important to be clear, however, about the relationship between the biblical form of church government and the gospel-centered mission of the Church. To state it negatively, the biblical form of church government is not part of the *esse* of the Church – not part of its "essence". This has four important negative corollaries. First, *a fully biblical church government is not part of the gospel*. It is an important part of "the whole counsel of God" (Acts 20.27), but it is not a matter of first importance (1 Cor 15.3). It is therefore perfectly possible for a particular church to faithfully proclaim the gospel without fully embracing the biblical form of church government. Second, *a fully biblical church government is not one of the marks of the true Church*. The true Church will be found wherever God's Word is proclaimed, the sacraments are administered, and discipleship (with discipline) is pursued, all in the power of the Spirit, because that's how God calls his people to himself, and produces saving faith in Christ, and so builds his Church.<sup>31</sup> Third, *a fully biblical church government is not a means of grace which somehow guarantees church health and growth*. It is tragically possible for a would-be "church" to have the biblical form of church government, but no gospel, no prayer, no love, and no spiritual vitality. If we are ever forced to choose between the two, it is an easy choice. Fourth, *Scripture does not provide all*

<sup>28</sup> Note: i. Acts 14.21-23 with 20.27-32; ii. 1 Tim 3.1-7 and 5.17-25 with 1.3-7, 19-20; 3.15-16; 4.1-7; 5.11-16; 6.20-21; iii. Tit 1.5 with 9-16. cf. also 2 Tim 2.2 with 2 Tim 2.14-18, 23-26; 3.1-13.

<sup>29</sup> Note: Matt 5.11-12; 7.15; 24.9-11, 24; Mk 13.9-13, 22; Lk 6.22; 21.12-17; Jn 16.2; 2 Thess 2.9, 11; 1 Tim 4.1-5; 2 Pet 2.1; 3.1-4; 1 Jn 4.1; Jude 3-4, 14, 17-19; Rev 2.2, 6, 14-15, 20, 24-25.

<sup>30</sup> cf. Beale, *NTBT*, 819-23.

<sup>31</sup> I refer here to the Reformational understanding of the "marks" of the true Church. For the Confessions, see: *Augsburg Confession* (1530), §7; *Scots Confession* (1560), § 20; *Belgic Confession* (1561), § 29; *Thirty-Nine Articles* (1563), §19; WCF (1647) §25.4. There has been some disagreement as to whether church discipline should be considered a "mark". The key point here is that it is possible to preach the word, administer the sacraments, and exercise discipline, without fully embracing the biblical form of church government.



*the details of the church's government*, but only the *central matters*, including the offices of Shepherd (elder) and Servant (deacon) and their basic functions. The details of how these officers lead and serve together to enable the whole body of Christ to pursue its gospel-centered mission in the world need to be worked out with prayerful wisdom in culturally appropriate ways (cf. WCF §30.1 with 1.6).<sup>32</sup> Nevertheless, there *is* a biblical form of church government. Thus, to state it more positively, we might say that the biblical form of church government, while not part of the *esse* of the Church, is part of its *de bene esse* – part of its “well-being”. It is a *God given means by which the church best pursues its gospel-centered mission in the world*. For this reason, we are right to ask the next question: what is the *shape* of the government that the Lord has given to his Church?

## 2. Shepherds and Servants

The two-office structure to the Church's government is clearest in texts like Philippians 1.1, where Paul addresses the church “together with the overseers and deacons”, and in 1 Timothy 3.1-13, where Paul regulates the offices of “overseer/elder” and “deacon”.<sup>33</sup> The full scope of the apostolic teaching, however, requires some attention.

### 2.1 The Shepherd office

The apostles envisage a single pastoral office – that of the “Shepherd” – and refer to the men appointed to this office by three interchangeable titles: they are “elders”, “overseers”, and “pastors” or “shepherds”. These titles each have a rich history in the OT, and in the NT two of the three are applied to the Lord Jesus himself.<sup>34</sup> The title “elder” (πρεσβύτερος) emphasizes the wisdom and maturity required for the role.<sup>35</sup> The title “overseer” (ἐπίσκοπος)

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<sup>32</sup> cf. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: Vol. 4*, 386-87: in the Reformed churches “it was the general conviction that the government of the church must substantially rest on a divine law. In this connection it was realized, however, that Scripture is not a book of statutes, does not deal in detail with a host of particulars, and leaves a great deal to the discretion of the churches”.

<sup>33</sup> A two-tier structure in the NT offices may also be suggested by 1 Peter 4.10-11. See further: Knight III, *Pastoral Epistles*, 175-77.

<sup>34</sup> For Jesus as “Shepherd” (ποιμήν): Matt 25.32; 26.31; Mk 14.27; John 10.2, 11, 14, 16; Heb 13.20; 1 Pet 2.25; 5.4; cf. Matt 15.24; Mk 6.34. For Jesus as “Overseer” (ἐπίσκοπος): 1 Peter 2.25.

<sup>35</sup> For πρεσβύτερος in the OT (LXX), usually translating the Hebrew word for “elder” (זקן) see above (fn. 23). In the NT, πρεσβύτερος occurs 68 times, 16 of which refer to non-apostolic Christian leaders holding a formally recognized position or role in the church (Acts 11.30; 14.23; 15.2, 4, 6, 22, 23; 16.4; 20.17; 21.18; 1 Tim 5.17, 19; Tit 1.5; Jas. 5.14; 1 Pet 5.1, 5). For discussion, see “πρεσβύτερος,” in *NIDNTTE*, ed. M. Silva (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 4:127-35.

emphasizes the work of carefully governing or “watching over” the Church.<sup>36</sup> The title “pastor” or “shepherd” (ποιμήν) emphasizes the calling of these leaders to lead, feed, and care for God’s “flock”, while protecting them from harm.<sup>37</sup>

### 2.1.1 One pastoral office: Shepherds (elders = overseers = pastors)

Five key passages make it clear that the apostles use the terms “elder”, “overseer”, and “pastor” or “shepherd” to refer to one and the same role.<sup>38</sup>

- i. Acts 20.17-31: Luke narrates how Paul summoned “the elders” (τοὺς πρεσβυτέρους) of the Ephesian church to meet him in Miletus, and then addressed this same group of men as those whom “the Holy Spirit has appointed ... as overseers (ἐπισκόπους), to shepherd (ποιμαίνειν) the church of God” (Acts 20.17, 28). The Ephesian “elders” were also “overseers” whose work was “to shepherd” or “pastor” God’s church.
- ii. 1 Peter 5.1-4: when Peter writes to the churches of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia (1 Pet 1.1), he addresses “the elders (πρεσβυτέρους) among you”, and charges them to “shepherd (ποιμανάτε) God’s flock ... exercising oversight (ἐπισκοποῦντες)” (1 Pet 5.1-2). The apostle Peter thus combines the same three terms as Paul in Acts to refer to the single group of leaders and to describe their work.
- iii. Titus 1.5-9: Paul reminds Titus that he left him on the island of Crete for the express purpose that he should “appoint elders in every town” (Tit 1.5: πρεσβυτέρους), and then immediately describes the qualifications required of “the overseer” (Tit 1.7: τὸν ἐπίσκοπον). The switch from the plural “elders” (Tit 1.5: πρεσβυτέρους) to the singular “overseer” (Tit 1.7: τὸν ἐπίσκοπον) does not indicate that Paul now

<sup>36</sup> In the OT (LXX), the noun ἐπίσκοπος occurs 15 times, usually translating the Hebrew noun for “overseer” or “leader” (פֶּקִיד). In the NT ἐπίσκοπος occurs only 5 times, always with reference either to Jesus (1 Pet 2.25) or Christian leaders other than the apostles (Acts 20.28; Phil 1.1; 1 Tim 3.2; Tit 1.7). cf. “oversight” (ἐπισκοπή): Acts 1.20; 1 Tim 3.1); “to oversee” (ἐπισκοπέω): 1 Pet 5.2. For discussion, see “ἐπίσκοπος,” in *NIDNTE*, ed. M. Silva (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 2:248-52.

<sup>37</sup> In the OT (LXX), the noun ποιμήν (translating Hebrew: רֹעֶה; “shepherd”) occurs 81 times, and the cognate verb ποιμαίνω (translating Hebrew: רָעָה; “to shepherd”) occurs 54 times. In addition to references to the ordinary care for sheep, the language is regularly used as a metaphor for leadership, especially kingship. In the NT, the noun ποιμήν occurs 18 times. Of these occurrences: (i). 11 refer to Jesus as the “shepherd” (Matt 25.32; 26.31; Mk 14.27; John 10.2, 11, 14, 16; Heb 13.20; 1 Pet 2.25; 5.4), and 1 refers to Christian leaders as “shepherds” (Eph 4.11). cf. ποιμαίνω (“to shepherd”): Jn 21.16; Acts 20.28; 1 Pet 5.2. For discussion, see “ποιμήν,” in *NIDNTE*, ed. M. Silva (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 4:81-87.

<sup>38</sup> For a classic discussion, see: J. B. Lightfoot, *Saint Paul’s Epistle to the Philippians*, 8 ed. (London: Macmillan, 1888), 95-99, esp. 95: “It is a fact now generally recognized by the theologian of all shades of opinion, that in the language of the New Testament the same officer in the Church is called indifferently ‘bishop’ (ἐπίσκοπος) and ‘elder’ or ‘presbyter’ (πρεσβύτερος).” More recently: Merkle, “Ecclesiology,” 180-90.

refers to a single individual either within or above a larger group, but is a generic singular, used to refer to a class of persons (“overseers”).<sup>39</sup> That is, having commanded Titus to appoint “elders in every town” (Tit 1.5), Paul now describes the kind of person appropriate to the role.

- iv. 1 Timothy 3.1-7 and 5.17-18: Paul lays out in some detail – again using the generic singular – the qualifications for “the overseer” (1 Tim 3.2: τὸν ἐπίσκοπον).<sup>40</sup> He then proceeds, in 1 Timothy 5.17, to speak, without any introduction or explanation, of “the elders who rule well” (Οἱ καλῶς προεστῶτες πρεσβύτεροι), some of whom also “labor in the word and teaching”. The identification of the generic “overseer” with these “elders” is strongly suggested by common language used to describe how both groups “rule well” (1 Tim 3.4-5 and 5.17: προϊστημι + καλῶς) and “teach” (1 Tim 3.2: διδακτικός; 5.17: διδασκαλία).
- v. Ephesians 4.11: Paul speaks of how the risen Lord Jesus “gave” to his Church not only “the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists,” but also “the pastors and teachers” (τοὺς δὲ ποιμένας καὶ διδασκάλους). This is the only place in the NT where Christian leaders are identified as “shepherds” or “pastors” using the noun ποιμήν. Some have seen here a reference to an office which is otherwise not identified in the same way elsewhere in the NT, that of “the pastor-teacher”.<sup>41</sup> Paul’s syntax, however, indicates that he speaks not of a single group by two names – “the pastor-teachers” – but of two closely related groups – “the pastors and teachers”.<sup>42</sup> Given that elders / overseers are elsewhere charged to “shepherd” or “pastor” God’s church, using the cognate verb ποιμαίνω (Acts 20.28; 1 Pet 5.2), it seems most likely that the “pastors” among these “pastors and teachers” are the “elders” / “overseers”, designated

<sup>39</sup> cf. Knight III, *Pastoral Epistles*, 290-91; Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 390.

<sup>40</sup> Knight III, *Pastoral Epistles*, 155.

<sup>41</sup> e.g. M. Barth, *Ephesians*, 2 vols., AB (New York: Doubleday, 1974), 2: 438-39; F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 348.

<sup>42</sup> The single article introducing two *plural* nouns indicates that the two nouns are closely related in some way, *not* that they are identical (cf. Eph 2.20: τῶν ἀποστόλων καὶ προφητῶν; also: Matt 3.7; Acts 17.12). Granville Sharp’s rule, though often invoked, only applies absolutely when the two nouns in question are *singular*. See: G. Sharp, *Remarks on the Definitive Article in the Greek Text of the New Testament*, 1st Amer. ed. (Philadelphia: B. B. Hopkins, 1807 (1798)), 3; D. B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 270-85.

in this case by one of their primary functions rather than their more common titles.<sup>43</sup>

Taken together, these five texts make it clear that in the language of the NT the titles “elder”, “overseer”, and “pastor” refer to one and the same office: all the elders are pastors; and all the pastors are elders; and all the pastors and elders are overseers.

### 2.1.2 Teams of Shepherds in each church

The Scriptures further consistently present plural leadership as the norm for God’s people. The OT, it is true, devotes significant space to the remarkable individual leadership of prophets, priests, and kings. In the New Covenant, however, these roles are primarily fulfilled in the Lord Jesus Christ, the one true Prophet, Priest, and King for God’s people (cf. WLC 42-45), and secondarily fulfilled in all of God’s people in Christ.<sup>44</sup> Nevertheless, alongside the leadership of these remarkable individuals, the OT also presents a consistent pattern of plural leadership. At the national level, “the elders of Israel” (זִקְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל; LXX: = ἡ γερουσία Ἰσραὴλ or οἱ πρεσβύτεροι Ἰσραὴλ or οἱ πρεσβύτεροι τοῦ λαοῦ) exercised authority over the entire people throughout the whole of covenant history.<sup>45</sup> At the local level, the elders of particular towns seem to have exercised authority in their towns throughout Israel’s history, and this structure persisted at the time of Jesus.<sup>46</sup>

In this context, the apostles established teams of Shepherds in each particular church. Four clear texts establish the principle.

- i. The book of Acts records that Paul and Barnabas appointed “elders (plural) in every church” (Acts 14.23: κατ’ ἐκκλησίαν πρεσβυτέρους). The phrase κατ’ ἐκκλησίαν is distributive, as parallel constructions make clear, and indicates that the apostles appointed a plurality of elders “in each individual congregation or assembly.”<sup>47</sup>

<sup>43</sup> The “pastors”, then, are a central subset of the broader category of “teachers” (cf. 1 Cor 12.28-29; Rom 12.7); cf. *Greek Grammar*, 284: “all Pastors were to be teachers, though not all teachers were to be Pastors”.

<sup>44</sup> Christ’s *munus triplex* (“threefold office”) was recognized as early as Eusebius, *Eccl. Hist.* §1.3.8-9. For the classic discussion, see Calvin, *Institutes* §2.15.1-6; cf. H. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: Vol. 3 – Sin and Salvation in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 364-68.

<sup>45</sup> Ex 3.16, 18; 4.29; 12.21; 17.5; 18.12; 24.1, 9; Deut 5.23; 27.1; 29.10; Josh 23.2; 2 Sam 5.3; cf. 2 Sam 17.4, 15; 1 Kgs 8.1, 3; 1 Chron 11.3; 15.25; 2 Chron 5.2, 4; Ezek 14.1; Ezra 6.4; Matt 15.2; 16.21; 21.23; 26.3, 47, 57; 27.1, 3, 12, 20, 41; 28.12; Mk 7.3, 5; 8.31; 11.27; 14.43, 53; 15.1; Lk 7.3; 9.22; 20.1; 22.52; 22.66; Acts 4.5, 8, 23; 6.12; 22.5; 23.14; 24.1; 25.15.

<sup>46</sup> e.g. Deut 19.12; Deut 21.3-6, 19; 22.15-18; 25.7-9; 27.1 Josh 20.4; Jdg 8.16; Ruth 4.2; 1 Sam 16.4; 1 Kgs 21.8, 11; Ezra 10.14: “elders and judges of every city”; Judith 6.16, 21; 7.23; 8.10; 10.6; 11.14; 13.12: “the elders of the town”; 15.8: “the elders of Jerusalem who lived in Jerusalem”; Matt 5.22; Matt 10.17 // Mk 13.9; Jos. *AJ.* 4.214, 287; *BJ.* 2.571; *j. Megillah* 3.74a; *b. Megillah* 26a, b.

<sup>47</sup> W. Bauer et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 304 ἐκκλησία § 3.β. For

- ii. Paul charges Titus to “appoint elders (plural) in every town” (Tit 1.5: κατὰ πόλιν πρεσβυτέρους). It is possible that Paul commands Titus to appoint a single elder to each of a number of particular churches in each of the towns on Crete. Given, however, the probable size of the towns on Crete in the first century, the recency of Paul’s influence on the island (2-3 years at most),<sup>48</sup> and the apostolic practice noted at Acts 14.23, it is far more likely that Paul envisages a single particular church in each town, with a plurality of elders in each particular church.<sup>49</sup>
- iii. Paul addresses his letter to the Philippian church “together with the overseers (plural) and deacons” (Phil 1.1: σὺν ἐπισκόποις καὶ διακόνους). Again, it is possible that Philippi had multiple Christian congregations at the time of Paul’s letter (c. 60-62), each of which was served by a single “overseer”. Given, however, the size of the city (10-15,000),<sup>50</sup> the relative youth of the church (10-12 years at most), the lack of any indication of multiple house churches in the city, and the apostolic practice noted at Acts 14.23, it is far more likely that Philippi had one Christian congregation served by a plurality of overseers and deacons.
- iv. The apostle James exhorts that if anyone is sick, “he should call for the elders (plural) of the church” (τοὺς πρεσβυτέρους τῆς ἐκκλησίας), who are to “pray over him” (Jas 5.14). The instruction strongly suggests plural eldership in a single particular church. Otherwise, how might the one who is sick call on a plurality of elders to pray for him?

In addition to these clear texts, the apostles elsewhere almost always refers to leadership in plural terms (e.g. 1 Thess 5.12; 1 Cor 12.28; Rom 12.8; Eph 4.11; Hebrews 13.7, 17, 24), which leaves the strong impression that plural leadership was the apostolic norm, even where the internal structure of the church’s leadership cannot be established with certainty.<sup>51</sup> The apostles and their associates consistently appointed teams of Shepherds – teams of pastoral leaders – to oversee and shepherd God’s flock.

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distributive use of κατὰ + acc. see *BDAG*, 512 § B.1.d. citing, amongst other examples, the similar expressions in Acts 2.46; 5.42; 15.21; 36; 20.20, 23.

<sup>48</sup> cf. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 386.

<sup>49</sup> cf. Knight III, *Pastoral Epistles*, 289.

<sup>50</sup> See P. Oakes, *Philippians: From People to Letter*, ed. R. Bauckham, vol. 110, *SNTSMS* (Cambridge: CUP, 2001), 44-50 who bases his estimate on the square acreage of the city, likely population density, and the size of the theatre.

<sup>51</sup> cf. Lightfoot, *Philippians*, 194; G. D. Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, *NICNT* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 67; Knight III, *Pastoral Epistles*, 176-77; Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 163.

### 2.1.3 Some Shepherds give themselves more fully to the work

At the same time, the apostle Paul does provide for some Shepherds to give themselves more fully to the work of teaching, and commands that these Shepherds are to be especially honored and supported. The key text here is 1 Timothy 5:17: “Let the elders who rule well (οἱ καλῶς προεστῶτες πρεσβύτεροι) be considered worthy of double honor (διπλῆς τιμῆς), especially those who labor in the word and teaching (μάλιστα οἱ κοπιῶντες ἐν λόγῳ καὶ διδασκαλίᾳ).” Paul does not in this text establish a different office. The men referred to are not given a different title. They are still “elders” (οἱ ... πρεσβύτεροι). It is also too much to say that Paul here establishes “two orders” within the one office – “Teaching Elders” and “Ruling Elders”.<sup>52</sup> The apostle fundamentally refers to a single group, “the elders who rule well”, *all* of whom are worthy of “double honour”. He does identify within this single group some who “labour in the word and teaching”, but the distinction Paul makes is not one of *kind*, but of *degree*.<sup>53</sup> The “elders who labour” are not performing fundamentally different functions to the others, since earlier in the same letter, the apostle is clear that *all* overseers / elders are both to “rule” (1 Tim 3:4-5: προϊστημι; 5:17: προϊστημι) and to be “able to teach” (1 Tim 3:2: διδακτικός; 5:17: διδασκαλία).<sup>54</sup> There is also no suggestion that these elders engage in a different *kind* of teaching ministry than the rest, since the text does not say “those who labor in *preaching* and teaching,” but “in *the word* and in teaching” (οἱ κοπιῶντες ἐν λόγῳ καὶ διδασκαλίᾳ).<sup>55</sup> There is, finally, no suggestion that these elders are more “gifted” in teaching than the others.

<sup>52</sup> The formulation of “two orders within the one office” has been common with Reformed and Presbyterian exegesis. See esp. Knight III, “Two Offices 1985,” 1-12; Waters, *How Jesus runs the church*, chpt 4. The distinction is often traced to Dabney, “Theories of the Eldership,” 133, but already occurs in Calvin, *Institutes*, § 4.11.1.

<sup>53</sup> Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 306-311 argues that 1 Timothy 5:17-18 makes no distinction of any kind among the elders. This relies on translating the adverb μάλιστα as “namely”, following T. C. Skeat, ““Especially the Parchments”: A Note on 2 Timothy iv. 13,” *JTS* 30 (1979): 173-77. This reading may be possible in some instances, but the majority of the 12 NT occurrences most naturally carry the sense “especially” (Acts 20:38; 25:26; 26:3; Gal 6:10; Phil 4:22; 1 Tim 4:10; 5:8, 17; 2 Tim 4:13; Tit 1:10; Phlm 16; 2 Pet 2:10), and this makes good sense in the present context. cf. V. S. Poythress, “The Meaning of μάλιστα in 2 Timothy 4:13 and Related Verses,” *JTS* 53 (2002): 523-32.

<sup>54</sup> cf. H. N. Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of his Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 458: “for some the center of gravity was more general leadership, from which, however, one cannot dissociate the teaching aspect”; D. A. Carson, “Some Reflections on Pastoral Leadership,” *Themelios* 40, no. 2 (2015): 197: “Some make a sharp distinction between teaching elder and ruling elder, based not least on 1 Timothy 5:17. As far as I can see, however, an elder is an elder/pastor/overseer, never less, and every elder/pastor/overseer must be able to teach (1 Tim 3:2).”

<sup>55</sup> So, correctly, KJV: “especially they who labor in the word and doctrine;” Luther: “besonders, die sich mühen im Wort und in der Lehre.” When Paul wants to specify “preaching”, he is perfectly capable of doing so (e.g. κηρύσσω 19x; καταγγέλλω 7x).

There is, of course, obvious wisdom in the church identifying those especially gifted to teach, and establishing processes to set them apart to “labour in teaching”, but Paul makes no mention here of a special teaching gift.<sup>56</sup> He speaks only of “*those who labor* (οἱ κοπιῶντες)”. These Shepherds, then, are those who have given up other labor – other work, other jobs – by which they might have supported themselves and their families, in order to make the work of being a Shepherd their daily work. Thus, while *all* the Shepherds are “worthy of double honor” – both honor and an honorarium, both respect and remuneration – such “double honor” is *especially* due those who have given up other labor in order to “labor in the word”.<sup>57</sup>

The apostle doesn’t give us a title for these “laborers”. Reformed and Presbyterian churches have tended to refer to them as “Ministers of the Word and Sacrament” or “Teaching Elders” as distinct from “Ruling Elders”. The first of these titles (“Minister”) is modelled on the way in which the apostles describe Jesus, themselves, and others as “servants” (e.g. Rom 15.8; 1 Cor 3.5; 1 Tim 4.6: διάκονος), and has the advantage of reminding us that those elders who “labour in the Word” are also “servants”, first of the Lord, and then of his Church. The apostles, however, also employ the noun διάκονος (“minister” or “servant”), and related terms, to describe a range of different kinds of Christian “servants”, and never use it as a recognizable title for an “ordinary and perpetual” pastoral leader in the Church.<sup>58</sup> When they do use the noun as a title for an ongoing role in the Church, it is for the other office that I’m calling “Servant” (= “deacon”). The practice of using the title “Minister” for elders who “labor in the Word”, therefore, runs the risk of suggesting that it is only the “Minister” or the “Ministry team” who do Christian ministry, when the biblical vision is for all of God’s people serving him – according to their various offices, gifts, and callings – in all of their lives.<sup>59</sup> The second title “Teaching Elder”, similarly, has the advantage of recognizing that all elders share the same office, but the significant

<sup>56</sup> *contra* Clowney, *The Church*, 212: “In short, then, the gift of teaching distinguishes pastors and teachers from other church elders with whom they share ruling authority in the church.”

<sup>57</sup> For this understanding of “double honour”, see already Calvin, *Institutes*, § 2.8.35. It is well supported by the context’: note 1 Tim 5.18 “for” (γὰρ) + two passages of “Scripture” (Deut 25.4; Luke 10.7) which teach that those who labour deserve their “wages” (μισθός).

<sup>58</sup> See, fn. 78 below.

<sup>59</sup> This does not mean that all forms of Christian service play the same role in God’s economy. The “ministry of the word of God” (cf. Acts 6.2), led by the Shepherds, plays a central role in the administration of God’s “saving grace”. Other forms of ministry, inside and outside the church, play various supporting roles in the administration of God’s saving grace, and a wide range of roles in the administration of God’s “common grace”. Practically, this means that we should usually employ the language of “ministry” with a descriptor, to specify the kind of ministry we mean, whether, for example, it is the ministry of the Word (Acts 6.4), the ministry of care (Acts 6.1-2), or the ministry of government (Rom 13.4).

disadvantage of implying that the “Ruling Elders” *only* rule and don’t teach. If that is what it means, the title “Ruling Elder” is unhelpful, because the Scriptures are clear that *all* of the Shepherds must be “able to teach” God’s Word (1 Tim 3.2; Tit 1.9). A better way forward, then, might be to refer to the elders who “labor in the Word” as “paid shepherds” or “paid elders” to reflect the fact that these laborers are supported financially and so able to devote more of their time to the work.<sup>60</sup> Whatever we call such elders, the main point here is that the apostles give us a single pastoral office, that of the “Shepherd” (elder / overseer / pastor), while also providing for some of the Shepherds to particularly labor in the work of teaching, commanding that those who do so should be especially honored and supported.

#### **2.1.4 No other pastoral office**

The apostles do not establish any other “ordinary and perpetual” pastoral office in the Church. Three potential arguments for a “third office”, however, require a brief discussion.

First, Reformed proponents of the three-office view have sometimes argued that the old covenant distinction between priests / levites, on the one hand, and elders, on the other, justifies an ongoing distinction between “pastors” or “ministers,” who are called to preach and teach, and “elders” or “governors,” who are called to rule and discipline the Church.<sup>61</sup> There are, however, at least four difficulties with this view. (i). The apostles are clear that the priestly office is fulfilled in Christ,<sup>62</sup> and – differently – in God’s people as a whole,<sup>63</sup> but not in any “ordinary and perpetual” new covenant office. This is a point of discontinuity between the administrations of the Old and New Covenants.<sup>64</sup> (ii). The proposed distinction between priests and levites who teach, and elders who govern, cannot be sustained, even on the basis of the OT evidence. The priests and levites did exercise the primary teaching role in the old covenant Church, but there are also clear examples of elders receiving and delivering instructions regarding passover (Exod 12.21-28), prophesying by the Spirit (Num 11.24-25), receiving and teaching the law (Exod 12.21;

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<sup>60</sup> The “light of nature” would also seem to suggest that such “paid shepherds” normally ought to: (i). take the lead role, amongst a team of Shepherds, in teaching congregations of God’s people; (ii). be thoroughly trained for the task.

<sup>61</sup> The argument goes back to *The Form of Presbyterian Church Government* (1647) § 4 citing Isaiah 66.21 and Matthew 23.34; cf. more recently: Rayburn, “Three Offices,” 109-10.

<sup>62</sup> The noun ἱερεὺς (“priest”) occurs 31 times in the NT, but never in reference to a Christian leader apart from Christ himself (Heb 8.4; 10.21). The cognate noun ἀρχιερεὺς (“chief/high priest”) occurs 123 times, but also never in reference to a Christian leader other than Christ “our Great High Priest” (Heb 2.17; 3.1; 4.14-15; 5.5, 10; 6.20; 7.26; 8.1; 9.11); cf. Calvin, *Institutes* § 4.18.2: “the right and honor of the priesthood has ceased among mortal men, because Christ, who is immortal, is the one perpetual priest.”

<sup>63</sup> 1 Pet 2.5, 9; Rev 1.6: 5.10; 20.6; cf. Exod 19.6.

<sup>64</sup> The apostle Paul sometimes employs priestly language to describe his ministry (Rom 15.16; cf. Phil 2.17), but neither he nor any other leader is ever styled “priest”.



19.7; Deut 27.1; 31.9, 28; 32.7), and giving counsel (Ezek 7.26).<sup>65</sup> (iii). The apostles explicitly require that the Shepherds (elders / overseers / pastors) are to be “able to teach” (1 Tim 3.2; cf. Tit 1.9; Eph 4.11-12). It is, therefore, extremely difficult to maintain that the NT restricts the role of elders to government and discipline. (iv). The Scriptures are clear that God’s fatherly care, instruction, and discipline of his children provides the paradigm for human leadership, so that loving pastoral leadership, including teaching and discipleship of others, always provides the context for right discipline (e.g. Prov 3.11-12; Heb 12.4-11). It would be very strange, then, if the apostles established a class of leaders (“elders” / “overseers”) who were called to “govern”, “rule”, and “discipline,” but *not* proactively teach and disciple. The old covenant distinction between priests / levites and elders, then, does not provide any support for a three-office view which sharply distinguishes between “Ministers” who “teach” and “elders” who “rule.”

Second, it might be suggested that the NT references to “prophets”,<sup>66</sup> “teachers”,<sup>67</sup> and “evangelists”<sup>68</sup> provide some basis for a distinct pastoral office. There is not space here to discuss these gifts in any detail. It is enough to notice that while the apostles recognised and celebrated these God-given gifts to the Church, there is no evidence that they ever: (i). appointed people to such roles;<sup>69</sup> (ii). sought to regulate the appointment of people to such roles;<sup>70</sup> (iii). took measures to establish such leaders in churches where they were lacking, or; (iv). understood the churches to be ordered under people

<sup>65</sup> *contra* Rayburn, “Three Offices,” 109: “The Levites and the priests as ministers of the Word are found in close connection with the prophets ... The elders, on the other hand, are never connected to prophecy in this way.”

<sup>66</sup> The noun “prophet” (προφήτης) occurs 144 times in the NT. Of these, around 26 refer to what we might call “new covenant prophets”: Matt 10.41; 23.34, 37 (?); Lk 11.49; Acts 11.27; 13.1; 15.32; 21.10; 1 Cor 12.28-29; 14.29, 32 (x2), 37; Eph. 2.20; 3.5; 4.11; 1 Thess 2.15 (?); Jas 5.10 (?); Rev. 11.10, 18 (?); 16.6 (?); 18.20 (?), 24 (?); 22.6 (?), 9 (?) (cf. Tit 1.12 which refers to a pagan “prophet”).

<sup>67</sup> The noun “teacher” (διδάσκαλος) occurs 59 times in the NT. Five of these references are to Christian “teachers” in the churches: Acts 13.1; 1 Cor 12.28, 29; Eph 4.11; Jas 3.1; cf. Rom 12.7: “the one who teaches” (ὁ διδάσκων); Gal 6.6: “the one who instructs” (ὁ κατηγών).

<sup>68</sup> “Evangelist” (εὐαγγελιστής): Acts 21.8; Eph 4.11; 2 Tim 4.5.

<sup>69</sup> Philip, one of the “seven men” appointed to “serve tables” in Acts 6.1-6 was an “evangelist” (Acts 21.8), but the gift is distinct from the “servant” role, and is neither a necessary nor sufficient qualification for it.

<sup>70</sup> The apostles did regulate the *exercise of the gifts* of prophecy and teaching, by denouncing “false teaching / teachers / prophets” (1 Tim 1.3; 2 Pet 2.1; 1 Jn 4.1), by asserting apostolic authority over the prophets (1 Cor 14.37), by insisting that teaching and prophecy be “tested” against the apostolic gospel (1 Cor 12.3; 14.29; 1 Thess 5.19-21; 1 Jn 4.1), and by urging that it be conducted in such a way that it builds the body (1 Cor 12.7; 14.26-33, 39-40). This is different, however, from the regulations in 1 Timothy 3.1-13 and Titus 1.5-9, where Paul places tests on the *people* to be appointed to office.

with such gifts, unless they were also elders / overseers.<sup>71</sup> Thus, while these gifts certainly perform functions which overlap with those of the Shepherd office, there is no indication that the apostles established these roles as “ordinary and perpetual” offices in the Church.

Third, it is sometimes suggested that Timothy and Titus provide the prototypes for the office of “Minister”, understood as the single pastoral leader of a congregation, or “Bishop” understood as a pastoral leader who stands outside the life of a particular church and oversees multiple churches in a city or region. Certainly, Paul identifies Timothy and Titus by a range of leadership descriptors, and charges them with significant leadership functions, especially teaching. Four factors, however, argue against the identification of these men as the solo “Ministers” or “Bishops” of the churches in Ephesus and on Crete: (i). such solo pastoral ministry is otherwise unknown in the NT; (ii). Paul never applies to Timothy or Titus his standard titles for the pastoral office (neither “elder”, nor “overseer”, nor “pastor”);<sup>72</sup> (iii). Paul regularly sent both men on short-term missions so that, like Paul, they exercised a semi-itinerant ministry, and were never the pastors of a particular flock for any extended length of time;<sup>73</sup> (iv). Paul charged both men with the specific mission of establishing the churches in Ephesus and Crete more firmly in the truth by teaching, refuting error, and especially by appointing a settled eldership, but never commands either of them to appoint an individual successor to their unique role.<sup>74</sup> It is difficult to argue that Timothy and Titus are the first “Ministers” of the church, and even more difficult to argue that they were the first “Bishops” in an episcopalian sense. Timothy and Titus are, rather, best understood as “apostolic delegates”, that is, they operated as an extension of the extraordinary ministry of the apostles.<sup>75</sup>

<sup>71</sup> Paul states that the Lord appointed “teachers” “third” in the Church. The correspondence between Ephesians 4.11 and 1 Corinthians 12.28 suggests that Paul speaks with the same intent but less precision in the latter passage, so that the class of “teachers” whom God has appointed “third” in the Church includes reference to the “Shepherds” but is not limited to them.

<sup>72</sup> Paul calls Timothy: (i). God’s “worker” (2 Tim 2.15: ἐργάτης); (ii). “the Lord’s slave” (2 Tim 2.24: δοῦλος κυρίου); (iii). a kind of “evangelist” (2 Tim 4.5: εὐαγγελιστής); (iv). a “servant/minister of Christ Jesus” (1 Tim 4.6: διάκονος Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ).

<sup>73</sup> Timothy was: (i). left behind in Berea (Acts 17.14); (ii). sent to Thessalonica (1 Thess 3.2-3); (iii). sent later to Macedonia (Acts 19.22); (iv). sent to Corinth (1 Cor 4.17); (v). planned to go to Philippi (Phil 2.19); (vi). left in Ephesus (1 Tim 1.3-4); (vii). called to return to Paul in Rome (2 Tim 4.9, 21). Titus was: (i). left behind on Crete (Tit 1.5); (ii). expected to meet Paul in Nicopolis (Tit 3.12); (iii). sent (?) to Dalmatia (2 Tim 4.10).

<sup>74</sup> 1 Tim 1.3-4; 3.1-7; 4.6-7, 11-16; 5.17-22; 6.2, 17, 20-21; 2 Tim 1.13-14; 2.2, 11-16, 23-26; 4.1-5; Tit 1.5, 11, 13; 2.1, 3, 6-10, 15; 3.1, 9-10.

<sup>75</sup> For this description, see: Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 387: “As is true of Timothy, Titus stands outside the structure of the Cretan church as an apostolic delegate; he is never identified as an Overseer or bishop.” (cf. lxxxviii.). For similar conclusions, see: J. N. D. Kelly, *A commentary on the pastoral epistles: I Timothy, II Timothy, Titus*, BNTC (London: A. & C.

From all of this we are left with a simple conclusion. The apostles: (i). established a single pastoral office for the leadership of the Church between Jesus' resurrection and return – that of the Shepherd (elder / overseer / pastor); (ii). appointed teams of Shepherds to lead each particular church; (iii). provided for some Shepherds to “labour in the Word and teaching”.

## 2.2 The Servant Office

The Lord Jesus, through the apostles, also established a second “ordinary and perpetual” office in his Church: that of the “Servant” (δίακονος).<sup>76</sup> Unlike the office of “Shepherd”, there is no clear OT equivalent to the NT office of the Servant. The OT, of course, speaks often of “service” or “ministry”, but neither of the two key Hebrew terms (עֲבָד and שָׂרָה) consistently designates a recognizable office among God's people, and there is no indication that such an office existed under some other title.<sup>77</sup> The Servant office, then, is part of what is new about the new covenant Church.

The Greek term διάκονος is most commonly translated “servant” or “minister,” and the whole διάκον- word group is used in a range of ways to speak of various kinds of service or assistance, ultimately modelled on that of the Lord Jesus himself, who “came not to be served, but to serve (οὐκ ἵνα δοῦναι ἀλλὰ διακονῆσαι) and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matt 20.28 // Mk 10.45; cf. Luke 12.37; 22.27).<sup>78</sup> In those contexts where διάκονος is used as a title for an office it is usually transliterated “deacon” (Phil 1.1; 1 Tim 3.8, 12; Rom 16.1). The Scriptures provide less teaching on this office than on that of the Shepherd, and the evidence may be discussed more briefly.

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Black, 1963), 13-14; D. Guthrie, *The Pastoral Epistles: An Introduction and Commentary*, 2nd ed., TNTC (Leicester: IVP, 1990), 38-39; Knight III, *Pastoral Epistles*, 29; Merkle, “Ecclesiology,” 195-97.

<sup>76</sup> cf. *The Form of Presbyterian Church Government* (1647) § 6: “The scripture doth hold out deacons as distinct officers in the church. Whose office is perpetual.”

<sup>77</sup> For עֲבָד, see L. Koehler and W. Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, trans. M. E. J. Richardson (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 2.773-75. For שָׂרָה, HALOT, 4.1661-63. The LXX translates these Hebrew terms by a number of different Greek words, but never by words from the διάκον- word group, which it employs only rarely.

<sup>78</sup> The noun διάκονος (“servant” / “minister”) occurs 29 times in the NT and carries a range of meanings. It is applied to: (i). Christ himself (Rom 15.8; cf. ironically Gal 2.17); (ii). the apostles and their associates (1 Cor 3.5; 2 Cor 3.6; 6.4; Eph 3.7; 6.21; Col 1.7, 23, 25; 4.7; 1 Tim 4.6); (iii). the false apostles in Corinth (2 Cor 11.23; cf. 2 Cor 11.15 (x 2)); (iv). various generic Christian servants (Matt 20.26; 23.11; Mk 9.35; 10.43; Jn 12.26); (v). those who hold the office of “deacon” in the church (Phil 1.1; 1 Tim 3.8, 12; cf. Rom 16.1); (vi). the Roman governing authority (Rom 13.4 (x 2)). The remaining 3 occurrences have no direct relevance to our question (Matt 22.13; John 2.5, 9). See further: “διακονέω, διακονία, διάκονος,” in *NIDNTTE*, ed. M. Silva (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 4: 701-05.

### 2.2.1 The origins of the Servant office: Acts 6

Acts 6.1-6 narrates the origins of the Servant office. To be sure, Acts 6 is a descriptive passage regarding the apostles' actions in the Jerusalem church and does not employ the noun "servant" (διάκονος) as a title for the seven men chosen to "serve tables". For these reasons the passage does not, on its own, provide sufficient biblical basis for an "ordinary and perpetual" office. Nevertheless, the language of "service" is certainly prominent in Acts 6: the apostles appoint seven men to "serve tables" (6.2: διακονεῖν τραπέζαις), in the "daily service" of food (6.1: ἐν τῇ διακονίᾳ τῇ καθημερινῇ), thus allowing the apostles to "devote" themselves "to prayer and to the service of the word" (6.4: τῇ προσευχῇ καὶ τῇ διακονίᾳ τοῦ λόγου). Acts 6, moreover, underlines the significance of the "ministry" or "service" of the seven men by setting their "service" in parallel with that of Jesus (Lk 12.37; 22.27), and of the apostles (Acts 6.1, 2, 4), by noting the requirement that those chosen must be men of "good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom" (Acts 6.3), and by reporting the apostles' resolve to formally "appoint" (καθίστημι) those chosen by the "laying on of hands" (Acts 6.3, 6). Acts 6, then, narrates the apostles' institution, in the church in Jerusalem, of a formalized ministry role, alongside their own ministry of the Word, which required godly appointees, and played a crucial role in the advance of God's mission through the Church.<sup>79</sup> When this passage is taken together with the apostle Paul's subsequent regulation and recognition of the office of "Servant" (see below), the account in Acts 6 is well understood as narrating the origins of the office.

### 2.2.2 Apostolic regulation and recognition of the Servant office

In three further key texts from Paul's letters, the apostle regulates and recognizes the office of Servant (διάκονος).

- i. 1 Timothy 3.8, 12: Paul follows his instructions regarding the office of "the overseer" (1 Tim 3.1-7) with a set of instructions regarding "Servants" (διακόνους). That the apostle here employs the noun "servant" (διάκονος) in the plural as a title for an office is indicated by the way in which he sets these "Servants" in parallel with "the overseer" (διακόνους ὡσαύτως: "Servants likewise ..."), and then stipulates the character qualities and competencies required of those who "serve" (1 Tim 3.10, 13: διακονέω) in the role.
- ii. Philippians 1.1: Paul opens his letter to the Philippians by addressing the church "together with the overseers and servants" (σὺν ἐπισκόποις καὶ

<sup>79</sup> Two of the seven – Stephen and Philip – went on to proclaim the gospel with great effect (Acts 7.1-60; 8.5-13, 26-40). Since there is no indication that the other five men served in this way, this is best understood as a function of their particular gifts and calling (cf. Acts 21.8), rather than as a necessary function of the office.

διακόνους). The apostle's reference, in his formal address to the Philippians, to plural "overseers" and plural "servants", simultaneously distinguishes these officers from each other and from the church, and so indicates that alongside the office of "overseer" (= elder / pastor) the church in Philippi had a second office established to serve its life and mission.<sup>80</sup>

- iii. Romans 16.1: In the final chapter of his letter to the Romans, Paul describes "our sister Phoebe" as "being also a servant of the church (οὐσαν καὶ διάκονον τῆς ἐκκλησίας) at Cenchreae." This description could merely indicate a generic kind of Christian service, but more likely indicates that Phoebe served in a recognizable office in that church.<sup>81</sup> This is suggested by three observations: a. Paul could have used more natural expressions involving the verb "serve", or the participle "serving", if he had merely intended general Christian service;<sup>82</sup> b. the construction "Phoebe ... being ... a servant" (Φοίβην ... οὐσαν ... διάκονον), which has a proper name + the present participle of the verb to be (εἰμί) + a titular noun, draws attention to the titular noun, and is elsewhere used to describe a person serving in office;<sup>83</sup> c. the reference to a particular named church which Phoebe served suggests she played a particular role in that church.

There is no explicit evidence, apart from Acts 6, for the apostles themselves directly appointing Servants in the churches. It is hard to tell, therefore, whether the apostles endeavored to appoint Servants in every church, or only appointed them as the need arose, or generally left the appointment of Servants to the elders, once these had been appointed.<sup>84</sup> Nevertheless, taken together, the narrative in Acts 6, and the three references to "Servants" just cited, provide clear evidence that the apostles established in the Church,

<sup>80</sup> M. Silva, *Philippians*, 2nd ed., BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 40-41.

<sup>81</sup> For this conclusion, see the classic discussion in J. Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Romans and the Thessalonians*, Calvin's Commentaries (Edinburgh: St. Andrews Press, 1961), *loc. cit.*. More recently, C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, 6th ed., 2 vols. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975-79), 2.781; T. R. Schreiner, *Romans*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 686-687. For extended discussion, see: G. R. Perry, "Phoebe of Cenchreae and "Women" of Ephesus: "Deacons" in the Earliest Churches," *Presbyterion* 36, no. 1 (2010): 9-36.

<sup>82</sup> cf. Romans 15.25: διακονῶν; 2 Timothy 1.18: διακονέω.

<sup>83</sup> John 11.49 and 51: Καϊάφας + ὢν + ἀρχιερεὺς ("Caiaphas, being high priest"); Acts 18.12: Γαλλίωνος + ὄντος + ἀνθυπάτου ("Gallio, being proconsul"); Acts 24.10: ὄντα + κριτὴν (Governor Felix, "being judge"). Thus, while he does not make this argument from the syntax, Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Romans and the Thessalonians*, *loc. cit.* observes that Paul commends Phoebe "first on account of her office".

<sup>84</sup> cf. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 386.

alongside the primary office of the Shepherd, the secondary office of the Servant.

**Conclusion: Shepherds, Servants, and the whole body of Christ in the gospel-centered mission of God's Church**

The Scriptures are clear: the Lord established two – and only two – ordinary and perpetual offices for the ongoing life of the Church: the offices of “Shepherd” ( = elder / overseer / pastor) and “Servant” ( = deacon). To recognize this, however, is only the beginning of what needs to be said and done in more fully reforming the churches to reflect God's revealed will. I have not here had the space to say anything about the qualifications and character of the people appointed to these roles. Nor has there been space to discuss the work of the Shepherds in *leading* the gospel-centered mission of the church, *teaching* the whole counsel of God from the Scriptures, *praying* with and for God's people, and *modelling* life in Christ. Nor have we been able to explore the complementary work of the Servants in *facilitating* the gospel-centered ministry of the Church, and managing its material resources, with particular reference to the needs of the vulnerable, weak, and poor. Nor have we discussed the work of Shepherds and Servants in wider councils designed to co-ordinate and oversee the gospel-centered mission of all the churches. And beyond that, there has not been space to explore the key role of Shepherds in equipping all of God's people for works of service so that the gospel goes out to the world, and the whole body of Christ grows up to maturity, as each part does its work. For now, however, it is enough to notice that although the “two-office” view has not always or everywhere been recognized in the churches, it has been recently affirmed in the World Reformed Fellowship's *Statement of Faith* 2010 § 8.2. The Lord has ordained that the gospel-centered mission of his Church should be led by Shepherds (elders / overseers / pastors), and facilitated by Servants (deacons). These two offices are the “ordinary and perpetual” offices that the Lord Jesus himself, though his apostles, has established in his Church.