

The Roles of Church Members, Deacons, and Preachers

Written by Ben Winslett

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Yesterday I posted a status to my facebook page sharing an observation I have made in recent years. Attempts to run the church as a business always end terribly.

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I have thought along those lines for a couple of days and would like to share some scriptural precedents with our readers concerning the roles of church members. The Bible gives us a very clear framework as to what each member and class of member is to do. Fortunately, we aren't left ignorant.

What The Church Is Not

Before looking at what different members ARE to do, I want to look at how the church is NOT to operate.

Churches are not businesses. They are not corporations. In the corporate model of church, the Pastor serves as a CEO. The Deacon as the Board of Directors (many times wielding more power than the CEO). The membership comprise the stock holders, which often can be a necessary evil in the mind of the Board. Stock holders must be kept happy enough to continue support and investment, but they also hinder the goals of the Board or CEO.

Churches are also not informal clubs with little to no structure. A church body isn't a group of people who gather merely to spend time fraternizing.

What The Church Is

The word church can be defined as "assembly." This rules out the concept that "church" can be defined as anyone and everyone who believes in Jesus, a common view in our ecumenical day. Church requires assembly.

But scripture goes into much more detail. According to The Apostle Paul, in both Romans and 1 Corinthians, a church is a body, made up of distinct members with different abilities and responsibilities. Members of a local church are members of a functional, connected body of members just as much as a human body is made of functional parts.

Finally, the nature of the church is spiritual. It is a spiritual entity created to render honor and praise unto Jesus Christ, her Saviour. This is why it is wrong to apply any sort of worldly system of governance in the church.

Roles

There are classifications of membership in the church. Not everyone has the same gift, sure. But, many of us even have distinct offices. There are three ways in particular we can learn about the various roles: 1) Definition of utilized term, 2) Clear instruction, and 3) Observation.

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Members - In the Bible, church members were called "disciples" and "followers." The word disciple is defined as *a pupil or student*. Obviously, the word follower is defined as *one who follows another*.

This is an umbrella term applying to EVERYONE in the church, notwithstanding some in the church fall into even more of a distinct class.

Members are instructed to gather (Hebrews 10), sing (Ephesians 5), pray without ceasing (1 Thes 5:17), give (1 Cor 16), submit to Christ in their daily lives (notice the often used term "servant/slave" of Christ), and submit to one another (Eph 5:21).

We can observe from the four gospels and Acts that disciples met daily, studied together, prayed together, helped each other in physical needs, and followed Christ over all.

Deacons - The word deacon means *servant or minister*. In fact, the very word which translates deacon is a common word for servant in the Greek language. Rather than being a board of directors or a ruling body, deacons are official servants of the church.

Most agree that official Deacons/servants were first called out to serve the church in Acts chapter 6, after there was a cry of neglect from the Grecian widows in their daily care. Because of this need, the Apostles, not willing to leave their spiritual labors, instructed the church to select men to see to this task of caring for the needs of the widows. From this, we observe the work of the deacons - to serve the church and care for those who cannot care for themselves.

We often think it is the preacher's role to visit the sick and needy (and he does share in this responsibility - See James 5) but the primary responsibility for this falls on the deacon. A deacon is to care for the physical needs of the church. Much like Moses' helpers lifted his arms as he tired, so do deacons relieve the minister from physical needs so that the minister can attend to the scriptures and prayer.

Sadly, in many locations a tradition has been established which has placed deacons in a

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position never intended for their office - the oversight of the pulpit. There is no Biblical warrant for deacons to control the pulpit, make the preaching arrangements, or be a "guard dog" for the church in spiritual matters. Deacons are also not a board to which you can express all your complaints about the preacher. That's such a terrible shame. If you have a problem with ANY church member, the pastor included, take that complaint directly to that party.

Does God give us grace to do that which He has not called on us to do? I think not. But He does give us grace to perform what He commands.

It's also worth pointing out that deacons are not shown, in scripture, to be in the position to guide the church or steer the direction of the church. This is also common in some areas. Unfortunately, occurs without Biblical command.

A final thought (perhaps one needing an article of its own): It is highly doubtful that deacons should serve in a presbytery during an ordination. The word presbytery is the plural form of the Greek word which translates "elder." A presbytery then is a plurality of elders. Since deacons are not elders, it is unlikely that they are to "lay hands on" a man being ordained to the work of the ministry. Elders, the presbytery, should lay hands on new elders. Paul laid his hands on Timotheus. Titus was left in Crete to ordain elders in every city. Ministers lay hands on - ordain - new ministers.

This isn't an attack on the office, but a needful clarification of the office. No offence intended...it's just a matter of scripture.

Elders - Preachers in the Bible were called elders. However, several other terms were employed. Let's look at them (definitions from blueletterbible.org):

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- Elder - among the Christians, those who presided over the assemblies (or churches) The NT uses the term bishop, elders, and presbyters interchangeably.
- Bishop - the overseer or presiding officers of a Christian church.
- Pastor - a herdsman, esp. a shepherd.
- Teacher - in the NT one who teaches concerning the things of God, and the duties of man.

- Them that have the rule - To be a leader, rule, command.

You can check those definitions and I encourage it. God used these words on purpose; they describe the work. A cook is called a cook because he cooks. A police is called a police because he polices. An athlete is called an athlete because he engages in athletics. These words describe the preacher based upon his work. Now, re-read the definitions I just cited.

Allow me to clarify one more thing. The elder is NOT A LORD. He isn't to Lord over God's heritage. Christ is the great head of the church - not the pastor. We are undershepherds (1 Peter 5). Under the leadership of Christ through the Holy Spirit, we lead the flock. A note on the word "rule," Peter excludes this from meaning "lords." Rather, we lead by example. The word rule is the root word for ruler - a measuring stick. We hold scripture forth and in that sense, rule or lead God's children.

One alternate definition of the word Bishop is *Superintendent*. A superintendent is one with oversight. Pastors are to take the oversight of the church, watch for the souls of the members, and report on them to God. He is to lead you and guide you with scripture and feed God's children the good word of God.

From the Scriptures, we learn that preachers are to study (2 Tim 2:15), pray, lead by example (1 Pet 5), take heed to themselves (Acts 20), take heed unto the doctrine (1 Tim 4), preach the word, rebuke, reprove, exhort (2 Tim 4), do the work of an evangelist (2 Tim 4), and pass on this glorious gospel of Christ to a future generation of preachers. They are also to join, when called for, a sick person so that they can pray for that person's healing (James 5). This is our work!

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While preachers do serve or minister the word of God to the churches, they answer to Christ. Christ called us as soldiers and it is to Christ whom we answer. We are slaves to Christ and we must obey Him in all things.

Finally, from the four gospels and Acts, we observe that preachers spent their time studying and preaching the word, both publicly and from house to house. This was their life's work and it consumed them. From their calling, they spent their time in nothing else than the ministry of the word of God. They gathered daily to study with each other, pray with each other, and preach the gospel of Christ. While a man greedy of filthy lucre must NOT - yea NEVER - be ordained to the ministry, the church DOES have a grave responsibility to provide for his needs so that he can devote his time to study and prayer, rather than juggle full time work with the spiritual tasks to which he is called. Paul wrote to the Corinthians that the only way they were inferior to the other First Century churches was that they did not care for him financially (2 cor 12:13). Those who preach the gospel should live of the gospel, but not for their gain. They should live of the gospel so they can devote their TIME and ENERGY to the gospel. This is for the PROFIT of the churches.

Head - Finally, and most importantly, Jesus is the Head of His church. He is in charge. It belongs to Him. He owns it. He bought her with His own blood. To Him we are accountable. Jesus is in charge of His church. Jesus guides us through the Holy Spirit. He speaks to us through His word. He grants to us our candlestick (status as a church). He can take away our candlestick. Churches are ultimately accountable to Jesus.

I hope this has been informative. Above all, pray for us as we attempt to serve you.