

Church Government: Officers

I. What is ordination?

- Ordination is when a member is publicly set apart for a particular office in the church.
- Benefits of ordination:
 - Protects the offices from unworthy people. People can't just claim to be ministers, elders, or deacons.
 - Gives accountability to people who serve in these offices. If they forsake the Bible (both in doctrine or deed), they can be removed by the ordaining body.
 - Clarity about who are leaders in a given church.
- Biblical argument for ordination:
 - The Bible talks about certain roles in the church as part of Jesus' plan.
 - The early church commissioned men for office (Acts 6:1–6; 13:3; 1 Tim 4:14), and maintained lists of who was ordained (Acts 6:5; 13:1).
 - God equips officers with gifts to serve (Acts 20:28; Eph 4:11).
 - The leaders are under authority: only certain people can be ordained (1 Tim 3:1-13; Tit 1:5-9), and they derive their authority from the church as a whole, which recognizes them.

II. Offices in the church

- Foundational offices:
 - Apostles: eyewitnesses to Jesus and his life, death, and resurrection (Acts 1:21–22), who received their message directly from Jesus (Gal 1:11–12; Rev 1:1), and who are sent out to establish churches.
 - Prophets: gifted with words revealed by Christ (Eph 3:5) in order to sustain an early congregation in the gospel (1 Cor 12:28–29; 14:26–40).
 - Acts 15:32: “And Judas and Silas, who were themselves prophets, encouraged and strengthened the brothers with many words.”
 - These offices ceased after the first generation of the church. They are part of the foundation-laying phase (Eph 2:20), where Jesus is imparting “the faith once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3). Since we have this revelation completely given in the Bible, no further revelational offices or gifts are necessary.
- Ongoing offices:
 - Elders: shepherds of the flock, who rule, care, and teach (1 Pet 5:1–4; Acts 20:28).
 - Two kinds: ruling elder and teaching elder (1 Tim 5:17: “Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.”).
 - Deacons: leaders in service, whose service and leadership frees up the elders and demonstrates Christ's love (Acts 6:1–6; 1 Tim 3:8–13).

III. Who is qualified?

- All offices require godly character and a true understanding of the faith.
 - Almost all of the qualifications in 1 Tim 3 and Tit 1 are about Christ-like character.

- Must be *mature* character: 1 Tim 5:22: “Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands, nor take part in the sins of others.”
- But elders and deacons must also know the gospel well (Acts 6:3; 1 Tim 3:2, 9). Elders must be able to teach the gospel and to fight falsehood (Tit 1:9).
- Why don’t we ordain women?
 - It’s not because we think men are smarter than women, or better than them. We are all image-bearers, co-equals before Christ! (Gen 1:27; Gal 3:28; 1 Pet 3:7). Nor is it because we think that women are incapable of excellent rule or public speaking (Prov 31:10–31).
 - Rather:
 - Jesus appointed a male-only set of apostles. All office-holders in the NT are male (with the possible exception of Phoebe; Rom 16:1).
 - 1 Cor 14:34 and 1 Tim 2:11–12 forbid women from exercising authoritative teaching roles. 1 Tim 2:13 roots this instruction in creation. Men and women picture God in different ways.
 - Elders and deacons should be “the husband of one wife” (1 Tim 3:2, 12; Tit 1:6).

IV. What are things that only officers should do?

- We recognize the general office of “the priesthood of all believers”: every believer is a priest (1 Pet 2:5, 9; Rev 1:6; 5:10; 20:6)!
 - We all offer our lives as spiritual sacrifices to God (Rom 12:1–2).
 - Every believer should be witnessing (1 Pet 3:15) and encouraging each other with the word of God (Col 3:16).
- But ministers alone teach the word in an authoritative way:
 - Christ has entrusted the word to the visible church (Rom 3:2; 1 Tim 3:15).
 - Ministers are ambassadors (i.e., authoritative representatives) of Jesus: 2 Cor 5:20: “Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.”
 - Second Helvetic Confession (early reformed confession): “The preaching of the word of God is the word of God.” This is true not in the sense that preaching is infallible, but that it carries God’s authority in a special way that everyday sharing from God’s word does not.
- Sacraments: ministers and elders wield the keys of the kingdom (determining the membership of the church). Therefore they should wield the seals of God’s kingdom, which mark us as “in.”
- Just as the teaching elder speaks with a unique authority when he speaks in his official capacity, so also the deacon uniquely ministers the love of Christ when he serves in the office of deacon.