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Q&A#43 How Should We Understand Formal Leadership Within the Church?

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Today's question: "What is "ordained", formal, leadership in the Church? How do you understand the NT's "episkopoi" and "diakonoi"? What is the connection between these offices/roles/functions and both preaching and liturgy in worship?"

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Transcript

Welcome back. Today's question is, what is ordained formal leadership in the church? How do you understand the New Testament's episcopal and diaconoi? What is the connection between these offices, roles, and functions in both preaching and liturgy and worship? At the outset, we should probably make clear that if we look through the New Testament, I do not believe that there is a clear indication of a single pattern of church government. Rather, what we see is the prudential establishment of church government according to certain underlying principles, but not a set pattern that must apply in all times and places.

The principles are there in different respects, but when it actually comes to the specific form that we must practice, we're left, first of all, to hypothesize about the exact form of the New Testament church's government, and also to think prudentially about our specific situation and what form of government is most appropriate for that. So I don't believe that there is a single form of church government that is explicitly authorized and

others are ruled out of bounds. There are certain forms of church government that are out of bounds, certain forms of church government that are inappropriate, that are contrary to the fundamental principles of the church in the New Testament, but there are many others that fit within that orbit.

So I think you could have an Episcopal form of government, you could have a Presbyterian form of government, you could have a number of different forms of government that broadly fall within the bounds of a New Testament ecclesiology. And so that is largely down to matters of prudence. That doesn't mean that there aren't better and worse forms of church government, but it just means that there is a bit more latitude and these things are largely a matter of wisdom and considering the context within which we are operating and what would operate best within that particular situation.

When we're talking about the different offices, people talk a lot about deacons in terms of a distinct office within the church that's particularly organized towards the works of mercy and the ministrations to the poor, that sort of thing, and it's connected with a particular understanding of what ministry means within the New Testament more generally. An understanding that I think according to John N Collins's book, *deaconia* is a very helpful challenge to that understanding of service. That service is not primarily a service that is attending to the needs of the poor, that is serving the community, these sorts of images that tend to dominate our understanding of diaconal service.

Rather, the deacon or probably best the minister is the one who is sent by another as an ambassador, an emissary, someone who represents that other party in different respects. And so I think what we would have within the early church is a form of government that largely grew out of the organic structures of the society itself. So you'd have older men and from those groups of older men, the elders within the community, the older men within the community, there would be certain overseers who would be chosen.

And those overseers would be responsible for the spiritual well-being of the community. And then there would be younger men who would be assistants, who would be those who are the emissaries of these older men. There would be a close relationship in certain of these in certain of these cases between older men and younger men, where there would be an older man taking on a younger man as a sort of specific emissary, as a *shaliach* to use the more Hebrew understanding as Elijah and Elisha, that Elisha is the representative of Elijah.

He comes with Elijah's authority. He acts on Elijah's behalf as a father and a son relate and the son can act on behalf of his father. So someone like Timothy can act with the authority of Paul in the situations into which he's sent.

And so a sort of diaconal service is in place there. So you'd have young men apprenticed

to older men and then you'd have young men who are particularly representing older men in their ministry. Among the elders, there would be differentiation in the different forms of roles that were served.

So you'd have the more general body of older men within the community, who would in part exercise more civil functions and sometimes political functions of looking after the community. But they'd also exercise ecclesial functions of overseeing the community, of being concerned for its spiritual well-being and safety and as guardians of the community. And then among that group, there'd be those who are specifically appointed to the task of overseers.

So not all elders are overseers, but all overseers are elders. Those elders would be generally over 50, generally about 60 or more in years and age. And they'd have younger men that would act on their behalf, that would represent their authority and act with that authority within the situation that they were placed.

And so you have different forms of office that arise fairly organically from the structures of a community. You have the elder men and then you have the younger men who are apprenticed to them. So very much a father-son relationship.

And it plays out in terms of the overseeing of the older men over the younger men. And then the older men are divided into different groups. Some will be specifically responsible for teaching, others have more of an emphasis upon ruling, some would be specifically appointed to a formal office of overseers.

And they were all participating within this general ministry, but in certain ones of them that would be more condensed. And so what we need to be aware of is condensing that ministry in a way that's alienated from the larger group. Rather what we see is the church has this ministry and it's performed by particular people in a condensed and focused way, but in a way that it still belongs to everyone.

It's exercised for the sake of everyone and in everyone's name. And so what you see within the elders is an exercise of a ministry that belongs to the whole church that is specific to that elder body. And then within that elder body there's a specific weighting of that upon particular overseers.

And others within that body of elders will exercise other more concentrated tasks. And so each member of these groups, ministering groups, would be ministering in the name of the wider body of the church. But it's important to recognise as well that the elders, the overseers of the church, the ministers of the church are primarily those who are acting as ministers of Jesus Christ.

They're not just democratically appointed representatives of the church. They are ministers of Jesus Christ representing his authority, representing his rule, representing

his oversight, representing his shepherding of his flock and his body and his bride. And so that relationship needs to be maintained with a certain priority that it's not just that these people are acting on behalf of the body of the church, although they do that in a certain respect, they're also acting in the name of Jesus Christ.

What more can we say about them? I think that there would be, these relationships would be ones that would be focused within particular areas of the church's life. Now we've often concentrated the work of the church upon these official ministers, these formal leaders. And the point of the formal leaders is to maintain the fundamental structure, the foundation, the backbone of the church.

But most of the church's life occurs outside of the immediate work of formal leadership. And so the formal leadership of the church can be responsible for setting the pattern, for setting the fundamental teaching of the church. But most of the church's work is not actually teaching, it's living out.

Most of the church's work is not performed by these formal teachers, it's not performed by these formal officers of rule and governing and overseeing, it's performed in the more practical work of living out the life of the family of God, the household of God. And the more that we focused upon the ministry as a sanctifying or sacralising ministry for the rest of the church, and the rest of the church being seen as some sort of secondary entity that is not really the church in the same sense, we've lost something central to the New Testament. The work of the elders, the work of the overseers is for the sake of the flock.

The central gravity of the church does not lie in the pastoral ministry or the ministry of elders, it lies in the life of the body of the church. And yet within the way that our churches operate, that just does not seem to be the case. The central gravity of the church functions as what happens on a Sunday morning and what happens up front on a Sunday morning.

And so there's very little life that occurs outside of that. And it's one of the reasons why we have all the conflicts that we do about women in ministry, because when you focus so much upon the formal ministries of the church, the official ministries of the church, those sorts of ministries that are very much concerned with the form and the structure and the institution, what you lose are the sorts of ministries in which women are most prominently active. And so if we're going to recover a sense of the importance of women in the life of the church, we need to reconsider the way that the centre of gravity of the church is situated.

It's not situated within those particular ministries, the ministries of elders and the ministries of pastors. Those ministries are crucial for the upbuilding of the church. They represent the head to the body in very powerful ways and enable the body to be built up as it ministers in love.

But that is not where the primary work of the church occurs. Rather, it occurs within the general action of the body. And so we need to place a lot more emphasis upon that.

The relationship between these offices, roles and functions and preaching and liturgy is in many respects a matter of prudence, because these ministries exercise a particular symbolic weight and importance and they perform particular purposes within the life of the church. They're there to guard the body of the church. They're there to give structure and order and foundation and strength to the order of the church.

But there's a great deal of room for prudence in the way that you actually work this out. So, for instance, could someone who's in a diaconal position or a young man who's apprenticed to the elders, can they deliver a message under the guidance and the authorisation of the elders? I think that is something that many churches might consider it appropriate to do. Other churches, maybe not.

This is a matter of prudence. Again, it really depends upon what these roles are conceived of within a specific context, how they are conceived of in a particular context and the particular symbolic weight that they have come to bear and the way that things are distributed in terms of the symbolic significance, etc., between these various positions. And so there are different ways in which these things can play out.

The focus of these ministries upon sacramental liturgy, upon the administration of the sacraments and the supper, I think, has been unfortunate because their primary purpose is in relationship to the wider body. It's in the representation of Christ's authority and rule, his oversight, his shepherding towards that wider body of the church. Now that allows for a lot of prudence in the way that we actually work out the relationship to the sacraments.

Is the administration of baptism appropriate when it's performed by a lay person? I believe it can be performed by a lay person. I don't believe that's the most ideal way to perform it. I don't think it's the proper way to perform it where you do have a rep, someone in a more official form of position that could be able to perform it.

But yes, it is legitimate. And so I think we need to be aware of alienating the ministry from the broader body of the church, failing to recognise that this ministry is in large part exercised in their name. It's representing Christ's authority to the church, but it's also representing Christ's authority in the church, an authority that the church shares in, in key respects.

Further things that could be noticed is that the relationship between the different offices. So for instance, between the elder and the one that's appointed as a representative of the elder, like Paul and Timothy, something like that, the shaliak or the person who's represented to, who acts on behalf and in the name of, and as the personal representative of, and as the person who has the authority of that person that appoints

them. That can occur in a number of different relations.

So we could have someone like Paul, who's an apostle appointing someone like Timothy to act in his name and with his authority and authorisation to do things on his behalf. We could have the elders appointing young men to act on their behalf in such a capacity. We can also have, and that would be an apprentice type office as well.

They're prepared for entering into the office of being elders themselves in due time. We can also have the church appointing people to act in their name, to do things on their behalf and to represent their authority in their ministry. So we see, for instance, the work of the seven that are appointed in Act 6. I think Matt Culvin places, presents a good argument for these seven being appointed not by the apostles but by the church before the apostles.

So the church points, picks out these seven people, the church selects them, brings them towards the apostles, and then the church lays their hands on the seven before the apostles. And the point being that the apostles' ministry is not the waiting on, not waiting on tables, but they're supposed to give themselves to the ministry of the word and to prayer. And so setting up these seven people to minister at tables is something that is the responsibility of the church to do that.

And so the church appoints people to act in their name to perform that ministry. And so it's the church whose authority is involved in that commission. And the laying on of hands is important here.

That particular right is associated with appointment to office. It's also associated with the act of a sacrifice. The sacrifice, the person who's sacrificing can lay their hands upon the animal to be sacrificed.

And that animal represents them. That animal goes forward to be sacrificed as someone that is a representative of their person. And in a similar way, the person who has their hands laid upon by a certain... the person whom a body of people or particular person lays their hands upon represents that body of people or person.

And they stand as their representatives acting in their name, in their authority with their authorization. And so the seven would act with the authorization of the Jerusalem church towards the ministration of the tables, the works of mercy that that involves and the general provision, not in the name of the apostles. The apostles' ministry is not passed on in that particular manner.

And so I think what we see bringing all of this together is a form of ministry that's rooted very much within the organic structures of human life. It's rooted first of all within the relationships with the general patterns of human life. As young men become older men, as a community is represented within certain men who act on their behalf, and as a

broader life of the community is administered.

And so there can be people who act on behalf of the community in certain capacities that are women. So for instance, Phoebe is an emissary of the church of Sencria. She acts as their ambassador, someone who represents them in certain capacities.

And so we have different forms of the church's life that can be represented in this regard. The significant aspect of the pastoral ministry and the ministry of elders is that it is a representation of Christ himself. They are the emissaries of Christ to the church.

And so it's that directionality. It's not so much that the church appoints them to be the emissaries of Christ on its behalf, but rather they are the emissaries of Christ to the church, but in a way that does not alienate the church from that ministry. The church itself participates and grows within that ministry, that ministry of the head that is ministered to the body through those particular persons who represent the ministry of the head to the body.

And that representation of the ministry to the head is in part because that ministry already belongs to the body. The gift of the spirit has been given to the whole body, but that gift of the spirit is represented to the body, symbolized and given again, as it were, in the ministry of particular gifted persons as they have and minister the gifts of the spirit. And so I think there are these natural structures that we see, or these organic structures of human society, that the work of the spirit and the work of Christ take up.

And so we have ordination, which is a specific recognition and appointment of people within a more organic relationship within human society. Older men, as they relate to the society at large, certain of them being set apart for a very specific formal office among a wider group of people who exercise a more informal role. And so what we see is something similar to what we see within the Old Testament, where Israel already has within its life, it already has elders, but certain of these elders are set apart for specific ministry, representing the nation and the rule of Moses.

And what we see more generally then is these structures of human society and life being taken up by the work of the spirit, by the appointment of Christ, and then they come to represent Christ's authority within the church and the gifts of the spirit within the church. And then there's a relationship of father and son in many of these roles. That relationship is seen in the way that the father's ministry is passed on to the son and the son acts in the name of the father.

And so this would be a relationship between elders and deacons. And then you see the personal representative, the shaliach, the one who comes in the name of the apostle or in the name of the prophet like Elijah and Elisha, or any of these sorts of relationships. And there will be certain diaconal roles like this.

I think that's a further organic structure that develops out of this. Then within these bodies of people, first of all, the more general body of elders, then the specifically appointed overseers, and within the deacons of various forms, there'll be all sorts of differentiations. So there will be people who can exercise a form of office that is an overseer of overseers, someone who has a sort of archbishopric, or someone who's exercising a very specific sort of diaconal role with a more teaching emphasis, or someone who's exercising a diaconal role with more of an emphasis upon rule or service of ministering to the church's needs.

Whatever it is, there is a natural differentiation that can develop as the society becomes more developed, as certain people act in more specific capacities according to their particular gifts. And so this sort of structure will diversify in various contexts as well. The form of church government that you'll find in one body of churches won't be the same as another, and that doesn't mean that one is wrong and the other is right.

It could do, but for the most part, it means that there is just variation according to circumstance. But what it does push against is the more, the sort of abstract system of the abstract organisation, the managerial structure that many people set up within the church, or the clerical structure that opposes the ministries of the church to the life of its people more generally. There should be a deep relationship between the two, and the ministries of elders and deacons and others like that should be something that feeds into the area where the central gravity of the church rests, which is in the life of the body more generally.

More things that could be said about this as it relates to, for instance, male and female within the church. What I'm talking about here is very much about the work of men within the church, and that's association between men and ordination. There are many people that will talk about certain forms of commissioning for women in particular roles, but ordination is something that gets focused upon male ministers.

Now I think it's not accidental that this is the case. The role of ministers is particularly concerned with the structure, the order, the governing of the church. It's concerned with the institutional, the structure in a way that is not so concerned with the fleshing out of the church.

It's concerned with the basic structure, and that forming of the church is a ministry that concentrates, as forming more generally does in scripture, upon the work of men. The work of men is the ministry that is primarily a work of formation. So what we see within Genesis 1-2 already is a connection between the forming work of God on the first three days of creation.

Forming, ordering, dividing, taming, naming, structuring, all these sorts of things, and then the work of Adam. Adam is set in the world to order, to structure, to divide, to establish the law, to lay the foundations, to maintain the boundaries. And that is a

specific ministry that is given to him.

He is set as priest within the garden. He is the one that's given the rule concerning the tree, all these sorts of things. And when Eve is created, she is not given that command directly.

She is not given the same commission as Adam is given. Rather, she's given a different emphasis to her calling. And so the structuring and the ordination, the institutional order of the church is something that is primarily resting upon the shoulders of men.

And the male community, more generally, it rises out of the relationships between fathers and sons, between elders and young men. And yet it is something that is exercised for the sake of the whole body. And then in relationship to that, you have a whole range of other forms of activities and gifts that are exercised within the church, ones that are focused more upon different forms of building up the church, of filling out its life, of creating and realising its union and communion.

And these are ones that will often focus upon the work of women. Now, the more that we focus upon the institutional structure of the church, upon the skeleton of the church, as it were, and not thinking about the broader life of its flesh, the more that we'll focus upon the ministry of men and the more that we'll struggle to speak well about the ministry of women. Whereas within Scripture, there is this filling out of the work of formation that occurs on the second three days and is particularly associated with the work of women who bring life, communion, union, who generate and who are the ones that bring the future, who bring all these different sorts of things that the man cannot bring.

It's something that we see also in the relationship between the work of the Spirit and the work of Christ. Christ is the one who establishes the structure, the form, and the Spirit is the one who fills. Christ is the one who gives order.

The Spirit is the one who gives life and communion and union, who generates and regenerates. And this is a pattern that we see, I think, more generally within the church. But the more that we've moved towards a clerical model of the church, the more that we've created the central gravity within the institution of the church, within the structures of governance, the more that we've struggled to speak well about the ministry of women.

And so we need to re-centre the church's central gravity. And I think that this will help us to understand, among other things, why it is that the work of men is focused upon in relationship to eldership, in relationship to the pastoral ministry, and these sorts of things. Once again, we have to root these things within the organic structures of human society.

These are things that are very closely related to the structure of the family, to the

structure of communities that grow out of that. And as these institutions are understood well, a lot of other things will start falling into place. We'll start to understand why it is that there is such a close relationship between people who are of older age and the elders within the church, and the relationship between elders and overseers, and the relationship between the young men and the old men, and the deacons and the elders.

All these sorts of relationships start to fall into their place once we think about these more organic structures of the life of the church. And likewise, we'll begin to understand the relationship between men and women that is expressed by this, and why the ministry of elders, why the ministry of pastors and others within the church who represent the church in that particular capacity, do not alienate the church from its proper authority, but exercise that on its behalf and in its name, and for its empowerment, that these are ministries that are exercised as representations of what belongs to the church as a whole. And until we get this right, I think we'll continue to have many of the problems that we're struggling with at the moment.

I've rambled a bit and gone on far too long, but if you have any further questions, please leave them in my Curious Cat account. If you've found these videos helpful, please pass them on to your friends, and if you'd like to support them, please do so using my Patreon account. And like my Curious Cat account, I'll leave the link to that below.

Thank you, and hopefully come back again tomorrow with some further answers to questions. God bless.