**The special offices of the church**

Rev. David Waldron

**Scriptures:** Hebrews 13:7-17; 1 Peter 5:1-5

**Songs Chosen:** ‘Behold our God’, [SttL] 183, 66, 393, 525

**Series:** Doctrine of the Church (#5) – Belgic Confession (Article 31)

**Theme:**  The church is to be governed by Biblically qualified office-bearers who our chosen by a local congregation. All Ministers are of equal power and authority within the churches and are to be esteemed by the congregation because of their work without grumbling or arguing.

**Proposition:** Joyfully submit to office-bearers in the church knowing that Christ, the Head of His church shepherds his people through them.

**Introduction**

A pendulum is a weight hung from a fixed point so that it can swing freely. As the pendulum swings down from one side of the arc it travels along, it gains speed which then enables it to climb up, against the force of gravity, to the other side of the arc. Once the speed of the pendulum drops to zero it reverses direction and swings back down the arc in the opposite direction. The regular motion of a swinging weight is used in pendulum clocks to keep time.

The ‘pendulum effect’ can be applied to culture, politics and also to church history when ‘a movement in one direction results in a movement in the opposite direction’. For example, the political history of New Zealand Governments shows swings from the ‘right’ (National) to the ‘left’ (Labour) and then back again.

At the time of the Protestant Reformation in the sixteen century there was a ‘pendulum swing’ in church government. The Roman Catholic church is ruled by the Pope and lower layers of clergy. In reaction to the abuses of power in the church, the Anabaptists abandoned any form of structured church government. This was a ‘pendulum swing’ in which the ‘priesthood of all believers’ (1 Peter 2:9) was affirmed to the exclusion of any human authority in the church. When there is a ‘correction’ to an extreme position, that correction goes too far in the other direction.

At the time of the Protestant Reformation, the Anabaptists were correct in affirming the ‘office of believer’. There are many tasks which all Christians are called to by God through His Word, for example to:

* “*instruct one another*” (Rom 15:14).
* “*serve one another*” (Gal 5:13).
* “*admonish one another*” (Col 3:16).
* “*encourage one another*” (1 Thess 5:11).
* “*confess your sins to one another and pray for one another*” (Jam 5:15).
* “*show hospitality to one another*” (1 Pet 4:9).

However, in addition to what is sometimes called ‘The general office of believer” there are ‘special offices’ in the church. These are identified in the Belgic Confession Article 31 as: “*ministers of God’s Word, elders, and deacons*”. In Scripture we see that:

* Timothy was commissioned (through the laying on of hands of the council of elders 1 Tim 4:14) to ‘*preach the Word*’ (2 Tim 4:2).
* Titus was to appoint elders in every town (Tit 1:5).
* Deacons are addressed in addition to elders, alongside ‘*all the saints in Christ Jesus*’ (Phil 1:1) with qualifications prescribed in 1 Tim 3:8-10 and Titus 1:7-9.

The Biblical point of balance for church government (‘when the pendulum stops swinging’) affirms the general office of believer **in addition to** the special offices of ministers, elders and deacons. This sermon focusses on these ‘special offices’ and draws together principles from a range of different Bible passages, including the two that we heard earlier from Hebrews 13:7-17 and 1 Peter 5:1-5. Firstly we’ll look at the calling of office-bearers, secondly, the status of office-bearers and thirdly, our attitude, as members of the church, to office-bearers.

1. **The calling of office-bearers**

There has been much discussion in the global press this year about ‘narcissistic leadership’ where the leader is only interested in him or herself. Such leaders typically exhibit arrogance, dominance and hostility to any and all perceived threats. Being self-absorbed, they believe in their own entitlement and superiority, lacking empathy and exploiting others without hesitation. Being convinced of their own wisdom, they ignore the advice of others.

Whilst the Bible doesn’t identify Absalom, the third of David’s sons, as a narcissist, He does have the characteristics of one as a ‘would-be leader’ of God’s people. He was praised above all others in Israel for his handsome appearance (2 Sam 14:25). He was ambitious, had a sense of entitlement and wanted to be king. As we heard from 2 Sam 15:6 ‘*He stole the hearts of the men of Israel*’. Four years later, he went to Hebron where David his father was first anointed king over Judah (2:4) and had his secret messengers sent out to proclaim, “*Absalom is king at Hebron!*” (2 Sam 15:10). Absalom had rebelled against his father the true king as he tried to grab power and appoint himself to the position of authority over the nation. As a result of his self-promotion to govern, he died at the hands of Joab, David’s commander (2 Sam 18:14).

The sad example of Absalom’s narcissism painfully illustrates the Scriptural principle that the leaders of God’s people are called, not self-appointed. In the Old Testament, the Lord revealed directly to the prophets, like Samuel, who was to be anointed a king or prophet. David himself, recognised that Saul the king was the Lord’s anointed one and would not take the life of his enemy even when he had opportunity to do so (1 Sam 24:10).

Christ Jesus, the promised king in the line of David (2 Sam 7:12) was anointed Prophet, Priest and King directly by God His Heavenly Father at His baptism, saying: "*This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased*" (Matt 3:17). Jesus did not take the honour of being the promised Messiah, Redeemer and eternal High Priest for himself, but was appointed by God (Heb 5:4-5). He is a humble Ruler who has been highly exalted by God the Father to the highest position of authority over all of Creation, giving Him as head over all things to the church (Eph 1:22).

**Just as** Christ was called to the ‘office’ of Head and Saviour of the church (Eph 5:23), **so** all Christians are called to the ‘general office of believer’ by their Lord who says “*come to me…take my yoke upon you and learn from me*” (Matt 11:28-29).

Have you come to Christ today? You will always be ruled by something or somebody. He is the very best ruler there is. He will love you, accept you as you are, lead you and always protect you. He will always give you what you need. Follow Him!

Christ was called to the ‘office’ of Head and Saviour of the church (Eph 5:23). We see in Scripture the calling of men to take up special offices through Christ’s church for example:

* The selection of Matthias as an apostle to replace Judas Iscariot: ***“****And* ***they put forward*** *two, Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also called Justus, and Matthias. And they prayed and said, "You, Lord, who know the hearts of all, show which one of these two you have chosen’”* (Acts 1:23-24).
* The selection of the first deacons: And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, *"It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. Therefore, brothers,* ***pick out*** *from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty”* (Acts 6:2-3).
* The commissioning of Barnabas and Saul as missionaries to Cyprus, and Galatia: **‘***While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "****Set apart for me*** *Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them"*’ (Acts 13:2).

Following the pattern of Scripture, the Belgic Confession (Article 31) states that: “*We believe that ministers of God’s Word, elders, and deacons ought to be* ***chosen to their offices by lawful election of the church****, with prayer and in good order, as stipulated by the Word of God. Therefore everyone shall take care not to intrude by improper means. He shall wait for the time that he is called by God so that he may have sure testimony and thus be certain that his call comes from the Lord*”.

In our Reformed Churches we follow a process for the calling of special office-bearers as laid out in our Church Order (article 4). These are the steps:

1. The congregation have opportunity to nominate men for office.
2. The nominations are carefully and prayerfully considered by the Session with respect both to the Biblical qualifications for office and the life circumstances of nominees. Ordinarily, the elders will meet with potential candidates prior to putting their names forward.
3. Names are put before the congregation by the Session for election to office.
4. All communicant members in good standing are able to vote.
5. Once a man has been elected to office, he is given some time to consider the call upon his life. In addition to the ‘external call’ of the church, it is very helpful if a man also experiences an inward compulsion to serve the Lord in a special office.
6. If he accepts the call, he is ordained (or installed if he has been ordained previously) to office and ordinarily serves a three-year term.

I hope that you can see clearly that this process is Biblically balanced.

Men, do you aspire to the office of elder? If you do, you desire a noble task (1 Tim 3:1). Men, do you aspire to the office of deacon? Men, do you aspire to the office of minister? If you receive a call to serve in one of the special offices in the church, I urge you to carefully and prayerfully consider this and to trust the Lord for His strength and enabling to carry out your tasks.

Let’s now look at the status of office-bearers:

1. **The status of office-bearers**

It is good to desire to do the work of a minister, elder or deacon, but it is **not** good to want to hold one of these special offices in order to have power, status or the acclaim of others. This was the sinful desire of Satan who desired the worship of the Son of God (Matt 4:9). The Apostle Peter, who learned humility the ‘hard way’, wrote these words to elders: “*Shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock*” (1 Pet 5:2-3).

Christ reserved His strongest words of rebuke for religious leaders, the scribes and the Pharisees, explaining to His disciples that: “*They do all their deeds to be seen by others. For they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long, and they love the place of honour at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces and being called rabbi by others. But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brothers*” (Matt 23:5-8).

In our Reformed Churches we do not have ministers who go by the title ‘Very Reverend’, nor do we use the title ‘Senior Minister’. Whilst the New Testament Scriptures do reveal the three ‘special offices’ of minister, elder, and deacon, they do not present a series of status levels, but emphasise an equality of status for everyone holding a particular office. This Biblical principle is reflected in these words from Belgic Confession Article 31: “*Ministers of the Word, in whatever place they are, have equal power and authority, for they are all servants of Jesus Christ, the only universal bishop and the only head of the church*”.

The principle of equal status is evident in the Apostle Peter’s words: “*I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder*” (1 Pet 5:10). Notice that Peter does not place himself above the elders to whom he is writing. Whilst we certainly recognise that some men have more experience and wisdom in a particular special office than others, we uphold an equality of status in which each office-bearer submits to the others.

Biblical church government could be described as a ‘two-tier’ church government structure with Christ, the ‘Chief Shepherd’ (1 Pet 5:4) at the top and the elders, exercising oversight (1 Pet 5:2) forming a ‘flat’ second tier underneath the Head of the church.

Presbyterian churches confess that the minister is a teaching elder and so do not classify the minister as having a separate office, but rather as an elder with a special task. This is sometimes called the ‘two office view’: elders and deacons. Reformed churches subscribe to the Belgic Confession which as we’ve heard, defines three distinct offices: “*ministers of God’s Word, elders, and deacons*”. The Reformed churches of New Zealand confess both the Belgic Confession and the Presbyterian Westminster Confession of Faith. The combination of these two historical confessions sometimes leads to what is called the ‘two and a half’ office view! Whilst we can debate the number of special offices and be convinced of 2, 3, or even 2.5, the important point is that there are special offices for some tasks in the church and that ministers are not ranked one above another, nor are elders one above another, nor are deacons one above another.

The tasks of the minister include preaching, administering the sacraments, continuing in prayer and watching over the elders, deacons and congregation (ref. CO article 19).

The tasks of the elders include ensuring that the gospel is preached every Sunday, that the sacraments are faithfully administered, Christian discipline exercised, and that the members of the congregation are visited (ref. CO article 23).

The tasks of the deacons include diligently collecting offerings, faithfully and diligently distributing these to those in need, visiting and comforting the distressed, and encouraging the congregation to show Christian mercy to those in need (ref. CO article 24).

Those holding the special offices of minister, elder and deacon are called to serve the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ in their work and we, as a congregation, are called to have a particular heart attitude towards office-bearers who serve under the authority of Christ in His church; which brings us to our third point.

1. **Our attitude to office-bearers**

I’ve heard plenty of complaints against our own New Zealand Government this year: *lockdown too late, lockdown too strict, alert level rules inconsistent!*”. I am not going to comment on the accuracy of these opinions, but note that complaining against those in authority over us has a very long history. There’s a human tendency to think that if we were in charge, we’d make better decisions than our leaders. Remember how the Israelites in the wilderness grumbled against Moses and Aaron, God’s appointed leaders, saying: "*Would that we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the meat pots and ate bread to the full, for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger*." (Ex 16:3)

Christ knows our fallen tendency at times to reject His loving rule over us through His appointed office-bearers in His church. For example, we heard these words from Hebrews 13:17 earlier: “*Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you*”.

Our attitude towards office-bearers in the local church to which we belong is to reflect our attitude towards Christ, the Head of the church. Ministers and elders carry a weighty responsibility for those in their spiritual care. As ‘under-shepherds’ they are called to know and understand those under their supervision and to ‘keep watch over their souls’. “Keeping watch” conveys the idea of ‘chasing away sleep’ (ref. Mark 13:33; Luke 21:36; Eph 6:18).

Many elders do struggle to sleep straight after an evening session meeting! Shepherding people is a blessed work, but it does take a toll. It is for this reason that in our Reformed Churches we have terms for those who hold special offices, ordinarily three years in duration so that men can rest and recover before potentially serving again.

The Apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians about the sufferings which he endured in the service of Christ (2 Cor 11:23-27). He concludes with these words “*and, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches*” (2 Cor 11:28). The word ‘anxiety’ here expresses a strong feeling for something or someone to the point of being burdened. It is a Scripturally commendable concern (e.g. 1 Cor 7:33-34).

Elders are called by the rule of Christ to ‘*shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock’* (1 Peter 5:2-3). In His perfect wisdom, God has decreed that His church be led by a group of men, frail and imperfect, prone to sin and error, insufficient in themselves for the task. These men have authority in the church only when and because they are under the authority of Christ the Head. They have strength and ability to lead only when and because Christ their Lord supplies all that they need to serve as His under-shepherds. As we saw in the last sermon in this series, rule by multiple elders is the only Biblical form of church government.

Our attitude towards those in authority over us in the church is to one of willing obedience and submission to their decisions. This is not to be a mindless, unquestioning response, but an engaged, prayerful one. If we do not understand the background to decisions which church leaders make, we can and should ask. If we disagree with a decision, then we should speak to an elder or write to the Session. Wise shepherds listen to those in their care and reflect on their own attitudes and actions in light of Scriptural wisdom.

The Belgic Confession states: “*In order that this holy ordinance of God may not be violated or rejected, we declare that everyone must hold the ministers of the Word and the elders of the church in special esteem because of their work, and as much as possible be at peace with them without grumbling or arguing*”. As you have opportunity, encourage those who hold special offices in the church. Express your joy that Christ cares so much for His church that He has appointed frail men to serve in special offices and to extend His love and protection over you through those called by His church to serve as office-bearers.

I would like to close with some questions which are especially directed to the men of this congregation, but also apply to each one of us, whatever our gender or age.

* Do you have a deep love for God in your heart?
* Do you have a love for people and for the church?
* Are you ready to sacrifice some leisure activities and perhaps some personal ambitions in order to serve the Lord?
* Do you have a sense of personal inadequacy and insufficiency?
* Are you teachable and humble?

If you are a man whose name is put before this congregation and you receive the external call of the church to serve in one of the special offices, will you carefully and prayerfully consider the call as being from the Lord?

Brothers and sisters in Christ, joyfully submit to office-bearers in the church knowing that Christ, the Head of His church shepherds his people through them.

AMEN