

# Democracy and the Denigration of Office

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Americans are not given to use the word *democracy* in a pejorative sense. Hence, the title of this chapter will be disturbing to some. In common usage the word loosely describes a system of government in which the rights of citizens are protected and their voices are given a fair representation in public affairs. Careful students of history, however, will be quick to make certain cautionary distinctions in order to remind us that majoritarian democracy, such as that found in Periclean Athens, and constitutional republicanism, which we often loosely refer to as “democracy” today, are quite different in many important respects.

Our present American system is, in fact, a corruption of the government of our Founding Fathers. While most may naively think of the popular franchise as the essence of the democratic ideal, we do well to remember that the institutions of our democracy, conceived as a constitutional republic, are largely based on a Reformation conception of civil government as it came to our shores from Scottish Presbyterianism. The essence of this form was a system of carefully defined and limited federal powers designed to keep order and foster individual and corporate responsibility at the state and local levels. Furthermore, it assumed the internal constraints of true Christianity, which are now rapidly disappearing in the Western world.<sup>1</sup>

It is not, however, the purpose of this chapter to reflect on democracy as a political system in its relationship to church government. It is democracy as a popular ideal, as a major strand in the fabric of the American mind, as that ideal impinges on the idea of church office, that is the subject of this essay. President Wilson encapsulated this American ideal in giving the rationale for our entrance into World War I with his slogan: “The world must be made safe for democracy.” This theme has been reiterated in President Bush’s preachments about a “new world order.”

The popular imagination, increasingly disconnected as it is from its Christian and Reformation past, tends to read “democracy” as a cultural catchword which conjures up a series of narcissistic notions such as: “I have rights; my opinion is as important as anyone’s; I am equal to others in every way; I have a right to education, peace, prosperity, and recreation; I may believe and say what I like; and I may do what I like as long as it doesn’t hurt anyone.”

It is not my intention to denigrate the democracy embodied in the founding documents and institutions of our nation or to dismiss all present popular ideas about democracy. It must not be overlooked, however, that in its contemporary popular

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<sup>1</sup>This essay is Chapter 13 from Mark R. Brown, ed., *Order in the Offices: Essays Defining the Roles of Church Officers* (Duncansville, PA: Classic Presbyterian Government Resources, 1993) 235-255.

Claes G. Ryn, *The New Jacobinism, Can Democracy Survive?* (Washington: National Humanities Institute, 1991), esp. 19 ff. Here is an excellent primer on the points made in my first two paragraphs.

conception, the egalitarian instinct, largely unrestrained by historic Christianity, is destructive to the very institutions which have made our country, as well as much of the Western world, great. In particular, the biblical idea of office has been denigrated in church and state by this idol of egalitarianism. As evangelical Anglican John Stott pointed out over a decade ago: “There is much uncertainty in the modern Church about the nature and functions of the professional Christian ministry.”<sup>2</sup> It is my contention that this uncertainty has in large part been fostered by a growing egalitarian mentality. Egalitarianism tends to equalize God with man and then man with man, and as a result office of every kind is destroyed. Authority in all of its God-given forms is radically undermined. The notion of a constitutional republic based on Presbyterian principles of church government both respects and strictly limits office for the benefit and protection of the governed body. When it comes to the government of the church, we tamper with its God-given order at our own peril. Thus, I have chosen generally to use the word *egalitarian* to denote the negative, destructive aspect of the democratic mindset that I am concerned to expose.

The concern of this volume is to make a case for a view of church office which has been clearly articulated by Presbyterian and Reformed churches since the Reformation. This “three office” idea, though substantially embodied in the standards of most American Presbyterian and Reformed bodies, has fallen on hard times in the twentieth century. This is due in large part to the egalitarian ideal which pervades the American mind and its contemporary institutions. In order to correct this problem as it is manifested in the church, we need to appreciate the cultural forces which have undermined the proper biblical idea of church office. An example that reveals this mindset can be observed in the way in which ministers are often sought. The process is referred to as “candidating.” In many churches the resemblance of this process to contemporary political candidating is striking and tragic. The prevailing “two-office” view is a concession to the egalitarian agenda, even if there is no intention to compromise biblical principle. In fact, it is especially where this compromise is unintended that it must be reckoned with. The traditional three-office idea, on the other hand, properly understood, will help to overcome all of the deleterious tendencies of the democratic spirit, while promoting the full range of pastoral ministry envisioned in the New Testament.

No doubt both two- and three-office proponents will find a large measure of agreement in assessing the threat which egalitarianism poses to the biblical view of office. They will also agree, in the main, on the function of church office. But beyond this it needs to be appreciated that the two-office view, especially in its pure form, is, wittingly or unwittingly, egalitarian in its conception and effect, and, therefore, tends to undermine the ministry of the church in our day.

## The Historical Roots of Egalitarianism

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<sup>2</sup> Geoffrey Thomas, “The Pastoral Ministry,” in *Practical Theology and the Ministry of the Church, 1952-1984, Essays in Honor of Edmund P. Clowney*, ed. Harvey M Conn (Phillipsburg N. J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1991), 74.

It should be recognized at the outset that the fundamental spiritual and moral principle of egalitarianism is not equality but autonomy. Put another way, the primary motivation of this democratic spirit is found in its assertion of equality or identification with God.

Thus, egalitarianism has its roots not in the Enlightenment, but in Eden. Adam's assertion of autonomy in God's world is the ultimate cause of the democratic mentality in its contemporary expression. The Enlightenment of the eighteenth century is the proximate historical source, which gave egalitarianism its present form.

Man, created as *imago dei*, was given the office of a servant of God. Under God, Adam was called to be a prophet, a priest, and a king—a vice-gerent over God's creation. God's mandate was for his servant to cultivate all of the rich and varied potential of his creation to the eternal glory of God. In challenging the sovereign authority of God to define man's meaning and role in history, Adam forsook his office. He became the first egalitarian by declaring his equality with God in defining his own meaning and role in history. The modern manifestation of this problem should not surprise us. It is at the heart of the thinking and motivation of fallen man.

At the beginning of our history as a nation, this spirit was clearly present. It must not be forgotten that our nation was born in the twilight of the "age of reason." As a true child of the Enlightenment, Thomas Paine confidently declared "my own mind is my own church." Paine's *The Age of Reason* was a virulent attack on the integrity and authority of Scripture. Several of the Founding Fathers held similar deistic sentiments, however more subtly they may have stated them. Autonomy was on the march. Only a strong Christian view of God, man, and government kept that spirit in check until the dawn of our century.

As Robert Bellah points out in his brilliant analysis of individualism, there are "three central strands of our culture—biblical, republican, and modern individualist."<sup>3</sup> According to Bellah, the American quest for "success, freedom, and justice" comes to expression in each of these three strands throughout her history.<sup>4</sup> Benjamin Franklin was the quintessential individualist of the founding era. He was the heroic poor boy made good, who pulled himself up by his own bootstraps and lived by the utilitarian interpretation of Christianity captured in his famous statement, "God helps those who help themselves." The moral maxims of *Poor Richard's Almanac*, such as "Early to bed, early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise," were rooted not in God and his Word, but in personal utility.<sup>5</sup> As with Thomas Jefferson, whose *Jefferson Bible* was an attempted reduction of Scripture to its purely ethical teachings, morality was loosed from its Christian moorings. Man was the measure as well as the master of reality and history. God and his Word became the servant of man.

Given this ascendant utilitarianism, it was not difficult for the equality before the law guaranteed by our constitution to subtly become an equality of individual success. Enlightenment men like Franklin and Paine became exemplars of the American dream. Every man can succeed, given the opportunity and the will. With this shift toward a more anthropocentric view of life, the biblical idea of office began to disappear. Man

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<sup>3</sup> Robert N. Bellah, et al., *Habits of the Heart. Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (New York: Harper and Row, 1985), 28.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

lives for his own glory. He is no one's servant. He is a law unto himself.<sup>6</sup> The Enlightenment notion that governmental authority is derived from the people was a secular distortion of the covenantal idea of men like Samuel Rutherford, in which the people of God were called to respond to the sovereign initiative of their Lord. When authority is delegated by God, both government and people have mutual responsibilities. But God's law is king, not the king or the people's law. As authority shifted to the people, the will of the majority became king and God was simply invoked to bless the popular will (or the will of politicians, as we are reminded at every inauguration).

Though often billed as a reaction to the rationalism of the eighteenth century, nineteenth-century romanticism was really its offspring. Men like Walt Whitman and Washington Irving despised the materialism of the Enlightenment-inspired Industrial Revolution. Autonomy, however, was as much at the heart of the romantic movement as it was of Enlightenment rationalism. Whitman's "Song of Myself" says it all in the first line: "I celebrate myself"<sup>7</sup> The romantic poet and the rationalist philosopher-statesman were singing different parts to the same tune. The transcendentalist essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson echoed this theme when he asserted: "Trust thyself; every heart vibrates to that iron string."<sup>8</sup>

Romantic man thought himself able to plum deeper than the Newtonian geometric-mathematical portrait of reality. The mysterious, emotional, and irrational element of man's nature needed to be appreciated. The logic of the scientist-philosopher was to be replaced by the genius of the artist. The precincts of calculation were to be transcended. Form was to be superseded by life. The authentic individual had to pursue Shelley's "desire of the moth for the star."<sup>9</sup> With man's reason having been set up as the final arbiter of reality and meaning, the romantic focused on the inner feelings, longings, and aspirations of the individual. In the nineteenth century, reason set out on a new voyage amidst the mysteries of life.<sup>10</sup>

It should not surprise us to see rationalistic science and romantic individualism appear together as brothers in the twentieth century. Squabble though they may, they are still kin. The internal combustion engine and the electronic impulse, consummate products of reason, have been harnessed to serve the individual in an unprecedented way. Timothy Leary, a leading proponent of the expansion of the individual consciousness via psychedelic drugs in the 1960s, recently applauded the new technology, called "virtual reality" (VR), commenting, "I hope it's totally subversive and unacceptable to anyone in power. I am flat out enthusiastic that it is for the liberation and empowerment of the individual."<sup>11</sup>

This reminds us of President Clinton's recent assertion that the purpose of government is "empowerment" of its citizenry. As new technologies propelled by

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<sup>6</sup> K. Sietsma, *The Idea of Office* (Jordan Station, Ontario: Paideia Press, 1985), 40.

<sup>7</sup> Bellah, *Habits of the Heart*, 34.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>9</sup> Crane Brinton, "Romanticism," in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Paul Edwards (New York: Macmillan, 1967), VII, 207.

<sup>10</sup> Franklin L. Baumer, *Modern European Thought, Continuity and Change in Ideas, 1650-1950* (New York: Macmillan, 1977), 283-301.

<sup>11</sup> Glenn Emery, "Virtual Reality's Radical Vision," *Insight on the News* (May 6, 1991), 25.

egalitarianism reshape our institutions, the individual is rapidly replacing the authority of God, his Word, his church, and the idea of office. As spontaneity and informality express people's devotion to the idol of egalitarianism,<sup>12</sup> individual authority and expression assert themselves with increasing boldness in the church. It is thought by many that in the absence of such self-assertion the church as an institution lacks authenticity and is "morally hypocritical."<sup>13</sup> Thus, the sadly prevailing sentiment is "There's nothing in it for me." Increasingly, the conviction that the church exists to "meet my needs" is held by ministers and people alike as they use the church as a vehicle for their own success.

### The Effects of Egalitarianism on Church Office

The immediate precursor of the American War of Independence was the Great Awakening. Despite the spiritual good generated by this genuine revival, its kindling of the egalitarian impulse should not be underestimated. Revivalists within the Presbyterian Church of that period were mostly a "force battering at the ecclesiastical structure."<sup>14</sup> The Rev. John Thompson, an Old Side Presbyterian, opposed itinerancy by positing the federalist idea that ruling elders fairly represented the people.<sup>15</sup> But this idea stood against a tide of unrestrained leveling.

One of the plainest popular manifestations of egalitarianism is anticlericalism together with its offspring, anti-intellectualism. Ever since the Reformation, the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers has been misinterpreted by the radical wing of that movement called Anabaptist (referring to their rejection of infant baptism). During the Great Awakening, revivalist Herman Husband, glorying in his lack of learning, confirmed the anti-revivalists' worst suspicions by boasting, "My Capacity is not below them of the first and greatest Magnitude."<sup>16</sup> Some, according to anti-revivalists, even claimed to be "abler divines than either *Luther* or *Calvin*."<sup>17</sup> In claiming the right to question and judge all, the extreme revivalists denied the idea of special office altogether. A genuine experience of God's grace was, for them, the only prerequisite for preaching. James Davenport's repentance during the Awakening consisted of burning his books and his clerical garb. He encouraged the laity to assume ministerial authority.<sup>18</sup>

In a well-intended effort to assert the priesthood of all believers and genuine religious experience over against the rationalistic elitism of some of the New England clergy, revivalists, in many cases unwittingly, undermined the authority and integrity of biblical office, especially the teaching office. The tendency to find the source of spiritual authority in the individual rather than in God-ordained office was present in

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. Charles Dennison, "Report of the Committee on the Involvement of Unordained Persons in Worship Services," *Minutes of the Fifty-eighth General Assembly of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church* (1991), 290.

<sup>13</sup> Bellah, *Habits of the Heart*, 64.

<sup>14</sup> Alan Heimart and Perry Miller, eds., *The Great Awakening: Documents Illustrating the Crisis and Its Consequences* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1967), xxx.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 113-114.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 646.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 150.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 260.

American Reformed churches from the earliest times. Men like Jonathan Edwards, along with his Calvinistic contemporaries and forefathers, carefully rejected the egalitarian impulse in the Great Awakening, without denying the authentic work of God's Spirit in that great movement. Charles Dennison, the Orthodox Presbyterian Church's historian, sums it up cogently:

The new tone sounding from the Presbyterians harmonized well with the spirit in the new nation in which the democratic ideal blended with the rising evangelical movement. The evangelicals traced themselves straight back to the charismatic aspects of New Testament worship (Ilion T. Jones, *A Historical Approach to Evangelical Worship* [1954], 150). Their perspective had been promoted in part by the Great Awakening and more conspicuously by the triumphs of Methodism.... With most, there was a deliberate attempt to keep ministers and layman on the same plane (Jones, 155).<sup>19</sup>

In the nineteenth century, this tendency simply spread. No one exemplified it in Presbyterianism better than Charles Grandison Finney. He was a member of the New School party from his conversion in 1821 until 1836, when he became a Congregationalist. "Finney and his colleagues had drunk deeply of the new ideals of democracy and sought to devise new means to reach men like themselves."<sup>20</sup> Finney's "new measures" focused on the individual decision of seekers. Others gave more attention to the emotions.<sup>21</sup> New School author Albert Barnes, in opposing the doctrinal strictness of the Old School, had great zeal for "freedom of the spirit."<sup>22</sup> But the net result was the same: the individual was king.

Old School Presbyterian Thomas Smyth saw the dangers of the "democratic form" in congregational churches: "Experience, however, proved, as it still proved in Congregational churches, the inexpediency of such a course, its impotency and inefficiency on the one hand, and on the other hand its tendency to produce parties, schisms and disturbances, and even tumults and open ruptures in the church."<sup>23</sup>

The egalitarian spirit, however, did not find Presbyterianism to be the happiest of hunting grounds, due to the latter's strong and clear view of the importance of special office. Through the office of ruling elder, the laity already played a prominent role in the government of the church. Furthermore, the priesthood of all believers was taken seriously and insured each member a vital part in the worship and edification of the church without giving quarter to egalitarianism.

In the twentieth century, however, the power of the democratic ideal in the American mind threatens to overwhelm all institutions which dare to stand in its way. In his recent impassioned and witty plea for America to return to the behavior and ideals of its WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) heritage, Richard Brookhiser unintentionally makes a very important point about egalitarianism. In commenting on

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<sup>19</sup> Dennison, "Report of the Committee on the Involvement of Unordained Persons," 290.

<sup>20</sup> Julius Melton, *Presbyterian Worship in America* (Richmond: John Knox, 1967), 47.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>23</sup> Thomas Smyth, *Complete Works of the Reverend Thomas Smyth, D.D.*, ed. J. William Flinn (Columbia, S.C.: R. L. Bryan, 1908), IV, 18-19.

the power of WASP America to assimilate a wide variety of nationalities and viewpoints, Brookhiser notes, “It is one of the pleasant surprises of the Irish experience that Catholicism adapted so well. The reason is plain. The Catholic Church in America became Americanized—that is, WASPized. The Catholic Church arrived as the one true faith, outside which there was no salvation, and it became a denomination. It was still the one true faith, of course, but then so were all the others.”<sup>24</sup> Here is the power, not of the WASP, who is living off borrowed capital and about to declare bankruptcy anyway, but of egalitarianism aimed at religion. All religions are created equal. It is not a big step from that assertion to declare that because all church members are created equal, the idea of office is rubbish—or, worse, that because it stands in the way of equality and self-fulfillment, it must be abolished altogether.

Where office formally exists in church and state, it is often used more for personal aggrandizement than for service to God or man. The celebrity has replaced the servant as a major mentor in our culture. Every man has the potential to be a star. If that fails, watching TV will provide vicarious stardom. In the church, this translates into the mistaken notion that participation in worship requires a spotlight on the individual. So special music and “sharing times” proliferate. Why should the preacher own center stage? Thus, church office often degenerates into a stage for the display of one’s gifts, rather than a means of ministering God’s grace to God’s people. When it comes to opinions and ideas, many people feel that their thoughts have not been “heard” until they have been heeded. As Christopher Lasch rightly concludes, the value of self-restraint has been replaced by that of self-indulgence.<sup>25</sup> This is egalitarianism come into its own. Whether one worships in church or in the woods, the individual prevails.

While the view which diminishes the distinction between the pastor and the ruling elder, known as the two-office view, may not be the lineal descendent of egalitarian thinking, it is significant that it was first explicitly articulated in American Presbyterianism in the romantic nineteenth century. Furthermore, it is no coincidence that this view is predominant in our egalitarian century.

If egalitarianism is in the business of leveling distinctions, particularly where authority and office are involved, the two-office view falls prey to this instinct by obliterating the distinction between ruler and pastor. Its tendency is to bring down, not to elevate. At its worst, the preacher is thought merely to be paid to do full-time what the elder does for free. Thus, whatever distinction remains, it is not qualitative and official, but quantitative and practical. But then, ironically, this equalizing instinct brings down in order to elevate itself. In true *Animal Farm* fashion, “Some are more equal than others.” Pure egalitarianism always opens the door to pure dictatorship.

The defenders of the three-office view in the nineteenth century were quick to pick up on this irony in the two-office view. Charles Hodge pointed out that as a consequence of the two-office view, “we are therefore shut up by this new doctrine to abolish the office of ruling elder; we are required to make them all preachers.”<sup>26</sup> The very people the two-office theory purports to help are deprived of the putative pastoral connection. Hodge continues:

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<sup>24</sup> Richard Brookhiser, *The Way of the WASP* (New York: The Free Press, 1991), 23.

<sup>25</sup> Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978), 177.

<sup>26</sup> Charles Hodge, *Discussions in Church Polity* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1878), 269.

This doctrine is, therefore, completely revolutionary. It deprives the people of all substantive power. The legislative, judicial, and executive power according to our system, is in Church courts, and if these courts are to be composed entirely of clergymen, and are close, self-perpetuating bodies, then we have, or we should have, as complete a clerical domination as the world has ever seen.<sup>27</sup>

As Edmund Clowney asserts, to limit rule to those with teaching gifts creates a distance between church officers and the church, and it denies the use of men who are gifted to rule.<sup>28</sup> So, while the three-office idea is often billed as clericalism or elitism, it turns out in fact to be just the opposite.

A further irony lies in the fact that where the two-office view prevails, the plurality of elders in a congregation tends to diminish the importance and therefore the quality of the teaching office. This was not lost on one of Hodge's mentors, Samuel Miller, whose classic work *The Ruling Elder* set the agenda for the nineteenth-century debate on the eldership. He lamented that the effect of the two-office view "would be to reduce the preparation and acquirements for the ministry; to make choice of plain, illiterate men for this office; men of small intellectual and theological furniture; dependent on secular employments for subsistence; and, therefore, needing little or no support from the churches which they serve."<sup>29</sup>

The two-office idea, then, in its purest form, ends up denigrating both the teaching and the ruling offices. The biblical system requires both as separate offices to preserve the full range of ministry mandated in the Scriptures. In fact, most two-office proponents in Presbyterian churches do hold to a distinction between teaching and ruling elders, as species of one genus. This is often popularly referred to as the "two-and-a-half-office" view. But does this not really represent a transition from the three-to the two-office view? As Iain Murray notes of Thornwell and Dabney in the nineteenth century, "When in writing on the call to the ministry they make plain that they are *not* discussing ruling elders—a position hardly consistent with their case" (i.e., for the two-office view).<sup>30</sup> The logic of the two-office position is bound ultimately to do away with any distinction between the pastor and the ruling elder.

## The Restoration of Church Office

No doctrine can be properly restored to the church's mind without careful definition. The three-office view in no exception. Distinctions made in the nineteenth-century debate are helpful in focusing the definition. In fact, it was the lack of proper

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 129.

<sup>28</sup> Edmund P. Clowney, "A Brief for Church Governors in Church Government" (unpublished paper, 1972), 17.

<sup>29</sup> Samuel Miller, *An Essay On the Warrant, Nature, and Duties of the Office of the Ruling Elder, in the Presbyterian Church* (New York: Jonathan Leavitt; Boston: Crocker and Brewster, 1831), 187.

<sup>30</sup> Iain Murray, "Ruling Elders-A Sketch of a Controversy," *The Banner of Truth Magazine*, no. 235 (April 1983), 9.



distinctions that characterized the two-office theory for Hodge. The point at issue, he maintained, is

the nature of the office of the ruling elder. Is he a clergyman, a bishop? or is he a layman? Does he hold the same office with the minister or a different one? According to the new theory the offices are identified.... This new theory makes all elders, bishops, pastors, teachers, and rulers.... It therefore destroys all official distinctions between them. It reduces the two to one order, class, or office.<sup>31</sup>

The focus of the question from an exegetical perspective is clearly stated by Iain Murray:

The question which arises is how this Presbyterian distinction between ‘ministers’ and ‘elders’ is to be justified from the New Testament. Upon what grounds should such a title as ‘pastor’ be restricted to one if the word in the New Testament is descriptive of all elders?<sup>32</sup>

If presbyter is used uniformly in the New Testament to refer to a single office, then the distinction between the ruling elder and the pastor cannot be maintained. But, as Clowney cautions,

In 1 Timothy 5:17, those who engage in rule are distinguished from those who also labor in the word and doctrine. Again, the fact that both groups can be called *presbuteroi* by no means demonstrates that their office is identical.<sup>33</sup>

Hodge makes a crucial exegetical point in recounting the essence of a debate he had with Thornwell:

This is the dilemma in which, as we understood, Dr. Thornwell endeavoured to place Dr. Hodge, when he asked him, on the floor of the Assembly, whether he admitted that the elder was a presbyter. Dr. Hodge rejoined by asking Dr. Thornwell whether he admitted that the apostles were deacons. He answered, No. But, says Dr. Hodge, Paul says he was a *dia,konoj*. O, says Dr. Thornwell, that was in the general sense of the word. Precisely so. If the answer is good in the one case, it is good in the other. If the apostles being deacons in the wide sense of the word, does not prove that they were officially deacons, then that elders were presbyters in the one sense, does not prove them to be presbyters in the other sense. We hold, with Calvin, that the official presbyters of the New Testament were bishops; for, as he says, “[For

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<sup>31</sup> Hodge, Church Polity, 128.

<sup>32</sup> Murray, “Ruling Elders-A Sketch,” 1.

<sup>33</sup> Clowney, “A Brief for Church Governors,” 15.

to all who carry out the ministry of the Word it (Scripture) accords the title of ‘bishops.’]” But of the ruling elders, he adds, “[Governors (I Cor. 12:28) were, I believe, elders chosen from the people, who were charged with the censure or morals and the exercise of discipline along with the bishops.]” *Institutio, &c.* IV. 3. 8.<sup>34</sup>

Some defenders of the three-office view, such as Thomas Smyth, held that ruling elders were never referred to in the New Testament “under the term presbyter or elder, which always refers to the teacher or bishop solely.”<sup>35</sup> Like Calvin, he found his warrant for the office of governor or ruling elder in passages such as 1 Corinthians 12:28 and Romans 12:8. He understood passages such as 1 Timothy 3; 5:17; Titus 1; Acts 20 as referring only to ministers of the word. On the other end of the exegetical spectrum of three-office defenders, Samuel Miller understood the above passages to refer to both offices together. Miller, nonetheless, clearly held the three-office view.<sup>36</sup> In fact, Hodge declared himself to be in complete agreement with Miller as to the nature of the ruling office, only differing with him in the method of establishing its biblical warrant.<sup>37</sup> Exegetical uniformity is not required in order to base the view clearly on Scripture.

Hodge summed up the three-office position robustly:

This is the old, healthful, conservative doctrine of the Presbyterian Church. Ministers of the word are clergymen, having special training, vocation, and ordination; ruling elders are laymen, chosen from the people as their representatives, having, by divine warrant, equal authority in all Church courts with the ministers.<sup>38</sup>

Much study of this question needs to be carried out by serious Presbyterians. The integrity of the offices of both ruling elder and minister is at stake. And while we need to take seriously the warning of Thomas Smyth that our devotion does not “terminate on the outward form, order, ministry or ordinances of any church,”<sup>39</sup> we must not forget that the proper biblical form of office will best serve the Lord who ordained it. This is true of both offices.

The 1941 edition of the *Form of Government* of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church referred to the “office of the minister” as “the first in the church, both for dignity and usefulness.” But this phrase was deleted in the 1978 revision, as an accommodation to the two-office view. This is unfortunate, because ultimately the centrality of preaching is at stake. Calvin said it well: “God often commended the dignity of the ministry by all possible marks of approval in order that it might be held among us in highest honor

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<sup>34</sup> Hodge, *Church Polity*, 130. (Battles's English translation in the Library of Christian Classics is substituted for Hodge's quotation of Calvin in Latin.)

<sup>35</sup> Smyth, *Works*, IV, 26.

<sup>36</sup> Miller, *The Ruling Elder*, 28.

<sup>37</sup> Hodge, *Church Polity*, 129.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

<sup>39</sup> Smyth, *Works*, IV, 26.

and esteem, even as the most excellent of all things.”<sup>40</sup> It is not the privilege of persons, but the dignity of God’s Word which is being upheld. Egalitarianism, lacking any conception of office, tends to see all official distinctions as tools of oppression. A biblical servant, however, will see such a distinction as a tool of ministry and himself as an instrument of grace.

The three-office doctrine also preserves the ruling function of the eldership. As both Hodge and Clowney have pointed out, the two-office view creates a gap between the clergy and the people. As every faithful minister knows, the oversight of the flock is impossible to maintain alone. The three-office position allows ruling elders to focus on the application of what the minister teaches from God’s Word. The three-office position, rightly understood, alone preserves the true dignity and effectiveness of the ruling office.

Only a careful distinction of offices will ultimately preserve the proper functions of each. Historically, the two-office scheme leads to the disappearance of the ruling elder and the atrophy of lay leadership. In some circles, the teaching function has been demeaned, but this seems to be the case more where the “no-office” idea prevails, as in Brethrenism. When everyone is a minister, no one is. The egalitarian impulse, by its very nature, erodes the idea of office to the great harm of the church.

The benefits of the three-office view are manifold. First, the parity of rule protects the church from tyranny. The minister does not rule alone. There is a balance of power—a system of checks and balances. As Miller notes, the ruling elder has “an equal voice. The vote of the most humble and retiring Ruling Elder, is of the same avail as that of his minister.”<sup>41</sup> Seitsma observes, “It must be remembered that office is the only justification and the proper limitation of any human exercise of power and authority.”<sup>42</sup> The three-office view brings this idea into its own. Egalitarianism allows power to fall into the hands of the domineering and gives voice ultimately to the loudest mouth.

Second, the three-office doctrine provides leadership. The minister, as a scribe of the Word, is a leader among the rulers. He is the moderator of the session, a first among equals. A ship cannot sail without a captain. As Geoffrey Thomas points out:

Where plural elders are in existence, the principle of single leadership is necessary. Nowhere in the Scriptures do we find leadership exercised by a committee with one man acting as a kind of chairman, although that is the consequence of the concept of parity among plural elders in many cases today.<sup>43</sup>

In preventing ministers from lording it over the elders, the two-office view tends to leave a vacuum of leadership. Smyth declares, “Ministers are like the head from which proceeds the stimulus, guidance, and direction, which are essential to the vitality, the

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<sup>40</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (The Library of Christian Classics; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), IV. iii. 8, 1055.

<sup>41</sup> Miller, *The Ruling Elder*, 197.

<sup>42</sup> Seitsma, *The Idea of Office*, 15.

<sup>43</sup> Thomas, “The Pastoral Ministry,” 78-79.

activity, the dignity, and the harmony of the system.”<sup>44</sup> Egalitarianism engenders lordship, not leadership.

Third, the three-office view allows the minister to focus on the ministry of the Word, unhindered by the multitude of concerns that only the group of elders can attend to with him. How many of the pulpits of our land suffer because of the inordinate demands made on a minister’s time? Jethro’s advice to Moses is as pertinent today as it was over three millennia ago: “The thing that you do is not good. Both you and these people who are with you will surely wear yourselves out. For this thing is too much for you; you are not able to perform it by yourself” (Ex. 18:17-18, NKJV). The apostles put this principle into practice in the calling out of deacons in Acts 6. Egalitarianism leads not only to tyranny but to burnout.

Fourth, this view allows for the proper and effective implementation of discipline, which the minister could not appropriately or practically provide on his own. Egalitarianism leads to moral chaos.

Finally, the three-office idea provides for the needs of all of the people. Miller beautifully depicts this full-orbed ministry:

In every department of official duty, the Pastor of this denomination has associated with him, a body of pious, wise, and disinterested counselors, taken from among the people; acquainted with their views; participating in their feelings; able to give sound advice as to the wisdom and practicability of plans which require general co-operation for carrying them into effect; and able also, after having aided in the formation of such plans, to return to their constituents, and so to advocate and recommend them, as to secure general concurrence in their favor.<sup>45</sup>

There are several things which need to be done to promote a more biblical view of office in our churches. First, people need to be instructed about the nature and dangers of egalitarianism. Most people are unaware of the democratic assumptions which are part of the fabric of the worldview in which they have been nurtured as Americans. To the extent that these assumptions are unbiblical, church officers, especially ministers, must foster the transformation of people’s minds, so that they will not be conformed to this world (Rom. 12:1-2).

Second, Pastors and elders need to encourage each other to fulfill the ministries to which God has called them. This means that each must be aware of the biblical requirements, duties, and limits of the offices of pastor and ruler. In particular, each must understand what is specifically expected of them in the local congregation. The strengths and weaknesses of each officer should be openly discussed in the privacy of the session. Special strengths and gifts should be appreciated and cultivated so that the wide variety of needs in a given congregation will be met.

Third, a good working relationship should be cultivated among elders and ministers. This means developing biblical communication and conflict-resolution skills. The session must see itself as a team. This means that the individualist instinct

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<sup>44</sup> Smyth, Works, IV, 28.

<sup>45</sup> Miller, *The Ruling Elder*, 311-12.

must be suppressed in ministers and elders. Matters under discussion must be kept confidential. When decisions are made, the dissenter should keep his disagreement to himself unless it involves moral or doctrinal absolutes. Then the proper means of discipline should be judiciously used to deal with sin and heresy.

One of the greatest temptations presented by the democratic mentality is the idea that the ruling elder is a sounding board for congregational discontent or an agent for special interests. Smyth was aware of this danger already in the nineteenth century, when he warned: "Remember, however, that while you are the representatives of the people, you represent not their WISHES and OPINIONS, but their DUTIES and OBLIGATIONS, THEIR RIGHTS AND PRIVILEGES, as these are laid down in those heavenly laws to which you and they are both alike subject, and which no power on earth can either alter, modify, abridge, or enlarge." Because pride enhances this temptation he adds, "Seek not popularity at the expense of fidelity."<sup>46</sup>

The idea, rightly emphasized by Hodge and others, that ruling elders are "representatives of the people" can easily be misused in order to pit the minister against the people, as if the pastor did not sympathize with their concerns. Frustrated preachers must not treat their elder as Absaloms. Regular sessional retreats together with a wise and regular system of visitation by elders and minister will do much to prevent such abuse.

The session must present a united front. This means that a wedge should never be allowed to be driven between a pastor and the elders. The pastor must be teachable and humble, never demanding his agenda. But it also means that the ruling elder must protect the pastor from the destructive power of criticism. Criticism itself is healthy, but the Devil, the original egalitarian, is a master at inspiring unjust criticism and using just criticism divisively to ruin churches and drive good men from the ministry. The wise elder will try to answer the criticisms and concerns of members on the spot or bring the matter directly to the pastor (with the critic, if necessary). It is crucial that elders support the pastor, especially when they disagree with him. Berghoef and DeKoster have an excellent section on this subject.<sup>47</sup> This would be a superb book for sessions to work through together. Finally, ministers and elders will serve the Lord and promote the godly government of his church best by being servants of God and his people. The three-office view, by itself, will not restore true ministry to the church. Only if those who fill the offices have the mind of their Master, the mind of a servant (Phil. 2:5-11), will egalitarianism be kept at bay and the kingdom of God built. The individualist will use the office for his own personal fulfillment and thus denigrate the office. The servant will seek the glory of his Lord.

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<sup>46</sup> Smyth, *Works*, IV, 31.

<sup>47</sup> Gerard Berghoef and Lester DeKoster, *The Elder's Handbook* (Grand Rapids: Christian Library, 1979), 160-62. Cf. Lawrence Eyres, *The Elders of the Church* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1975), 17-18.