

**On Sacraments and Ordinances and the three offices of the church:
Pastor, Elder and Deacon
Exodus 18:13-27
Acts 6:1-7
Fairview Presbyterian Church
September 9th, 2007**

The message of the Protestant Reformation: The Church must get back to the Bible

Today at Fairview Presbyterian Church we are ordaining and installing church officers. It is a special day. We are setting apart those persons whom we believe God has appointed to lead the work and ministry of our church.

Different churches are organized in different ways and while I would like to take the time to contrast and compare the different ecclesiastical organization and offices of the various branches of Christendom, I simply do not have time to do so in a single message. I recognize that some in our membership may have previously been a member of, or been raised in, another church, another denomination, another branch of the Christian faith. For this reason, to understand what is happening today, it is helpful to understand a little bit of Church history. I am about to explain the *Presbyterian* understanding of sacraments, ordinances, and the offices of pastor, elder and deacon. We are a Presbyterian Church and so I preach that understanding unapologetically. At the same time, it would probably be helpful for you to remember that, when you walk out Fairview's front door, and enter into conversation about these subjects with your friends who are Roman Catholic, or Baptist, or Pentecostal, they will probably view these matters quite differently.

We are Presbyterians. We are Protestants. We are Protestants in the Reformed Tradition. The history of our church as a denomination flows out of the Protestant Reformation. One key mark of the Protestant Reformation was a desire to get back to the teachings of the Bible. The fervor of the Protestant Reformation was both encouraged and enabled by the then recent invention of the printing press. Because of the printing press, dependable, accurate and relatively inexpensive copies of the Bible and the writings of the church fathers were now widely available. Books copied by hand required a process that was long, tedious, expensive and error-prone. The printing press revolutionized the world, enabling church scholars to get back to the roots of the Bible, in the original languages of Greek and Hebrew, reexamining the roots of the Christian faith and comparing those roots with the current practices of the day.

At the time of the Protestant Reformation, the Roman Catholic church had developed a complex and elaborate system of church officers and church orders; together with an extensive sacerdotal system that recognized seven sacraments. Reexamining this system, The Protestant Reformers asked, "*Which offices do we*

find in the Bible? Which sacraments are named in the New Testament? The answers they found were these. There were three named offices in the New Testament: that of Pastor (from the Greek word *episkopos*); together with the offices of Elder and Deacon. Regarding the sacraments, the Protestant Reformers rejected the sacerdotal system that had developed in the medieval Roman Catholic church, insisting instead that the only true New Testament sacraments were those actually instituted by Jesus Christ himself: baptism and communion.

Catholics and most Protestants agree that a sacrament is a means of grace; it is something God gives in order to help us along the walk of faith. A sacrament is a concrete spiritual blessing given by God. Ordination, according to the Catholic Church, is one of the seven sacraments.¹ The Protestant Reformers rejected this. They said a sacrament is a means of grace; an ordinance is a means of order: and ordination is an ordinance, not a sacrament.

A sacrament is a means of grace; an ordinance is a means of order: and ordination is an ordinance

A sacrament is a means of grace. An ordinance is a means of order. A sacrament is a means where God meets us. An ordinance is a means by which we organize our corporate and spiritual life together. Some Protestants – Baptists and Disciples of Christ, for example – reject the idea of sacrament altogether. They understand baptism and communion as things we humans do as acts of obedience. Therefore, baptism and communion are ordinances, not sacraments. According to this understanding, God is not involved in them in any special way. They are things we do, not things God does. For this reason, these churches do not recognize infant baptism for a baptism must be, in their understanding, an act of obedience, and an infant is incapable of such an act of will. A true baptism only occurs, they argue, when a person is old enough to comprehend and affirm their own will. It is not what God does that matters. It is what we do, for baptism is how we organize our common life together. Similarly, in a communion celebration, the emphasis of the language used by those who lead the worship falls upon remembering and remembrance. In communion, the congregation *remembers* Christ's sacrifice but Christ is not thought to be present in any special, spiritual or sacramental way. Respectfully, we Presbyterians do not agree. From our perspective, the Roman Catholics have seven sacraments – too many; the Baptists have no sacraments – too few; while we, Goldilocks like, have two – just right!

When the Protestant Reformers examined the teaching and theology of ordination, they determined that ordination has no New Testament warrant to be viewed as a sacrament. Being ordained is not a means of grace; but instead should be understood as a means of order. Ordination is part of the story of how God wishes his people to organize themselves. Thus, ordination is an act of the

¹ The seven are baptism, communion, confirmation, marriage, extreme unction, penance, and ordination.

church whereby persons are commissioned to public ministry. Ordination is part of the story of how we organize our corporate spiritual lives together. I am a fan of the movie *The Apostle* in which Robert Duvall plays Sonny, a sincere but flawed Pentecostal preacher. There is a scene in the movie where Sonny baptizes and ordains himself as *the apostle*. *Cinematically* the scene works, for it visually represents a spiritual, inward change in Sonny's heart: but theologically the message is flawed, for baptism and ordination are acts of the church. They cannot legitimately be performed individually, unilaterally, or apart from the community of Christ represented by the church. Those ordained must be *called* to an office. The marks of being called to the office of pastor, elder or deacon are three: inner persuasion, outward gifts, and public election by the church. Sonny clearly had the inward persuasion and outward gifts but, for reasons the movie makes clear and upon which the drama of the story unfolds, he lacked the public recognition of the church of his ordination to this office.

This is why there is the *laying on of hands* in the act of ordination. The laying on of hands does three things in an ordination. First, it is a recognition of the gifts the individual ordained possesses. He or she brings these gifts and abilities in his service to the church to the ordained office. Secondly, it also symbolizes being set apart to ministry within the church. Not everyone in the church is ordained. This is a particular office, given to specific people, symbolized in the act of laying on of hands. Moreover, third, the laying on of hands symbolizes stepping into the historic stream of Biblical leadership. Moses laid hands upon the first elders commissioned in the Sinai dessert. The apostles prayed and laid hands on the first deacons ordained in Jerusalem. In theory, we can trace an unbroken line from these acts of ordination through the centuries on to the present into the sanctuary of Fairview Presbyterian Church today. The elders and deacons ordained today stand in the same tradition and fulfill a comparable spiritual office, as did the first elders and deacons in the Biblical story. There are three Biblical offices of church order: Pastor, Elder and Deacon.

There are three *Biblical* offices of order: *Pastor, Elder and Deacon*

Ex. 18 You shall represent the people before God and bring their cases to God,²⁰ and you shall warn them about the statutes and the laws, and make them know the way in which they must walk and what they must do.

Ex. 18²¹ Moreover, look for able men from all the people, men who fear God, who are trustworthy and hate a bribe, and place such men over the people as chiefs of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties, and of tens

Acts 6³ 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.

Languages evolve and change. The Biblical language for these three offices are, literally, Bishop, Presbyter and Deacon. At its root, the word *bishop* is a word that refers to caring for something or someone. It communicates the idea of pastor. Jesus Christ is the Good Shepherd. All other pastor-shepherds are under-shepherds. They exercise their office under his authority.

Elders are the spiritual leaders in a local church. I confess that I prefer the old fashioned language of the Presbyterian Church that distinguished between *teaching* elders and *ruling* elders. The pastor is the teaching elder of a local church. The serving elders on the Session are the ruling elders of the church. It is their responsibility to oversee the temporal and spiritual matters of the church. The Session is the governing board of a local church. The Session is made up of the pastor (teaching elder) and the ruling elders who together oversee the life, worship, and ministry of a local congregation.

The office of Deacon is specifically an office of service to those in special need. In Acts 6 we learn that a problem has arisen in the early church. In the ancient world three classes of people were singled out as requiring special attention and care by God's people: the orphan, the widow and the sojourner (i.e. traveler). Why these three groups? These three lacked the normal social care network that others would have: an orphan lacked parents; a widow lacked her husband; and travelers lacked the usual network of family and friend, vulnerable to robbery and exploitation. We learn from Acts 6 that the early church provided care for widows. However, the ongoing tension between Jew and Gentile carried over into the church and it appeared that the Greek widows were not receiving adequate care. The apostles hear the report and respond with the suggestion that some be set apart to the office of deacon in order to meet this need. From their names, we determine that the first seven deacons chosen and set apart by the church were Greeks, Gentiles. Obviously they would have a special interest in meeting the needs of the Greek widows in their midst.

This has become the model for deacon ministry through the centuries: find a need and fill it. The types of needs may vary greatly from one human community to another, from one cultural context to the next. For this reason, there is great variety to the types of deacon's ministries from one church to the next. The deacon's job is to see the need and meet it.

No doubt, you have noticed that there was one additional office present in the installation service earlier that I have not, as yet mentioned. It is the office of Trustee. The first thing to note is that the office of trustee is a *legal* office, not a Biblical or spiritual office. You will not find the word *trustee* in the Bible. While the Trustees are under the authority of the Session of Fairview Presbyterian Church, they exercise their authority under the law of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. I am a pastor, father, husband, and son. I can be all these things at the same time. Fairview Presbyterian Church is a local church whose meeting place is in the village of Glenmoore; it is a particular congregation of the Presbytery of Donegal, in the Presbyterian Church (USA); it is a legal corporate entity of the state of Pennsylvania; and it participates in the church universal, the people of Christ, who forever and in all times and places declare Christ's glory. Fairview Church can and is all these things at one and the same time. The trustees of Fairview Church are the legal representatives of the church to the

Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. They have the legal fiduciary responsibility to care for and oversee the investment and the real property of the church. They serve Christ in doing so.

This leads to our final point this morning: the primary way ordained officers fulfill their ordination vows is by putting first things *first*.

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Ex. 18 Moses' father-in-law said to him, "What you are doing is not good.

Acts 6 "It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables.

One day, an expert on time management was speaking to a group of business students and, to drive home a point, used an illustration those students will never forget. As he stood in front of the group of high-powered overachievers he said, "Okay, time for a quiz." Then he pulled out a one-gallon, wide-mouthed Mason jar and set it on the table in front of him. Then he produced about a dozen fist-sized rocks and carefully placed them, one at a time, into the jar. When the jar was filled to the top and no more rocks would fit inside, he asked, "Is this jar full?"

Everyone in the class said, "Yes."

Then he said, "Really?" He reached under the table and pulled out a bucket of gravel. Then he dumped some gravel in and shook the jar causing pieces of gravel to work themselves down into the space between the big rocks. Then he asked the group once more, "Is the jar full?"

By this time the class was on to him. "Probably not," one of them answered.

"Good!" he replied. He reached under the table and brought out a bucket of sand. He started dumping the sand in the jar and it went into all of the spaces left between the rocks and the gravel. Once more he asked the question, "Is this jar full?"

No!" the class shouted.

Once again he said, "Good." Then he grabbed a pitcher of water and began to pour it in until the jar was filled to the brim. Then he looked at the class and asked, "What is the point of this illustration?"

One eager beaver raised his hand and said, "The point is, no matter how full your schedule is, if you try really hard, you can always fit some more things in to it!"

"No," the speaker replied, "that's not the point. The truth this illustration teaches us is: **If you don't put the big rocks in first, you'll never get them in at all.**"

What are the 'big rocks' in your life? They are God, your spouse, your children; your family; your faith, your education; your dreams. These are the **BIG ROCKS** of life. If you focus on the little stuff (the gravel, the sand) then you'll fill your life with the little things. You will worry about things that don't really matter. You will expend your time on things that are not ultimately important. If you want to have a full and meaningful life, then you need to spend your time and energies on the big, important stuff (the big rocks). Put those in your jar first.

In the passage from Exodus we saw how Moses was distracted by all the administration he provided to the people of Israel. By God's grace, Moses received good, solid advice from his father-in-law, Jethro. Moses implements Jethro's advice, dumping out the gravel and sand of the administrative responsibilities in order to focus again upon the big rock of representing God to the people, of teaching the people God's word and will. Jethro's advice enabled him to put the big rocks in first. The Apostles were a bit wiser. They declare "It is not right to wait at tables." They are not saying that waiting at tables is unimportant. No. They are saying that that was not what they were called to do. They knew to keep first things first. They had put the big rocks in their life.

The first commitment of each and every teaching elder, elder, deacon and trustee, is to make God their number one priority in life. Putting God first in this way is revealed in faithful participation in worship each week, through personal times of prayer, and in gathering with others to pray and study God's word. Putting first things first puts us a long way along the road of placing everything else in our lives in their proper place and order.

Say "Amen!," Somebody

Exodus 18

¹³ The next day Moses sat to judge the people, and the people stood around Moses from morning till evening. ¹⁴ When Moses' father-in-law saw all that he was doing for the people, he said, "What is this that you are doing for the people? Why do you sit alone, and all the people stand around you from morning till evening?" ¹⁵ And Moses said to his father-in-law, "Because the people come to me to inquire of God; ¹⁶ when they have a dispute, they come to me and I decide between one person and another, and I make them know the statutes of God and his laws." ¹⁷ Moses' father-in-law said to him, "What you are doing is not good. ¹⁸ You and the people with you will certainly wear yourselves out, for the thing is too heavy for you. You are not able to do it alone. ¹⁹ Now obey my voice; I will give you advice, and God be with you! You shall represent the people before God and bring their cases to God, ²⁰ and you shall warn them about the statutes and the laws, and make them know the way in which they must walk and what they must do. ²¹ Moreover, look for able men from all the people, men who fear God, who are trustworthy and hate a bribe, and place such men over the people as chiefs of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties, and of tens. ²² And let them judge the people at all times. Every great matter they shall bring to you, but any small matter they shall decide themselves. So it will be easier for you, and they will bear the burden with you. ²³ If you do this, God will direct you, you will be able to endure, and all this people also will go to their place in peace."

²⁴ So Moses listened to the voice of his father-in-law and did all that he had said. ²⁵ Moses chose able men out of all Israel and made them heads over the people, chiefs of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties, and of tens. ²⁶ And they judged the people at all times. Any hard case they brought to Moses, but any small matter they decided themselves. ²⁷ Then Moses let his father-in-law depart, and he went away to his own country.

Acts 6

6 Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. ² 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. ³ 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. ⁴ But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word." ⁵ And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. ⁶ These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them.

⁷ And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.

