

Two or Three Office: A Slash at the Gordian Knot

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A. Introduction

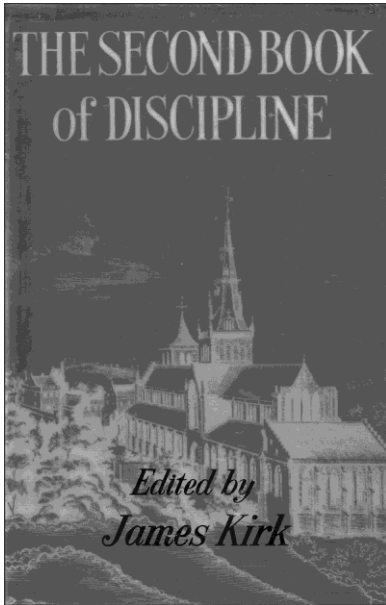
This article is a contribution to the discussion of whether or not there is a distinction in office between those who are called ministers of the word and those who are called ruling elders.

The discussion being entered into is greatly hampered by designations and descriptions. It is often spoken of in terms of the number of ordinary, continuing, offices in the church: two office view or three office view. The three office view speaks of ministers, elders, and deacons. The two office view speaks of elders (teaching and ruling) and deacons. If only it were so simple. The first thing to note is that deacons do not feature in the discussion. It is about the eldership. The second thing to note is that writers claiming to hold one or other of the views stated above describe their positions in ways which contradict those with whom they claim to side¹; or they appear to state the opposing position, only using different metaphors, analogies, or classifications. One illustrates his points using the Constitution of the United States²; another prefers biology. One will speak of office alone; another delineates in

¹ See Mark R. Brown, ed., *Order in the Offices* (Duncansville, PA: Classic Presbyterian Government Resources, 1993). This book contains a number of extracts and essays by different authors who might all be said to oppose the two office view. The problem is that there is no consistency of exegesis, terminology, argument, or tone among the contributors. There appear to be two positions held by the authors. One is that there are three offices: minister of the word, ruling elder, and deacon. The other is that there are two offices, minister of the word and deacon, and a lesser function of governor.

² If Presbyterianism is a 'glorious system of representative republicanism', one might wonder where Christ fits in. See Luder G. Whitlock Jr, 'Elders And Ecclesiology In The Thought Of James Henley Thornwell' *Westminster Theological Journal*, 37:1 (Fall 1974) 47.

terms of office and classes or orders. One will speak of clergy and laity, another of professionals and amateurs. What one will join together with Granville Sharp, another will put asunder with Peter Ramus. There is, no less, a version of the three office view which is actually a two office view because it sees the position of ruler, governor, or administrator as beneficial but not necessary to the government of the church. The third thing to note is that this discussion might at times be overly influenced by societal, cultural, and political considerations. Differences over large versus small government, order versus oligarchy, monarchy versus republic, top down versus bottom up delegation of authority, or even North versus South seem at times to have a bearing on how three office or two office positions are perceived.



In an attempt to avoid getting embroiled in such problems too soon, the plan here is, first, to examine how the Bible defines the term office and if the eldership and the ministry of the word can be described as offices, and then to look at the descriptions of office-bearers given in the *Second Book of Discipline* (*SBD*)³ in the light of that examination.

Why the *SBD*? The *SBD* is a foundational Presbyterian document. Written in 1578, it belongs very much to the third generation of Reformers⁴. James Kirk's notes to his definitive edition show the degree to which it codifies the views of earlier writers and documents. It stands at a pivotal point as things move from the manifesto style of the *First Book of Discipline*⁵ from the Knoxian era to the begin-

ning of the Presbyterian forms of government or books of practice of the present day. The *SBD* was the official stance of the Church of Scotland going into the Westminster Assembly. It contains, perhaps along with Walter Steuart of Pardovan's *Collections*,⁶ many of the positions and practices which have been absorbed, often without citation or memory of the source, into the practice of the church: that thing with which innovators meddle.

³ James Kirk, ed., *The Second Book of Discipline* (Edinburgh: St Andrew Press, 1980).

⁴ Luther and Zwingli might be described as the first generation; Melancthon, Bucer, Calvin, Bullinger, and Knox as the second; and Beza and Melville as the third.

⁵ J. K. Cameron, ed., *First Book of Discipline* (Edinburgh: St Andrew Press, 1972).

⁶ Walter Steuart, *Collections and Observations Methodiz'd; Concerning the Worship, Discipline, and Government of the Church of Scotland* (Edinburgh: Heirs and Successor of Andrew Anderson, 1709).

By taking the *SBD*'s understanding of the Scriptures as a datum, it is possible to see whether or not later contributions to the discussion have moved the church's understanding of the eldership any further forward.

B. The Bible

1. Toward a Biblical Definition of Office

So, before beginning to talk about office in the church, the term needs to be defined. A survey of dictionaries of both American and British English gives the following definition: a position of authority, trust, responsibility, or service; a special duty, charge, or position conferred by an exercise of governmental authority and for a public purpose; a position of authority to exercise a public function and to receive whatever emoluments may belong to it. However, arriving at a biblical definition of the term is hampered by the fact that there is no single Hebrew or Greek word which is translated office; indeed, in many cases translators supply the term when a single Hebrew or Greek word is rendered by a phrase in English⁷. In this section of the article, the plan is to show that there is sufficient biblical material to demonstrate that office, according to its contemporary English definition, is an appropriate word to use to convey the meaning of the Greek and Hebrew words used in Scripture.

Presbyterian ecclesiological vocabulary in English comes from the 16th and 17th centuries. This might provoke the question: has the word "office" become archaic? This question might be answered by looking at how the word is used in a range of English versions of the Bible. At the heart of that formative period is the Authorized, or King James, Version of the Scriptures⁸. The AV uses the word office forty-five times. More modern translations use it much less than that but also use it in places which the AV does not. Where the newer versions replace office, they use duty, position, place, ministry, function, service, charge, or responsibility. Often they will not use the word; for example, where the AV has 'minister in the office of priest', the NASB and NKJV have 'minister as priest' and the ESV has 'serve as priest'. Yet, for the ESV and the NASB, a priest's period of service is his time 'in office'. In 1 Chronicles 9:22, the AV has 'set office', while the ESV and NASB have 'office of trust' and the NKJ has 'trusted office'. Translating the parallelism of Isaiah 22:19, interestingly, the AV does not use office, but uses station and state; whereas, the NASB, NKJ, and ESV use office in place of station and have station (NASB, ESV) and position (NKJ) for state. Even if 16th and 17th century writers gave the word, newer translators still use it,

⁷ John Murray, *Collected Writings* (Edinburgh: BoTT, 1977) 2:357.

⁸ The Bible versions used are the Authorised Version (AV), TBS Westminster Reference Bible; the New King James Version (NKJ), Thomas Nelson, 1983; The New American Standard Bible (NASB), Holman, 1973; and the English Standard Version (ESV), Crossway Bibles, 2001.

and still keep the idea of office by using words which are readily associated with it from our current English usage.

A key verse for understanding office in the Bible is Acts 1:20, where Peter, quoting from a Greek translation of Psalm 109:8, says, 'Let another take his office.' In this context, the Hebrew word in the Psalm has the meaning: appointment, service, or office⁹; other English words used to render it are appointed duty, charge, responsibility, and oversight. In Acts, the Greek word is translated as office in the modern versions and as bishoprick in the AV; in other verses, the word is translated as office of bishop (AV), position of bishop (NKJ), office of overseer (NASB, ESV)¹⁰. From this, it can be said that an office is a position of oversight.

The AV also uses office to translate words which are now rendered by ministry or service (Romans 11:13) and function (Romans 12:4). This raises the question: was it correct to begin by defining an office as a position or should it rather be defined in terms of activity? For example, is it not sufficient that there be those who teach without there being a position of teacher? It is certainly the case that many offices in the church are described in terms of activity: prophets prophesy, teachers teach, and evangelists evangelise (Ephesians 4:1-16; Romans 12; 1 Corinthians 12). Nevertheless, apostles and elders are also mentioned. These are positions, the functions of which are not clearly described by the title. To be true to all the biblical information, it must always be asked what the duties and responsibilities of the position in question are; for, while an office in the church is an honourable position (1 Timothy 3:1; 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13), it is not an honorary one.

This initial definition of a position of oversight can be expanded by looking at the context of Acts 1:20 and other passages which describe appointment to office. In Acts 1:12-26, a replacement for Judas Iscariot is chosen and appointed by a process which sets a pattern for the rest of the New Testament (Acts 6:1-6, 13:1-3, 14:23; 1 Timothy 3:1-13; Titus 5-9). Appointment to office involves a statement of qualifications, the selection of the qualified, and setting apart the qualified person by existing office-bearers. The selection step in the process is one of recognition. Christ, the Head of the church (Colossians 1:13), the one to whom all authority has been given (Matthew 28:16-20), gives spiritual gifts to those whom He has given to the church for its edification (Romans 12:3-8; 1 Corinthians 12; Ephesians 4:1-16); the congregation chooses the person whom they believe Christ to have qualified for the vacant position. That person is a minister or servant of God (2 Corinthians 6:3-4) and has received that office or ministry from Christ (2 Corinthians 5:18; Colossians 4:17; see also Hebrews 5 & 13). An office in the church is a position of oversight in the service of Christ.

⁹ Willem A. VanGemeren, ed., *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997) [Henceforth, *NIDOTTE*] 3:657-663.

¹⁰ Colin Brown, ed., *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1978) [Henceforth *NIDNTT*] 1:188-192.

So, how closely do the ideas drawn from the examples contained, and directions given, in the Bible match the English definition of “office”? As Hebrews 13:17 and 2 Corinthians 5:20 show, an office in the church is at one and the same time a position of authority and of service. It is a position conferred by an exercise of governmental authority as Christ confers the office through the leadership which He has set in place in His church, starting with the apostles. Office is for a public purpose and to exercise a public function in that office-bearers are given to the church for its up-building and/or to the world as the ambassadors of Christ, bringing the gospel. Yes, there are emoluments: see 1 Timothy 5:17-18. It appears, then, that office is an accurate and readily understood term to use in this discussion.

2. Ruling Elder: A Tautology

The office of elder, or presbyter, is a position with only hints as to the functions it might involve contained in its name. Seniority can imply authority and leadership. The Greek verb meaning to be an elder is also used in the sense of to rule. Elders in the Bible have leadership and administrative roles. In the Old Testament, there are the elders of Israel¹¹. These men are the heads of the extended families, or clans, which subdivided the tribes. They are the representatives of the people before God: both when He wishes to address them and when they wish to address Him. Their duties are to oversee the putting of God’s instruction into practice¹² and the administration of His Law in local settings (Ruth 4:1-2). In the Gospels, there are the elders of the people who join with the chief priests and scribes in the Sanhedrin. In the New Testament church, elders rule (1 Timothy 5:17)¹³. A variation of the word used in 1 Timothy is used in Romans 12:8 and 1 Thessalonians 5:12 to speak of those who rule, lead, or are over those being addressed by Paul in his epistles. In a somewhat parallel passage to 1 Corinthians 12, the apostle uses governments or administrations. The epistle to the Hebrews in chapter 13 uses yet another word to speak of those who rule in the church: the word from which we get governor. There are, then, rulers of the people spoken of in both Testaments. And in both Testaments, they are called elders.

Acts 20:17-38 and 1 Peter 5:1-4 have the position of elder and the functions of overseeing and shepherding. In the Old Testament, the LORD is Israel’s shepherd¹⁴. Yet, as David and Cyrus are said to have shepherding roles with regard to the people, we see that the Shepherd uses under-shepherds. In Ezekiel 34, the nation’s leaders are described as the shepherds of Israel and condemned for their misrule in an extended sheep farming metaphor, the climax of which being that those who have abused their authority will be re-

¹¹ *NIDOTTE*, 1:1137-1139; *NIDNTT*, 1:192-201.

¹² Compare Exodus 12:3 and 12:21.

¹³ *NIDNTT*, 1:192-201.

¹⁴ *NIDOTTE*, 3:1138-1143.

placed by the Davidic shepherd whom we understand to be Christ, the Good Shepherd. The New Testament parallels the Old: Christ, the Over-shepherd, commands Peter to shepherd His sheep, and Peter instructs elders to shepherd the flock.

The AV unnecessarily limits this shepherding to feeding the flock. The passages which employ the shepherding metaphor refer to preventing from straying, protecting, tending, and, rather than simply feeding, leading to quality grazing and water. Closely linked to the idea of elders shepherding is that of elders overseeing the flock. Where shepherding describes church leadership in terms of its duties, overseeing describes it in terms of commission and responsibility.

Acts 20:17, 28 and Titus 1:5, 7 strongly suggest that elder and overseer are interchangeable terms; and, by analogy, it might be said that shepherd, or pastor, can be added to that list. There is, then, a position described as one of authority under the title elder and as one of responsibility for guardianship and duty of care under the titles overseer and pastor. Its function is rule. Those who hold the office are accountable to a Superior (1 Peter 5:1-4) and may expect material support (1 Timothy 5:17).

3. The Ministry of the Word.

Is there a corresponding office of minister of the word? It would seem that the answer to that question should, at face value, be no. The ministry of the word is, according to Acts 6:4, a responsibility or duty of the apostles. Along with being eyewitnesses, it is one of the more important functions which they performed (Luke 1:2; Acts 1:8, 21-22, 10:39). There are others who exercise this function of the ministry of the word: those who have gifts of prophecy and teaching (Romans 12:6; 1 Corinthians 12:10) and are called prophets and teachers (Acts 13:1; Ephesians 2:20, 3:5, 4:11; 1 Corinthians 12:28). Looking at these verses in context, particularly as they relate to the office of apostle, it appears that prophets and teachers are not mere functionaries (those who prophecy and those who teach), but fellow office-bearers, and, in the case of prophets, fellow foundational office-bearers. There is no office of minister of the word, but there are a number of offices which the title might be used to describe.

Like that of the elder, the office of teacher is not a novelty to the New Testament church. In the Old Testament, the ministry of the word was in the hands of the prophets and the priests. The prophets spoke the word: 'Thus saith the LORD.' The priests taught the Law (Leviticus 10:11; Deuteronomy 33:10). As Moses is the archetypal prophet, Ezra is the archetypal teaching priest.¹⁵ He not only dedicated himself to the study of the Law of the LORD in order to teach its statutes and judgments to Israel (Ezra 7:10), but also led those who read and expounded the Law to God's people (Nehemiah 8:1-8). From this new post-exilic beginning, came what the New Testament calls

¹⁵ *NIDOTTE*, 4:634-635.

scribes, lawyers, teachers of the Law, and teachers. Somewhere in the intertestamental period, men outside of the priesthood and Levites joined them in the study and expounding of the Law; and they also became a distinct group, along with the chief priests and the elders, in the Sanhedrin.

In the Gospels, Jesus is acknowledged as a teacher, a rabbi, and tells His disciples that they are not to accept that title themselves because they will always be His pupils (Matt 23:8). Yet, Paul calls himself a teacher, and gives prominence to apostles, prophets, and teachers in the church. It would seem that just as Christ is the Great Shepherd who uses under-shepherds, He is The Teacher who uses teaching-assistants.

The office of teacher seems to be the ordinary and on-going office in the church with the function of the ministry of the word, just as the elder is the on-going office with the function of rule. If that is the case, thus limited, minister of the word might be understood to be a synonym for teacher even though it is not used as such in the Bible.

4. Pastors and Teachers

How do teachers and elders relate to one another? This question touches the crux of the discussion. Pastors and teachers are closely linked, yet distinguished, in Ephesians 4:11¹⁶. However, there are a number of New Testament passages which seem to absorb the ministry of the word into the office of elder. In 1 Timothy 3:2, Paul gives 'able to teach' as one of the qualifications of an overseer. In a corresponding list in Titus 1:9, able to teach is replaced by, 'He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.' Turning to 1 Timothy 5:17, Paul speaks of elders who rule well as being worthy of double honour. However, there are two ways of understanding who those who rule well are. One understanding of the verse reads: 'Let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honour, especially those who labour in word and doctrine.' The other would translate the verse: 'Let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honour, that is, those who labour in word and doctrine.'¹⁷ Whichever view is decided on, a similar thought is found in Hebrews 13:7, where the recipients are encouraged to remember those who have the rule over them, who have spoken to them the word of God. When this material is brought together and added

¹⁶ Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond The Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996) 284, Wallace's basic point that pastors and teachers are closely joined together, but not identical is well taken. The group is made up of pastors and teachers, not pastor-teachers. However, his description of the relationship of pastors to teachers is open to question, as he himself implies by placing Ephesians 4:11 in a list of ambiguous texts.

¹⁷ George W. Knight III, *The New International Greek Commentary: The Pastoral Epistles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992) 231-233; Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership* (Littleton: Lewis and Roth, 1995).

to that supplied by passages already referenced, it can be understood why there is a problem with rightly dividing the ruling and teaching office or offices of the church.

C. The Second Book of Discipline

1. Office

Rather than attempt to delineate all the possible ways that the rulers and teachers have been categorised by writers past and present, and in the hope of avoiding pitting writers against each other, the view set forth in the *SBD* will be taken as a paradigm and other interpretations compared to and contrasted with it.

The *SBD* begins its description of office in the church with Christ. The church is ruled and governed by Him, its only King, High Priest, and Head; yet, He uses the service of men as a most necessary means for His government (II:4). Ecclesiastical power or authority is given by Him immediately to lawfully called office-bearers to be exercised for the well-being of the whole body (I:5, 6). In New Testament times, Christ used the ministry of apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers for the administration of the word; the eldership for good order and administration of discipline; and the diaconate to have the care of ecclesiastical goods (II:7). Now, He uses four remaining ordinary, or perpetual, functions or offices in the church: the office of pastor, minister, overseer, elder; the office of the doctor, prophet, overseer, elder, catechist; the presbyter, elder, president, governor; and the deacon (II:10; IV:1; V:1; VI:3).

It is difficult to say what is most striking about this description. The discussion usually gives an alternative of two or three offices. The *SBD* gives four. The *SBD* uses titles for offices differently from what might be expected. These things shall be examined later. The important points for now are the close tie of function and office and the consistent connecting of elder and rule.

2. The Elder

Taking up the subject of the eldership, the *SBD* begins with the scriptural use of the word elder. Sometimes it is used of age and sometimes of office (VI:1). When it is used of office it is sometimes used largely, comprehending pastors and teachers as well as those commonly called elders (VI:2). This dual use is found in the Gospels. Most often, the chief priests, the elders, and the scribes are listed distinctly (e.g. Luke 20:1), yet the Sanhedrin, which contained representatives of all three groups, is described as the council of the elders of the people (Luke 22:66; Acts 22:5).¹⁸ It might also explain what is meant by the presbytery in 1 Timothy 4:14. Timothy received a spiritual gift by prophecy with the laying on of hands of the presbytery. 2 Timothy 1:6

¹⁸ Edmund P. Clowney in *Order in the Offices*, 48; *NIDNTT*, 1:198-199.

would seem to indicate that Paul was present and one of those involved in the act. A New Testament presbytery, then, might be taken to include an apostle and, perhaps, prophets, as it reflected the offices of its time. Today, it may be that elders, broadly and narrowly speaking, administer Christ's rule in His church.

Turning to the elder, narrowly speaking, the *SBD* states that his is a spiritual function, requiring spiritual gifts, the qualifications set down in the Pastoral Epistles, and a lawful calling which cannot be abandoned (VI:5, 6, 10). It is not necessary that he be a teacher of the word (VI:9). His office is, both individually and jointly with his fellows, to watch diligently over the flock committed to his charge, both publicly and privately, lest any corruption of life or doctrine should enter in (VI:11). He should be diligent in admonishing all men of their duties according to the rule of the gospel; and that which cannot be corrected privately is to be brought before the assembly of the eldership. (VI:15, 16).

Those who claim that the office of ruling elder is an innovation are clearly wrong. Lawful calling, spiritual function, and spiritual gifts cannot mean anything less than office (*SBD*, VI:5, 6); and if teaching is not necessary, ruling remains. In 1641, George Gillespie argued for the office of ruling elder in his *Assertion of the Government of the Church of Scotland*.¹⁹ At the Westminster Assembly, he and the other Scottish Commissioners sought to have the office included in the Divines' *Form of Presbyterial Church Government*,²⁰ but failed. Those who deny the *jus divinum* of the office of ruling elder may cite in their favour the Westminster Assembly, but not the Church of Scotland.²¹

Nowhere does the *SBD* say that the ruling elder is the representative of the people. As a lawfully called office-bearer, he is the representative of

¹⁹ (Dallas, TX: Naphtali Press, 2008 from 1641 original) 25-103. Some English Presbyterians also argued for the office of ruling elder having divine right: *Jus Divinum Regiminis Ecclesiastici* (Dallas TX: Naphtali Press, 1995 from 1646 original) 123-167.

²⁰ Westminster Confession of Faith (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1994) 395-416.

²¹ Wayne R. Spear, *Covenanted Uniformity in Religion* (Grand Rapids: RHB, 2013)108-116; Robert S. Paul, *The Assembly of the Lord* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1985) 163-174. Charles Hodge in *Order in the Offices*, 68-69, describes the views of the *Form of Presbyterial Church Government* as being those of the Scottish church. The General Assembly gave a qualified approval to the *Form* and set out conditions upon which it was to be ratified. These conditions were never met, and the *Form* never came to state the official position of the Church of Scotland. Specifically on the subject of ruling elders, the wording of the *Form* allowed the Scots to keep them, but did not make them mandatory for English congregations. Peter Colin Campbell also writes against church governors being presbyters; however, he acknowledges that his view is not that of George Gillespie, James Guthrie, or even Calvin. (*Order in the Offices*,86)

Christ. Nevertheless, as Gillespie points out, if ‘tell it to the church’ in Matt 18:17 means tell it to the eldership, then the office-bearers are a representative group. Just as the servant of Christ is also the servant of His bride, so the representative of Christ is also the representative of His people. The key element here is that Christ has chosen, gifted, and given those whom He would have represent His bride. The idea of the ruling elder as a democratically elected representative of the people, based upon an authority in, and the will of, the people is an innovation.²²

Yet, at the same time, the *SBD* strongly emphasises the right of the people to elect office-bearers who meet their needs. Anyone who would take on an office in the church must do so with an inward testimony of good conscience and the lawful approbation and outward judgement of men according to the word of God and the order of the church (II:4, 5). Election is the choosing of a person who is, first, a biblically qualified person and, second, most able to fill the vacant position. The election is twofold requiring both the judgement of the eldership and the consent of the people; the ordination of a person who lacked either or both of these would constitute an intrusion and/or an irregular admission. (III:4-9)

3. The Pastors and Teachers

The *SBD* places the ministry of the word into the hands of pastors and teachers (IV:1; V:1). However, as has been noted, these titles are used differently here from the Bible’s usage of them. Pastors²³ are those who teach the word of God and administer the sacraments; they intercede for their flocks in prayer and pronounce the benediction over them; they perform marriages; and they announce the decisions of the eldership. Like ruling elders, they watch over the lives of the people but with more of a view toward the content of their preaching rather than private admonition (IV:8-13). Doctors or Teachers, on the other hand, are professors of theology or catechists; they join with the pastor and ruling elders in the government of the church; but, they do not preach (make practical application of the doctrine), administer the sacraments, or perform marriages (V:1-6).

4. The Eldership

The time has come to examine Ephesians 4:11 and 1 Timothy 5:17, using the *SBD* to order some thoughts. Of the offices listed in the Ephesians passage, pastors and teachers are the ordinary or continuing, ones. 1 Timothy

²² Tomas Smyth in *Order in the Offices*, 129, 131. Charles Hodge in *Order in the Offices*, 70-72. James H. Thornwell, *Collected Writings* (Edinburgh: BoTT, 1986 from 1875 original) 4:140.

²³ There seems to be a limiting of the idea of being a shepherd to feeding the flock in 16th and 17th century ecclesiastical thinking. This restriction might be the reason why while everything else points to identifying pastor with ruling, writers of that period tend to identify pastor with teaching.

5:17 has one office, elder, and the functions of ruling well and labouring in word and doctrine.

The *SBD*'s office of doctor comes from making a distinction between pastors and teachers which was common among 16th century Reformed writers. They equate pastors and teachers in Ephesians 4:11 with word and doctrine in 1 Timothy 5:17 to divide the ministry of the word into two offices with two functions: preaching pastors and teaching doctors. Even given their division, the office as described in the *SBD* is somewhat wide. It seems to cover religious education from theological seminary to catechism class. With regard to the former, in Scotland, the on-paper distinction between pastor and teacher was less common in practice. Alexander Henderson said that the Scots had little experience of the office as most of their teachers of theology were drawn from the ranks of the ministry – a provision for which the *SBD* allowed (V:6). Of the latter, unfortunately, the catechising aspect of the office seems to have fallen by the wayside.²⁴

Taking the definitions from the word studies above and applying them here, teacher is the equivalent of both pastor and doctor as used in the *SBD*, and the function of labouring in word and doctrine belongs to him. Pastor would be the equivalent of the *SBD*'s elder, and his is the function of rule.

It might be objected that as Ephesians 4:11 lists word orientated offices, an essentially ruling office is out of place. In response it could be argued that if elders are to be able to teach, then elders have a place in the list. The duty of privately admonishing according to the rule of the gospel would require an ability to teach, as would the activities of a catechist. Ruling elders fulfil a spiritual function which requires spiritual gifts (*SBD*, VI:5, 6). While they do not require the gift of teaching, they do require that of exhortation (Romans 12:7-8)²⁵.

The *SBD* understands the Scriptures to use the elder largely and specifically. This large or wide use of elder to cover the offices of preacher, teacher, and ruler, while at the same time, there is the narrow or specific use for the office of elder. If this wider use of elder is applied to 1 Timothy 5:17, elder becomes a broad category comprised of elders-overseers-pastors and teachers who with them are members of the eldership. There are a number of benefits to this approach. The first is that it ties closely office and function. Thus the discussion of the number of continuing offices in the church avoids becoming overly complicated such as when some studying the subject have had to resort to distinctions of class, order, and family to clarify their view.²⁶

The second is that it maintains the New Testament's emphasis on the office of teacher. Writers desirous of promoting the office of ruling elder have

²⁴ Wayne R. Spear, *Covenanted Uniformity in Religion*, 106-108.

²⁵ Patrick Fairbairn, *The Pastoral Epistles* (Grand Rapids: Klock and Klock, 1980 from 1874 original) 214-215.

²⁶ Paul Gilchrist, ed., *PCA Digest Position Papers 1973-1993* (Atlanta, GA: PCA, 1993), 456.

correctly shown that rule is the essential element in the definition of elder. However, to say that some elders have the function of teaching added to that of ruling does not do justice to the office of teacher.²⁷ Nor does the idea that, at first all elders both ruled and taught, but that over time as different gifts became more obvious in some than in others, a division grew up between teaching and ruling elders.²⁸ Nor, again, does the idea that there is an office of elder and that all who hold the office must be able to rule and, to varying degrees, teach, but that there is no office of teacher, minister of the word, or teaching elder, as the gift of teaching is given to the church in general.²⁹

It has been objected that understanding 1 Timothy 5:17 to be speaking of ruling elders would involve paying them a salary, and congregations could not afford that.³⁰ If 1 Corinthians 9:1-18 establishes the right of those who preach the gospel to live off the gospel, then 1 Timothy 5:17-18 establishes the right, based on the same Old Testament text, of all members of the council of elders to receive appropriate remuneration. For some that might mean a stipend. For others that might mean compensation for loss of earnings. For some others, it might mean reimbursement of out-of-pocket expenses. To turn this objection on its head, financial independence is not on the list of qualifications for any office in the church.

D. Conclusion

To draw things to a conclusion, firstly, the Old and New Testaments have word orientated and ruling offices in the church. Of the ruling offices, the ordinary and continuing one is the elder. Of the word-orientated offices, the ordinary and continuing one is the teacher. Teachers and elders come together in the councils of the church; and when they do, they can be collectively called elders.

Secondly, the *SBD* has four ordinary perpetual offices in the church: pastor, doctor, elder, and deacon. The office of doctor has never really sat well; and its intended functions have been and can be divided between what the *SBD* calls pastor and elder.³¹ So, to use the *SBD*'s terms, the separate offices of pastor and elder join together in ruling Christ's church; and as office-bearers of both kinds come together in the eldership, both can be described as elders.

Thirdly, later contributions to the discussion which have sought to defend the position either of the ruling elder or of the minister of the word have tended to do so at the expense of the other office. Sometimes this is intentional and other times it is not. Nevertheless, these contributions have not

²⁷ James H. Thornwell, *Collected Writings*, 4:119,140.

²⁸ Patrick Fairbairn, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 213-217. D. D. Bannerman, *The Scripture Doctrine of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1976 from 1887 original) 546-547.

²⁹ Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership* 209-211.

³⁰ Leonard J. Copes in *Order in the Offices*, 205.

³¹ If there is something to be kept in mind from this old distinction, it is that theological education is an ecclesiastical function.

moved the discussion forward as the church has reviewed its structures in the light of Scripture. The slightly modified *SBD* position presented here is drawn from the biblical usage of the language involved; and having the benefits of accuracy and simplicity, it stands the test of time.

Finally, this discussion is often stated in terms of who is, or is not, a ‘presbyter’ and using the designations teaching and ruling elders. It might be fitting to draw this article to an end by accommodating that language. Ruling elders are presbyters. Ministers of the word are teachers; however, they are teachers and presbyters, teaching elders, when they join with ruling elders in presbyteries.