

Elders and Deacons

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA at the installation and ordination of elders and deacons on January 10, 1988. Scripture Lessons: Numbers 11 (selected verses); 1 Timothy 3:1-13; Matthew 24:45-51.

This morning we're going to install and ordain new elders and deacons. We spent most of yesterday at an officers retreat. We spoke of our personal faith in Christ. We studied the basic tenets of the Reformed faith. We became more familiar with the government and discipline of the PCUSA. And we talked about the duties of elders and deacons. At the end of the day the Session voted to ordain and install these new elders and deacons this morning.

The Book of Order of the Presbyterian Church (USA) directs that the service of ordination and installation of elders and deacons shall focus upon Christ and the joy and responsibility of serving him through the mission and ministry of the church. That's what I want to do first. We believe that Christ is the Head of the church. The elders aren't the head of the church. The pastor isn't the head of the church. Christ is the head of the church. We all belong to Jesus Christ. He's our master. Elders rule by serving God's people. Jesus said in our Gospel lesson, "Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom the master has put in charge of the servants in his household to give them their food at the proper time?" We answer that question this morning by ordaining and installing these men and women.

Second, Paul writes in our Epistle lesson, "If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer, he desires a noble task." I take that to mean that it's a good thing to want to be an elder or a deacon. A couple years ago I was reading the biography of James Fraser, a Scots Presbyterian, who went to South Africa as a lay agricultural missionary about fifty years ago. When Fraser was a young boy his minister asked him, "What would you like to be when you grow up?" Fraser responded, "A farmer and an elder."

I like that. You don't often hear young people say, "I want to own my own business and be a deacon". "I want to be a mechanic and a elder." "I want to be a computer technician and a deacon." "I want to be a farmer and a elder." When a young person expresses interest in serving God we usually encourage them to become a minister. Why don't we encourage them to be elders and deacons?

One of the hallmarks of the 16th century Protestant Reformation was the belief in the priesthood of all believers, men, women, young, old, educated and uneducated. The reformers declared that the carpenter in the shop, the parent in the home, the farmer at the plow were no less priests than the pastor standing in the pulpit. So the second thing I want to emphasize is this. God has sanctified all of life. The person in a so called secular occupation is no less a servant of God than someone who has entered "full-time-Christian service." It's a good thing to serve God in your various occupations and also desire to be an elder and deacon.

Thirdly, I want to express my belief that God has called women as well as men to be leaders in the church. I say this as one who accepts the Bible as the Word of God and seeks to live in obedience to it. When I read the epistle lesson I'm sure a lot of people were thinking, "How can a woman be the husband of one wife?" Doesn't the Bible make it clear that only men are qualified for the office of elder or deacon? I don't believe so.

In fact, what the Bible teaches in its entirety leads me to believe that woman as well as men may be ordained to the office of elder and deacon. I want to direct your attention to two strands of biblical evidence. And first, I want to call St Paul to the witness stand. Paul is often portrayed as a woman hater but it's not so. A study of Paul's writings shows that the churches under his jurisdiction accepted female as well as male leaders. In his letter to the Romans he speaks of Phoebe, the deacon, and

tells the Romans to give her whatever help she needs. He calls Priscilla, Mary, Tryphena, Tryphosa, and Persis his fellow workers in Christ Jesus. In his letter to the Philippians he commends Euodia and Syntyche as women who labored side by side with him in the gospel. There's no suggestion that their labor differs from their male colleagues. He commends Priscilla who catechized Appolos and corrected some of the errors he held. And in the book of Acts we read that the daughters of Philip the Apostle were preachers. This is absolutely amazing when you consider that, in Paul's day, women were nothing. The Christian church, I believe, more than any other force in human history, has lifted women to the place God intended them to have as bearers of God's image.

One of the most basic principles of Biblical interpretation is that Scripture doesn't contradict itself. We must, therefore, interpret what Paul says in Timothy in such a way that it doesn't contradict what he and other biblical writers say in so many other places. I don't believe, therefore, that Paul intended to forbid women elders and deacons. I believe Paul's intent was simply to say that elders and deacons should be people who are above reproach; people whose Christian faith and practice is recognised inside the church and who are respected by those outside the church.

A second strand of biblical evidence supporting the ordination of women is found in our Old Testament lesson. Some people believed that Eldad and Medad weren't qualified to prophesy. But Moses said, "I wish that all the Lord's people were prophets and that the Lord would put his Spirit on them!" Moses would have been very happy if all God's people, men and women, were preachers. The wish of Moses came true on the day of Pentecost. On that day God's spirit was poured out on the church, on men and women, who prophesied. In the Old Testament, gentiles couldn't enter

the Holy of Holies in the Temple in Jerusalem. Slaves couldn't enter. Women couldn't enter. But the coming of Jesus has changed all that. Jesus has poured out his Spirit upon all flesh, both men and women, and made us all priests so that we all have a right, through Christ, to enter into the holy of holies, to preach, to teach, to celebrate the sacraments, to serve as elders and deacons.

This morning when we ordain and install these elders and deacons we're simply recognising that God's Spirit has given them gifts that are particularly useful in the building up of this church. There's nothing magical about ordination. Ordination doesn't confer the Spirit. Ordination recognises that the Spirit is already at work in these men and women in ways that will make them especially useful in the building up of his church.

~~A number of years ago I received a letter from a woman who agreed to~~ serve as an elder. She wrote, "This was not an easy decision. A good job involves much dedication of both self and time. I find the responsibility a bit awesome. I would like to think that even those who perhaps don't think I should be a ruling elder will support me in love and prayer as I seek to do His work in the way I believe He wants me to serve Him."

I think those words reflect the feelings of all our elders and deacons. These new elders and deacons need your prayers. They need your support. God has called them by his grace to be your servants. May God give them strength, wisdom and love to work for the Lord Jesus Christ.

Let us pray: God of grace who called us to a common ministry as ambassadors of Christ, trusting us with the message of reconciliation: give us courage and discipline to follow where your servants rightly lead us; that together we may declare your wonderful deeds and show your love to the world; through Jesus Christ the Lord of all. Amen.