

I have a question for Schuyler--What is the relationship between the office of all believer and the special offices in the church?

If Schuyler gets a pseudonym, I'd like one, too. You can undersign it "Publius."

Thank you!

The Relationship Between the Offices

Schuyler

An office is a position of authority in which a person has the right to function in a certain way. For example, a police officer has the right to enforce the law. Without the office, a person does not have the right to perform that work even if they think they have the gifts.

In the church there are four offices. There are three special offices: pastor (minister), elder, and deacon; and there is the office of believer. All believing members of the church, young and old, and male and female, occupy the office of believer. Some male members of the church occupy a second office: a pastor/elder/deacon has the office of believer *and* the special office. Of those four offices, the office of believer is fundamental. Without the office of believer a man cannot function as a pastor/elder/deacon: he might preach/rule/distribute alms, but he perishes in unbelief.

The office of believer is the gift of Christ. When God saves us, we receive the office of believer, which is a participation in Christ's threefold office of prophet, priest, and king. This is the clear teaching of Heidelberg Catechism, LD 12, where the name "Christian" is explained: "I am a member of Christ by faith, and thus am partaker of His anointing" (A 32). Christ is anointed (Luke 4:18; Acts 4:27; 10:38), and we are anointed also. Christ is anointed with the oil of gladness (the Holy Spirit) above his fellows, and we (who are his fellows) are anointed too (Heb. 1:9). Aaron, a type of Christ, was anointed, and we (who are the skirts of Aaron's garments) are anointed too (Ps. 133:1-3). The apostle John expresses it in these words: "But ye have an unction (anointing) from the Holy One, and ye know all things" (1 John 2:20), which he repeats in verse 27: "But the anointing which ye have received of him abideth in you, and ye have no need that any man teach you: but as the same anointing teacheth you of all things, and is truth, and is no lie, and even as it hath taught you, ye shall abide in him."

The office of believer is peculiar to the New Testament, for the Old Testament saints did not have the office of believer (they believed, but they did not have the freedom of the office). The reason for this is their lack of the Holy Spirit. Old Testament believers were regenerate; they did believe; they were justified; and they were sanctified. Therefore, there was some operation of the Spirit in them. Nevertheless, the Holy Spirit worked in believers to a much lesser degree in the Old Testament. In fact, the Holy Spirit worked through the three special offices of prophet, priest, and king: *only* prophets, priests, and kings were anointed; the ordinary, pious, God-fearing, believing Israelite was *not* anointed. That changed in the New Testament, and that change was promised in the Old Testament. When we read of the increased activity of the Spirit in the New Testament age, we read of the future anointing of all saints into the office of believer:

we read of *our* office of believer: “I will pour my spirit upon thy seed, and my blessing upon thine offspring” (Isa. 44:3); “And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments, and do them” (Ezek. 36:27); “I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh; and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy” (Joel 2:28).

In the New Testament, therefore, these promises are fulfilled at and after Pentecost: the whole church is anointed; every child of God receives the office of believer; the church (which before was under tutors and governors) reaches maturity (see Galatians 4:1–7). In the New Testament, the barriers that separated the anointed office-bearers (prophets, priests, and kings) from the ordinary believers are torn down. We find it hard to understand how amazing that was: to know and receive God’s word, we no longer need a prophet; to approach God in worship, we no longer need a priest; and to fight God’s enemies, we no longer need a king. We have the chief Prophet, the only High Priest, and the eternal King Jesus (see Heidelberg Catechism, A 31), and we are little prophets (and prophetesses), little priests (and priestesses), and little kings (and queens) *in* him.

Therefore, believing young person, *you* are a prophet (or prophetess) with the right and the ability to read, understand, and confess the Word of God; *you* are a priest (or priestess) with the right and the ability to pray to God, to worship him, and to offer your life as a living sacrifice of thanksgiving to him; and *you* are a king (or queen) with the right and ability to fight against sin and Satan. This is true not only of your pastor, elders, and deacons, and of your parents, or of your older, confessing siblings: this is true of *you*! Do not abdicate your office to become the slavish, blind follower of any teacher (whether your pastor or anyone else); do not abdicate your office to follow someone who promises you access to God or who promises to worship *for* you (instead of you), so that you do not participate in worship; and do not abdicate your office to yield to your sinful urges and passions.

John writes about the Christian’s anointing (by which we have the office of believer) that “ye need not that any man teach you” (1 John 2:27). Is John denying the work of pastors? Is he saying, “Because you have the anointing and the office of prophet, you do not need to listen to sermons, or to learn your catechism, or to participate in family devotions?” That cannot be the meaning because John himself is teaching in his first epistle. Instead, John means that by virtue of the Spirit you can discern the truth and judge the teaching of every teacher.

Why, then, does God give special office-bearers? Why does God require that we listen to our pastors, and submit to our elders and deacons? The special offices serve the ordinary office of believer in various ways. Christ graciously gives special offices for the strengthening, development, and preservation of the ordinary believer in his or her office. It would be foolish to despise the special offices, therefore. In 1 Thessalonians 5:12 we are called to “know” and highly to “esteem” the elders; in 1 Timothy 5:17 we count them “worthy of double honor;” and in Hebrews 13:17 we “obey” and “submit” to the rulers of the church, for they “watch for your souls. Paul even says in 1 Timothy 4:16 that by the pastor’s preaching he *saves* “them that hear” him.

The clearest passage about the relationship between the pastor and the members is Ephesians 4, where the apostle explains that Christ ascended to give office bearers, especially “pastors and teachers” to his church (v. 11). Gifts of the ascended Christ are not to be despised. Paul then outlines the purposes for the gift of pastors and teachers: “for the perfecting of the saints” (v. 12); “for the work of the ministry” (or for the work of service); “for the edifying of the body of Christ” (v. 12). The result of the work of such office-bearers under the blessing of the Spirit is, first, unity in the faith; second, knowledge of Christ; third, protection from heretics and false teachers; fourth, the speaking of the truth in love by the members; and, fifth, growth of the members into Christ (see Ephesians 4:13–15).

Therefore, the office of believer and the special offices are not contrary to one another: the believer must not oppose or seek to undermine the special office bearers, which is the sin of rebellion and schism. The special office-bearer must not seek to usurp the believer’s office, which is the sin of lording it over the saints or authoritarianism (see 1 Peter 5:3). In a healthy church, the relationship between the elders, deacons, and pastor, and the members is one of mutual edification, “love” and “peace” (1 Thess. 5:13).

Remember, however, that the office bearers are weak, sinful men. Their faults, weaknesses, and sins should not be the reason for finding fault with them. Where members are always finding fault with the office-bearers’ work, they do not show love for them. Parents who do this in front of their children undermine the office-bearers’ authority and even contribute to their children becoming alienated from the church. Parents’ criticism of the pastor’s preaching will make the children despise their catechism teacher and minister: why should we listen to and obey the preaching when our parents are always tearing him down? Why should we honor the elders when they come for family visitation when our parents are always complaining about them? Do you *pray for* your elders, deacons, and pastor as fervently and as often as you *criticize* them?

It is true, of course, that there is a place for the members to judge the work of the office-bearers. As I wrote earlier, our possession of the office of believer does not permit us to follow any man blindly. We have the right and the responsibility carefully to evaluate the preaching in light of the truth of God’s Word: as prophets we can and must do that. In this connection, the men of Berea are our example: “These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the Scriptures daily, whether those things were so” (Acts 17:11). These godly men “received the word,” but they did not listen uncritically, for they tested everything by the Scriptures, which must be our practice also.

Nevertheless, we must do this charitably, not seeking heresy in every sermon, not coming to the preaching with the express purpose of finding fault, not tearing the preacher to pieces because he does not emphasize the point that we think he should, and not faulting the sermon’s applications, illustrations, and delivery. We do not come to judge the preaching: the preaching judges *us*. Only if the sermon is clearly contrary to the teaching of Scripture do we raise an objection, preferably by consulting the pastor. Only if the elders make a decision that is clearly contrary to Scripture do we protest to the consistory. In all other cases, we “patiently bear

with their weaknesses and infirmities, since it pleases God to govern us by their hand” (Heidelberg Catechism, A 104).

Schuyler

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