

Evidences of an Implicit Three-Office View in the *Book of Church Order* of the Presbyterian Church in America

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There is at present some debate in the Presbyterian Church in America over whether the offices ordained by Christ for His church are two (elders and deacons) or three (teaching elders, ruling elders, and deacons). Both views have strong proponents, and the debate has sparked some publications.¹ In this brief essay I argue that the *Book of Church Order* of the PCA at least implicitly, if not explicitly, better supports the three-office than the two-office view.

We first encounter mention of the offices in 1-4: “The officers of the Church, by whom all its powers are administered, are, according to the Scriptures, teaching and ruling elders and deacons.” Similarly 4-2: “Its officers are its teaching and ruling elders and its deacons.” Although three-office proponents might argue that the very distinction between teaching and ruling elders made here implies distinct offices for them, two-office proponents might reasonably respond that had this been the intent the text would have read instead, “teaching elders, ruling elders, and deacons,” signaling the distinction by the repetition of *elder* after the two modifiers *teaching* and *ruling*. However, three-office proponents might rejoin that precisely this sort of construction does appear elsewhere in the *BCO*, e.g., 14-1.11, “Each presbytery may present *one teaching elder* and *one ruling elder* for each committee or agency”—why not “one teaching and one ruling elder”?; 14-1.14, “*three teaching elders* and *three ruling elders*”—why not “three teaching and three ruling elders”?; 14-3, “at least *ten* shall be *teaching elders* and at least *ten ruling elders*”—why not “at least ten shall be teaching and at least ten ruling elders”?; 15-2, “Every commission appointed by Presbytery shall consist of at least *two teaching elders* and *two ruling elders*”—why not “at least two teaching and two ruling elders”? *ibid.*, “the quorum of such commission shall not be less than *two teaching elders* and *two ruling elders*”—why not “two teaching and two ruling elders”? Nonetheless, the ambiguity remains, for in at least one instance the two variations on form appear in proximity. In 14-1-11, in consecutive sentences, we read: “Each presbytery may present *one teaching elder* and *one ruling elder* [language that might support a three-office view] for each committee or agency. [paragraph] In addition to nominees for expired terms, the Committee shall nominate for each permanent committee *one ruling and one teaching elder*² [language that might support a two-office view] as alternates to fill any vacancies that may occur during the year.” Such phrasing, therefore, however suggestive it might be, is not definitive.

Two-office proponents will surely appeal to *BCO* 8, “The Elder,” as definitive, for it begins (8-1): “This office [singular] is one of dignity and usefulness. The man who fills it has in Scripture different titles expressive of his various duties. As he has the oversight of the flock of Christ, he is termed *bishop* or *pastor*. As it is his duty to be grave and prudent, an example to the flock, and to govern well in the house and Kingdom of Christ, he is termed *presbyter* or *elder*. As he expounds the Word, and by sound doctrine both exhorts and convinces the gainsayer, he is termed *teacher*. These titles do not indicate different grades of office, but all describe one and the same office.” What could be more clear? *Bishop, pastor, presbyter, elder, teacher*—all these titles “describe one and the

¹Among them, see Mark R. Brown, ed., *Order in the Offices: Essays Defining the Roles of Church Officers* (Classic Presbyterian Government Resources, 1993).

²Throughout this paper, italics within quotations from the *BCO* are added for emphasis.

same office.” Furthermore, they might cite *BCO* 8-9: “Elders being of one class of office, ruling elders possess the same authority and eligibility to office in the courts of the church as teaching elders.” Case closed. Obviously the *BCO* supports the two-office view.

Yet we must not jump to conclusions, for very different language indeed occurs in *BCO* 7, “Church Officers—General Classification,” 7-2: “The ordinary and perpetual *classes* of office in the Church are elders and deacons. Within the *class* of elder are the two *orders* of teaching elders and ruling elders.” So, does *elder* denote an *office* (8-1) or a *class of office* (7-2)? Particularly arresting is the contrast between 8-1’s “These titles do not indicate different *grades* of office” and 7-2’s “Within the *class* of elder are the two *orders* of teaching elders and ruling elders.” What, precisely, is the difference between *grades* and *orders*? A standard dictionary indicates considerable overlap among the terms *class*, *grade*, and *order*, and even the term *office*.³ And in a *class* of things, the

³The *American Heritage Dictionary* treats them thus:

class, 1. A set, collection, group, or configuration containing members regarded as having certain attributes or traits in common; a kind or category. 2. A division based on quality, rank, or grade, as: a. A grade of mail: a package sent third class. b. A quality of accommodation on public transport: tourist class. 3. a. A social stratum whose members share certain economic, social, or cultural characteristics: the lower-income classes. b. Social rank or caste, especially high rank. c. [Informal.] Elegance of style, taste, and manner: an actor with class. 4. a. A group of students or alumni who have the same year of graduation. b. A group of students who meet at a regularly scheduled time to study the same subject. c. The period during which such a group meets: had to stay after class. 5. [Biology.] A taxonomic category ranking below a phylum or division and above an order. 6. [Statistics.] An interval in a frequency distribution.

grade, 1. A stage or degree in a process. 2. A position in a scale of size, quality, or intensity. 3. An accepted level or standard. 4. A set of persons or things all falling in the same specified limits; a class. 5. a. A class at an elementary school or the pupils in it. b. grades. Elementary school. 6. A mark indicating a student’s level of accomplishment. 7. A military, naval, or civil service rank. 8. The degree of inclination of a slope, road, or other surface. 9. A slope or gradual inclination, especially of a road or railroad track. 10. The level at which the ground surface meets the foundation of a building. 11. A domestic animal produced by crossbreeding one of purebred stock with one of ordinary stock. 12. [Linguistics.] A degree of ablaut.

office, 1. a. A place in which business, clerical, or professional activities are conducted. b. The administrative personnel, executives, or staff working in such a place. 2. A duty or function assigned to or assumed by someone. See Synonyms at function. 3. A position of authority, duty, or trust given to a person, as in a government or corporation: the office of vice president. 4. a. A subdivision of a governmental department: the U.S. Patent Office. b. A major executive division of a government: the British Home Office. 5. A public position: seek office. 6. offices. [Chiefly British.] The parts of a house, such as the laundry and kitchen, in which servants carry out household work. 7. Often offices. A usually beneficial act performed for another. 8. [Ecclesiastical.] A ceremony, rite, or service, usually prescribed by liturgy, especially: a. The canonical hours. b. A prayer service in the Anglican Church, such as Morning or Evening Prayer. c. A ceremony, rite, or service for a special purpose, especially a rite for the dead.

order, 1. A condition of logical or comprehensible arrangement among the separate elements of a group. 2. a. A condition of methodical or prescribed arrangement among component parts such that proper functioning or appearance is achieved: “Order, cleanliness, seemliness make a structure that is half support, half ritual” (Florida Scott-Maxwell). b. Condition or state in general: in good order. 3. a. The established system of social organization: “Every revolution exaggerates the evils of the old order” (C. Wright Mills). b. A condition in which freedom from disorder or disruption is maintained through respect for established authority: finally restored order in the rebellious provinces. 4. A sequence or an arrangement of successive things. 5. The prescribed form or customary procedure: the order of worship. 6. An authoritative indication to be obeyed; a command or direction. 7. a. A command given by a superior military officer requiring obedience, as in the execution of a task. b. orders. Formal written instructions to report for military duty at a specified time and place. 8. a. A commission or an instruction to buy, sell, or supply something. b. That which is supplied, bought, or sold. 9. a. A request made by a customer at a restaurant for a portion of food. b. The food requested. 10. [Law.] A direction or command delivered by a court or other adjudicative body and entered into the record but not necessarily included in the final judgment or verdict. 11. [Ecclesiastical.] a. Any of several grades of the Christian ministry: the order of priesthood. b. Often orders. The rank of an ordained Christian minister or priest. c. Often orders. The sacrament or rite of ordination. 12. Any of the nine grades or choirs of angels. 13. A group of persons living under a religious rule: Order of Saint Benedict. 14. An organization of people united by a common fraternal bond or social aim. 15. a. A group of people upon whom a government or sovereign has formally conferred honor for unusual service or merit, entitling them to wear a special insignia: the Order of the Garter. b. The insignia worn by such people. 16. Often

members must be distinct from each other, for otherwise they would be the class itself. If teaching elder and ruling elder are the same office, what sense does it make to write of “Elders being of one *class of office*, ruling elders [and] teaching elders” (*BCO* 8-9)? Clearly the *BCO* reflects a significant distinction—whether we designate that distinction as one of *offices*, of *grades*, or of *orders*—between teaching elders and ruling elders. What I argue here is that this distinction is so significant as to warrant calling teaching elders and ruling elders two offices.

What, however, of *BCO* 8-9, “Elders being of one class of office, ruling elders possess the same authority and eligibility to office in the courts of the church as teaching elders”? An important rule of constitutional interpretation is that one clause must be interpreted so as to be consistent with other clauses. Other parts of the *BCO* clearly tell us that, for example, the authority to administer the sacraments is exclusively that of the minister (56-1, 4, and 5, and 58-4, 5, and 7), not of ruling elders. Clearly, then, the sentence must not be interpreted expansively, i.e., as if it meant, “. . . ruling elders possess *all* of the same authority as teaching elders, *in every context and with no exceptions*.” Such an interpretation would make this statement conflict with others in the *BCO*. What then does it mean? The limiting words are “to office in the courts of the church.” That is, ruling elders are eligible to every office in the church courts (session, presbytery, and general assembly), just as are teaching elders, and *in every office in the church courts* the ruling elder has the same authority that a teaching elder has. It does *not* mean that the ruling elder and the teaching elder are simply interchangeable.

There are in fact many signs of a firm distinction between teaching elders and ruling elders, a distinction that is so clear and inviolable that it warrants speaking of the two as distinct offices:

1. The *BCO* sometimes speaks of teaching eldership as itself an office, implicitly distinct from the office of ruling elder.
 - a. In 19-7 we read, “The Holy Scriptures require that some trial be previously made of those who are to be ordained to *the ministry of the Word*, both concerning their gifts and concerning their ability to rule *as teaching elders*, in order that *this sacred office* may not be degraded by being committed to weak or unworthy men, and that the Church may have an opportunity to form a better judgment respecting the gifts of those to whom *this sacred office* is to be committed.” No doubt ruling eldership is a sacred office as well, but the fence around that of teaching elder is considerably higher.
 - b. In 21-7 we read that, after passing his ordination examination, “the candidate shall kneel, and the presiding minister shall, with prayer and the laying on of hands of the Presbytery, according to the apostolic example, solemnly set him apart to *the holy office* of the Gospel *ministry*.” This ordination to “*the holy office* of the Gospel *ministry*” would occur even if the candidate had previously been ordained a ruling elder. The implication is clear: teaching and ruling elders hold different offices, even if they are offices within a larger office.
 - c. In 24-2 we read, “The *pastor* is, *by virtue of his office*, moderator of congregational meetings. If there is no *pastor*, the Session shall appoint one of their number to call the

orders. A social class: the lower orders. 17. A class defined by the common attributes of its members; a kind. 18. Degree of quality or importance; rank: poetry of a high order. 19. [Architecture.] a. Any of several styles of classical architecture characterized by the type of column employed: the Corinthian order. b. A style of building: a cathedral of the Gothic order. 20. [Biology.] A taxonomic category of organisms ranking above a family and below a class. 21. [Mathematics.] a. The sum of the exponents to which the variables in a term are raised; degree. b. An indicated number of successive differentiations to be performed. c. The number of elements in a finite group. d. The number of rows or columns in a determinant or matrix.

- meeting to order and to preside until the congregation shall elect their presiding officer, who may be a *minister* of the Presbyterian Church in America or any male member of that particular church.”⁴ Now, if ruling elder and teaching elder are truly only one and the selfsame office, then the pastor’s office is no different from the office of any other member of the session, and consequently that office cannot entitle him to be moderator of congregational meetings any more than that same office would entitle any other session member to be so.
2. The terms *pastor* and *minister* frequently occur in the *BCO* as synonyms for *teaching elder* but never as synonyms for *ruling elder*. E.g.: 4-3, “[A particular church’s] jurisdiction, being a joint power, is lodged in the church Session, which consists of its *pastor*, *pastors*, its *associate pastor(s)* and its *ruling elders*.” Even in 8-1 (cited above), *bishop* and *pastor* denote different functions from those denoted by *presbyter* and *elder*, and *teacher* denotes a still different function. Even there, then, neither *pastor* nor *bishop*, let alone *minister* (which does not appear), is used as a synonym for *ruling elder*.
 3. The qualifications for teaching elders and ruling elders, and the manner in which they are inducted into office, differ enormously.
 - a. The *BCO* says little about qualifications for ruling elders other than that they should have “suitable gifts for the discharge of their various duties” and “should be sound in the faith, and [their lives] be according to godliness. Wherefore every candidate for office is to be approved by the court by which he is to be ordained” (16-3). The examination of candidates for “the office of ruling elder,” like that of candidates for “the office of . . . deacon” (24-5), must include the following questions (24-5.1-6):
 - i. “Do you believe the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, as originally given, to be the inerrant Word of God, the only infallible rule of faith and practice?”
 - ii. “Do you sincerely receive and adopt the *Confession of Faith* and *Catechisms* of this Church, as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures; and do you further promise that if at any time you find yourself out of accord with any of the fundamentals of this system of doctrine, you will, on your own initiative, make known to your Session the change which has taken place in your views since the assumption of this ordination vow?”
 - iii. “Do you approve of the form of government and discipline of the Presbyterian Church in America, in conformity with the general principles of biblical polity?”
 - iv. “Do you accept the office of ruling elder (or deacon, as the case may be) in this church, and promise faithfully to perform all the duties thereof, and to endeavor by the grace of God to adorn the profession of the Gospel in your life, and to set a worthy example before the church of which God has made you an officer?”
 - v. “Do you promise subjection to your brethren in the Lord?”
 - vi. “Do you promise to strive for the purity, peace, unity and edification of the church?”
 - b. Of every candidate for teaching elder (“the gospel ministry” or “the ministry,” terms never denoting ruling elders), the *BCO* requires (as it does *not* require of a candidate for ruling elder) that he
 - i. “be called to preach the Gospel, submits himself to the care and guidance of the Presbytery in his course of study and of practical training to prepare himself for *this*

⁴See also 25-4: “The pastor shall be the moderator of congregational meetings *by virtue of his office*.”

- office*” (18-1);
- ii. “put himself under the care of Presbytery. . . . The endorsement of his Session must be given to the Presbytery, consisting of testimonials regarding his Christian character and promise of usefulness in the ministry” (18-2).
 - iii. “must file his application with the clerk of the Presbytery at least one month before the meeting of the Presbytery” (18-2).
 - iv. “shall appear before the Presbytery in person, and shall be examined by the Presbytery on experiential religion and on his motives for seeking the ministry” (18-3).
 - v. “continues to be a private member of the church and subject to the jurisdiction of the Session, but as respects his preparatory training for the ministry he is under the oversight of the Presbytery” (18-4).
 - vi. “In no case may a candidate omit from his *course of study* any of the subjects prescribed in the Form of Government as tests for ordination without obtaining the consent of Presbytery (see *BCO* 21-4); and where such consent is given the Presbytery shall record the fact and the reasons therefor” (18-4). Note that nowhere does the *BCO* require a “course of study” or anything like it as qualification for ordination to ruling elder.
 - vii. be examined for licensure to preach (not required of ruling elders unless they seek licensure to preach) (19-1—19-4).
 - viii. “. . . a candidate for ordination [to the office of teaching elder] must serve an internship” (19-7).
 - ix. be called to a church by permission of his Presbytery (21-1);
 - x. “present a diploma of Bachelor or Master from some approved college or university, and also a diploma of Bachelor or Master from some approved theological seminary or authentic testimonials of having completed a regular course of theological studies, or a certificate of completion of and endorsement from a theological study program as approved by the General Assembly and one of the Presbyteries of the Presbyterian Church in America. No Presbytery shall omit any of these educational requirements except in extraordinary cases, and then only with a three-fourths (3/4) approval of the Presbytery” (21-4). Note that the *BCO* never requires proof of any formal educational attainments on the part of ruling elders.
 - xi. “Trials for ordination shall consist of:
 - (1) A careful examination as to:
 - (a) his acquaintance with experiential religion, especially his personal character and family management (based on the qualifications set out in 1 Timothy 3:1-7, and Titus 1:6-9),
 - (b) his knowledge of the Greek and Hebrew languages,
 - (c) Bible content,
 - (d) theology,
 - (e) the Sacraments,
 - (f) church history,
 - (g) the history of the Presbyterian Church in America, and
 - (h) the principles and rules of the government and discipline of the church.

A Presbytery may accept a seminary degree which includes study in the original languages in lieu of an oral examination in the original languages.
 - (2) He shall prepare a thesis on some theological topic assigned by Presbytery.
 - (3) The candidate shall prepare an exegesis on an assigned portion of Scripture, requiring the use of the original language or languages.
 - (4) He shall further be required to preach a sermon before the Presbytery or

committee thereof, upon three-fourths (3/4) vote.” (21-4)

Note again that none of these trials for ordination applies to candidates for ruling elder.

- xii. The first four questions for ordination of a teaching elder are identical to those for ordination of a ruling elder. Following them, however, are these four, which are not asked of candidates for ruling elder (21-5.5-8):
- (1) “Have you been induced, as far as you know your own heart, to seek *the office of the holy ministry* from love of God and a sincere desire to promote His glory in the Gospel of His Son?
 - (2) “Do you promise to be zealous and faithful in maintaining the truths of the Gospel and the purity and peace of the Church, whatever persecution or opposition may arise unto you on that account?
 - (3) “Do you engage to be faithful and diligent in the exercise of all your duties as a Christian and *a minister of the Gospel*, whether personal or relational, private or public; and to endeavor by the grace of God to adorn the profession of the Gospel in your manner of life, and to walk with exemplary piety before the flock of which God shall make you overseer?
 - (4) “Are you now willing to take the charge of this church, agreeable to your declaration when accepting their call? And do you, relying upon God for strength, promise to discharge to it the duties of *a pastor*?”
- xiii. When a teaching elder is to be received by a congregation as its pastor, the congregation is asked the following questions, none of which are they asked when receiving a ruling elder (21-6.1-4):
- (1) “Do you, the people of this congregation, continue to profess your readiness to receive _____, whom you have called to be *your pastor*?”
 - (2) “Do you promise to receive the word of truth from his mouth with meekness and love, and to submit to him in the due exercise of discipline?”
 - (3) “Do you promise to encourage him in his labors, and to assist his endeavors for your instruction and spiritual edification?”
 - (4) “Do you engage to continue to him while he is *your pastor* that competent worldly maintenance which you have promised, and to furnish him with whatever you may see needful for the honor of religion and for his comfort among you?”⁵
4. Teaching elders, unlike ruling elders, are members of Presbytery, not of local congregations. Consequently, “Original jurisdiction (the right to first or initially hear and determine) in relation to *ministers of the Gospel* [teaching elders] shall be in the Presbytery of which *the minister* is a member. . . . Such original jurisdiction in relations to church members shall be in the Session of the church of which he/she is a member . . .” (31-1) and “Process against *a minister* [but not against a ruling elder] shall be entered before the Presbytery of which he is a member” (34-1). Furthermore:
- a. “As no *minister* ought, *on account of his office*, to be screened in his sin, or slightly censured, so scandalous charges ought not to be received against him on slight grounds” (34-2).
 - b. “If any one knows *a minister* to be guilty of a private offense, he should warn him in private. But if the offense be persisted in, or become public, he should bring the case to the attention of some other *minister* of the Presbytery” (34-3).

⁵Among other distinctions between teaching and ruling elder, that of payment for services is significant. It is required for pastors; it is not required for ruling elders.

- c. “The censure of deposition shall be administered by the moderator [of the appropriate court] in the words following: ‘Whereas, _____, a *teaching elder* of this Presbytery (or ruling elder or deacon of this church), has been proved, by sufficient evidence to be guilty of the sin of _____, we, the _____ Presbytery (or Church Session), do adjudge him disqualified for the *office of the Christian ministry* (or ruling eldership, or deaconship), and therefore we do hereby, in the name and by the authority of the Lord Jesus Christ, depose from *the office of a teaching elder* (or ruling elder or deacon) the said _____, and do prohibit him from exercising any of the functions thereof’” (36-7; compare 37-1, 37-5, and 37-8, where similar language occurs in respect to the removal of censure or indefinite suspension from the Sacraments, and 37-3, in relation to restoring one debarred from the Sacraments).

It is difficult indeed to imagine how the distinctions here repeatedly made between minister (or teaching elder) and ruling elder can be sustained if we insist that there is but one office. How can *one office* have some of its officers members of presbytery but not of a local congregation but others of its officers members of the local congregation but not of presbytery? Why, by using the parenthetical clauses, distinguish between action against a teaching elder and a ruling elder if a teaching elder simply is a ruling elder and vice versa—that is, if there is only one office? Shall we understand that no difference of office is implied by the words “depose from the office of a teaching elder (or ruling elder or deacon)” between the office of teaching elder and the office of ruling elder, but a difference of office *is* implied by the very same words between the office of teaching elder and deacon?

5. Responsibilities and privileges of teaching elders differ from those of ruling elders:
- a. (27-4:) “. . . *teaching elders* must:
 - i. “instruct the officers in discipline,
 - ii. “instruct the congregation in discipline,
 - iii. “jointly practice it in the context of the congregation and church courts.”

Clearly this distinguishes teaching elders from ruling elders, for the former must instruct the latter in discipline, not vice versa.
 - b. “The public reading of the Holy Scriptures is performed by *the minister* as God’s servant. . . . The reading of the Scriptures by *the minister* is to be distinguished from the responsive reading of certain portions of Scripture by *the minister* and the congregation. In the former God addresses His people; in the latter God’s people give expression in the words of Scripture to their contrition, adoration, gratitude and other holy sentiments” (50-1).
 - c. “The reading of the Holy Scriptures in the congregation is a part of the public worship of God and should be done by *the minister* or some other person” (50-2).
 - d. “How large a portion shall be read at once is left to the discretion of every *minister* . . .” (50-4).
 - e. “The proportion of the time of public worship given to praise is left to the judgment of *the minister* . . .” (51-5).
 - f. “It is proper to begin the public worship in the sanctuary with the Doxology followed by a short prayer, in which *the minister* shall lead the people . . .” (52-1).
 - g. “The prominence given each [topic in congregational prayer] must be left to the discretion of *the minister*” (52-2).
 - h. “*Ministers* are not to be confined to fixed forms of prayer for public worship, yet it is the duty of *the minister*, previous to entering upon *his office*, to prepare and qualify himself for this part of his work, as well as for preaching. . . . Moreover, when he is to offer prayer in public worship, he should compose his spirit . . .” (52-4).

- i. “*The minister* should apply himself to [the preaching of the Word] with diligence and prove himself a ‘worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth’ (2 Timothy 2:15)” (53-1).
- j. “. . . *ministers* should prepare their sermons with care . . .” (53-3).
- k. “. . . *ministers* should be careful not to make their sermons so long as to interfere with or exclude the important duties of prayer and praise, but should preserve a just proportion in the several parts of public worship” (53-4).
- l. “By way of application of the sermon *the minister* may urge his hearers . . .” (53-5).⁶
- m. “Baptism is not to be unnecessarily delayed; not to be administered, in any case, by any private person; but by *a minister* of Christ, called to be the steward of the mysteries of God” (56-1). Note that this implies that there is some sense in which the minister (teaching elder) is not a “private person” but the ruling elder (or any other person) is.
- n. “Before baptism, *the minister* is to use some words of instruction. . . . *The minister* is also to exhort the parents. . . . *The minister* shall then read. . . . *The minister* shall then propose the following questions. . . . Then *the minister* is to pray. . . . As he pronounces these words, he is to baptize the child . . .” (56-4, 56-5).
- o. In the reception of new members by profession of faith: “The time having come for the making of a public profession, and those who have been approved by the Session having taken their places in the presence of the congregation, *the minister* may state. . . . If there be present any candidates for Baptism, *the minister* may state. . . . *The minister* may then address those making a profession. . . . *The minister* may now briefly admonish . . .” (57-5).
- p. “On the day of the observance of the Lord’s Supper, when the sermon is ended, *the minister* shall. . . . Since, by our Lord’s appointment, this Sacrament sets forth the Communion of Saints, *the minister*, at the discretion of the Session, before the observance begins, may. . . . The table, on which the elements are placed, being decently covered, and furnished with bread and wine, and the communicants orderly and gravely sitting around it (or in their seats before it), the elders in a convenient place together, *the minister* should then set the elements apart by prayer and thanksgiving. [para] The bread and wine being thus set apart by prayer and thanksgiving, *the minister* is to take. . . . *The minister* may, in a few words, put the communicants in mind. . . . It may not be improper for *the minister* to give a word of exhortation also to those who have been only spectators. . . . Then *the minister* is to pray and give thanks to God . . .” (58-4, 5, 7).
- q. “Christians should marry in the Lord; therefore it is fit that their marriage be solemnized by a lawful *minister* . . .” (59-2; compare 4, 6, and 7).
- r. “. . . when persons are sick, their *minister*, or some officer of the church, should be notified, that *the minister*, officers and members may unite their prayers in behalf of the sick. It is the privilege and duty of *the pastor* to visit the sick . . . *the minister* should use discretion in the performance of this duty” (60-1).
- s. “The funeral services are to be left largely to the discretion of *the minister* performing them . . .” (61-2, compare 61-1).
- t. “On days of fasting, *the minister* should point out the authority and providences . . .” (62-6).

⁶The points immediately above relate to *the minister’s* duties in public worship. Chapter 51, “The Singing of Psalms and Hymns,” may imply that it is principally the minister’s task to determine what psalms and hymns are to be sung in public worship when it says, “Hymns should have the note of praise, or be in accord with the spirit of the sermon” (51:3). Who better to know what hymns will “be in accord with the spirit of the sermon” than the minister, whom alone the *BCO* permits to preach the sermon? This implication finds support also in the requirement of 51-5 that “The proportion of the time of public worship given to praise is left to the judgment of the minister.”

Thus the *BCO* reserves to the minister (not the ruling elder) all of the following duties: “The public reading of the Holy Scriptures,” i.e., “The reading of the Holy Scriptures in the congregation”; the choice of “How large a portion” of the Scriptures is to be read in the congregation; “The proportion of the time of public worship given to praise”; starting public worship with the Doxology and prayer; the choice of the prominence given to topics in congregational prayer; the preaching of the Word; exhorting the congregation to apply the sermon; administration of the sacraments, including instruction, reading, exhortation, and prayer accompanying them; conducting the reception of new members into the congregation; performing marriages and funerals. Additionally, it at least gives preference to the minister in the performance of such other functions as visitation and prayer for the sick and the explanation of the authority and causes for days of fasting. If there is no difference between the office of ruling elder and the office of teaching elder (minister), the *BCO*’s reservation of such functions specifically to teaching elders is paradoxical, to say the least.

In sum, the *BCO* is in its terminology ambiguous—schizophrenic, we might say—about whether teaching elder and ruling elder are distinct offices. But in the actual assigning of qualifications, modes of entrance, and responsibilities, the *BCO* makes such clear, abundant, and important distinctions between them that there can be no impropriety in calling them distinct offices, and doing so only serves to safeguard those substantive differences, better ensuring that ruling elders rule and teaching elders teach.

Why, then, does the *BCO* insist that teaching elder and ruling elder are a single office, despite the important differences demonstrated above? Although I shall not argue at length in this context, my strong suspicion is that the insistence on single-office language, right alongside the implicitly two-office practice, is a holdover from a time when Presbyterians were fighting against prelacy (episcopacy). Their point in insisting that the only two offices recognized in Scripture are deacon and elder was not to deny the substantive distinction between ruling and teaching elder but to deny that there were governing offices (ecclesiastical authorities) above that of teaching elder (pastor): bishop, archbishop, cardinal, and pope.

As but one evidence of this, consider *The Form of Presbyterian Church-Government*, adopted by the Westminster Assembly and confirmed by the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland in February, 1645. The General Assembly’s act approving the Westminster Assembly’s *Form* mentioned as one of the grounds for approving it “that as in former times there did, so hereafter there may arise, through the nearness of contagion, manifold mischiefs to this kirk from a corrupt form of government in the kirk of England” if the new *Form* were not adopted. The form of government in the Church of England before the Westminster Assembly was prelatical (episcopal); the new *Form* was designed to oppose that—not to assert the parity of pastors and ruling elders. After acknowledging “some extraordinary” officers of the church (“apostles, evangelists, and prophets, which are ceased”), the *Form* went on to assert four “ordinary and perpetual” officers in the church: “pastors, teachers, and other church-governors, and deacons.” It affirmed that it belonged to the office of pastor “to pray for and with his flock, as the mouth of the people unto God,” “read the Scriptures publicly,” “feed the flock, by the preaching of the word,” “catechise,” “dispense other divine mysteries,” “administer the sacraments,” “bless the people from God,” and “take care of the poor,” and added that the pastor “hath also a ruling power over the flock as a pastor.” It affirmed that it belonged to the office of teacher or doctor as “a minister of the word, as well as the pastor,” to have “power of administration of the sacraments,” but added that “A teacher, or doctor, is of most excellent use in schools and universities. . . .” (Interestingly, the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, in its act confirming the *Form*, reserved the right to question in the future “that article which holds forth, That the doctor or teacher hath power of the administration of the sacraments, as

well as the pastor. . . .”) It affirmed of “other church-governors” (“Which officers reformed churches commonly call Elders”) that they, “beside the ministers of the word,” are furnished by God “with gifts for government, and with commission to execute the same when called thereunto, who are to join with the minister in the government of the church.” It affirmed of deacons that it belongs to their office “not to preach the word, or administer the sacraments, but to take special care in distributing to the necessities of the poor.” The Westminster Divines and the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, then, recognized pastor and elder as distinct offices. They certainly recognized a superiority of pastor over ruling elder. Their passion was not for a parity of all elders (or pastors and elders) but against a hierarchy of offices above that of pastor.