

ECCLESIASTICAL OFFICES IN THE EARLY CHRISTIAN CHURCH: ELDERS AND DEACONS AS ROLE MODELS OF SERVANTHOOD

MÁRK BIRINYI¹

Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church, Budapest, Hungary

<https://orcid.org/0009-0006-6376-2274>

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the historical development and theological significance of the ecclesiastical offices of elder and deacon in the early Christian church. Drawing on biblical texts such as 1 Peter 5:1–2, Acts 20:28, and Acts 6:1–6, and incorporating insights from Protestant, Catholic, Orthodox, and ecumenical scholarship, the study demonstrates how these offices functioned as models of servant leadership. It places emphasis on the dual responsibilities of spiritual oversight and practical service—with elders providing pastoral care and deacons addressing material needs. Its analysis shows that true leadership is measured not by the accumulation of power but by humility, mutual accountability, and selfless service, offering enduring lessons for contemporary ministry.

Keywords: elder; deacon; church leadership; ecclesiastical offices; servant leadership

¹ The author utilized the DeepL online translation tool during the translation of the study from Hungarian into English.

INTRODUCTION

The early Christian community, emerging in a complex socio-religious environment marked by both profound spiritual challenges and urgent material needs, was compelled to devise innovative models of leadership that deviated markedly from prevailing hierarchical systems. In the context of its rapid expansion, the nascent church faced the dual imperative of nurturing the spiritual well-being of its diverse adherents while also addressing the practical exigencies of a growing community, such as the distribution of resources and care for the vulnerable. Rather than instituting offices solely for the purposes of centralizing authority—an approach characteristic of the imperial structures of the Roman world—the early Church deliberately established the offices of elder and deacon as complementary, service-oriented roles. The office of elder was primarily designed to safeguard and disseminate apostolic teaching, ensuring that the community remained doctrinally sound and spiritually vibrant. In contrast, the office of the deacon emerged to manage the community's logistical and charitable functions, thereby allowing the elders to devote themselves to prayer and the ministry of the Word. Rooted in New Testament tradition (cf. 1 Peter 5:1–2; Acts 20:28; Acts 6:1–6), these offices were conceived not as instruments of autocratic control but as models of servanthood—designed to reflect the radical ethos of Christ's own ministry, which emphasized humility, mutual accountability, and selfless service (cf. Mark 10:45). Over the subsequent centuries, these roles have been rigorously examined and continually refined across a spectrum of theological traditions, including Protestant, Catholic, Orthodox, and broader ecumenical scholarship. Contemporary academic discourse affirms that true ecclesiastical leadership is measured not by the accumulation of power, but by the ability to serve as a living embodiment of Christlike humility. This study examines the biblical foundations, historical evolution, and contemporary relevance of the offices of elder and deacon, drawing on an extensive array of scholarly sources to demonstrate that these roles continue to offer enduring insights into the practice of servant leadership in the modern church.

THE BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS OF ECCLESIASTICAL OFFICES

The New Testament provides explicit instructions regarding the qualifications and responsibilities of elders. In 1 Peter 5:1–2, elders are exhorted to shepherd the flock “not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly,” while Acts 20:28 implores them to “pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock.” These passages stress the need for personal integrity and a deep commitment to the community's spiritual welfare.

Protestant scholars such as Stott and Fee² argue that the biblical elder is fundamentally a spiritual overseer whose primary function is to nurture, protect, and guide the community in faith. This view was reinforced by reformers such as Luther and Calvin,³ whose writings emphasize that true pastoral leadership stems from a personal relationship with God and is expressed through servant leadership rather than authoritarian command. Catholic and ecumenical sources—including the *New Jerome Biblical Commentary*⁴ and the *Catholic Encyclopedia*—consistently describe early church elders (or presbyters) as shepherds entrusted with the spiritual care of the faithful. Ware⁵ explains that in the Orthodox tradition, the elders' pastoral role is seen as an extension of the priesthood, characterized by communal participation and mutual accountability.

The appointment of deacons is recorded in Acts 6:1–6, where the apostles selected seven men “full of the Spirit and wisdom” to manage the distribution of food to widows—thus enabling the apostles to devote themselves to prayer and preaching. The qualifications for deacons in 1 Timothy 3:8–13 emphasize personal integrity, self-control, and a good reputation, reinforcing that the deacon's ministry is as much about character as it is about competence in service. Protestant commentators such as Marshall and Lloyd-Jones⁶ point out that the deacon's role mirrors Christ's own ministry of service (cf. Mark 10:45). Calvin⁷ asserts in his *Institutes* that every ecclesiastical office, including that of the deacon, is established for the common good, with service as its defining feature. Catholic sources, notably the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1992), describe deacons as ministers of charity and service, a tradition reinforced by scholars such as Küng and Kasper, who link early diaconal ministry with both liturgical practices and modern social outreach. Ecumenical works, such as *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*,⁸ portray the deacon as a servant leader who bridges the gap between the clerical hierarchy and the lay community, while Zizioulas⁹ emphasizes that in the Orthodox tradition the diaconate serves as a living witness to the incarnational reality of Christ's ministry.

² J. Stott: *The Message of Acts*. InterVarsity Press, 1990; G. Fee: *1 Timothy / Titus* (New International Commentary on the New Testament). Eerdmans, 1987.

³ M. Luther: *Small Catechism*. Concordia Publishing House, 1983. (Original work published 1529); J. Calvin: *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Westminster John Knox Press, 1960. (Original work published 1559).

⁴ P. Quinn – E. McCloskey (eds.): *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*. Prentice Hall, 1990.

⁵ B.K. Ware: *The Orthodox Church*. Penguin Books, 1993.

⁶ I.H. Marshall: *Acts: An Introduction and Commentary*. InterVarsity Press, 1978; D.M. Lloyd-Jones: *The Church According to Scripture. Banner of Truth*, 1991.

⁷ Calvin: *Institutes of the Christian Religion*.

⁸ L. Cross – E. Livingstone (eds.): *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (3rd edn.). Oxford University Press, 2005.

⁹ J. Zizioulas: *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church*. St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985.

THE OFFICE OF THE ELDER AS A MODEL OF SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP

Elders are tasked with a dual responsibility: to serve as exemplars of personal holiness and as stewards of the church's spiritual life. The directive in Acts 20:28—to “pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock” encapsulates this dual mandate. Beyond administrative oversight, the elder's role is intrinsically pastoral, involving the guidance, teaching, and correction of the community with humility and love. Fee and Stott¹⁰ contend that pastoral care is the primary function of the elder, a task that requires both spiritual depth and humility. Bavinck¹¹ emphasizes that this pastoral function is inseparable from the communal nature of the church, where every member is called to mutual service. From a Catholic perspective, documents such as *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (1968) stress that authentic leadership involves serving the people by modeling the life of Christ.

A recurrent theme in both biblical and historical texts is the warning against idolizing church leaders. Elders must guard against transforming their office into an object of veneration; instead, their leadership should be characterized by transparency, accountability, and service. Scholars such as Wright and Wells¹² have noted that excessive veneration of leaders disrupts the essential dynamics of mutual accountability within the church. This concern was echoed by reformers such as Luther and Calvin,¹³ who insisted that ecclesiastical authority must always be exercised within the framework of communal accountability.

THE OFFICE OF THE DEACON: PRACTICAL SERVICE AND HUMILITY

The origin of the diaconate, as recounted in Acts 6:1–6, represents a pivotal moment in early church organization. Delegating practical tasks to deacons not only relieved the apostles of administrative burdens but also established a model of distributed ministry that addressed both spiritual and material needs. Marshall and Moo¹⁴ argue that the establishment of deaconship was a deliberate strategy designed to embody the values of the gospel by attending to the needs of the vulnerable. Greenleaf¹⁵ reinforces the view that effective leadership is best demonstrated through service instead of through the exercise

¹⁰ G. Fee: *1 Timothy / Titus*; Stott: *The Message of Acts*.

¹¹ H. Bavinck: *Reformed Dogmatics, Vol. 1: The Christian Faith*. Baker Academic, 2004.

¹² N.T. Wright: *Scripture and the Authority of God*. SPCK, 2004; D. Wells: *No Place for Truth: The Challenge of Orthodoxy*. Eerdmans, 1999.

¹³ Luther: *Small Catechism*; Calvin: *Institutes of the Christian Religion*.

¹⁴ Marshall: *Acts: An Introduction and Commentary*; D.J. Moo: *The Book of Acts*. Eerdmans, 1996.

¹⁵ R.K. Greenleaf: *Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness* (25th Anniversary edn.). Paulist Press, 2002.

of power. The Catholic Church continues to honor the diaconate as a distinct ministry, as evidenced in *Lumen Gentium* (1964), which reaffirms the critical role deacons play in charity, the liturgy, and pastoral care.

The practical manifestation of the deacon's role is a vivid expression of the call to serve. Whether managing benevolence programs, organizing social outreach initiatives, or assisting in liturgical functions, deacons consistently model a lifestyle that prioritizes the needs of others. Lloyd-Jones and Keller¹⁶ have demonstrated that effective deaconal service not only meets material needs but also inspires the broader congregation to adopt a culture of service. Furthermore, scholars such as Küng and Kasper have documented the evolution of the diaconate while affirming its foundational calling to serve the poor, marginalized, and vulnerable. Zizioulas¹⁷ observes the same attitude to the diaconate within the Orthodox tradition, where it serves as a vital bridge between the divine and the human.

COMPLEMENTARY ROLES AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The early Church's dual leadership structure—where elders provided spiritual oversight and deacons managed practical matters—was a strategic response to the diverse needs of a growing community. This balanced division of labor ensured that neither the spiritual nor the material aspects of ministry were neglected. Early church sources such as Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History* and the writings of Origen and Cyprian establish the foundational roles of both offices in maintaining the health of the church. During the Reformation, figures such as Luther and Calvin revitalized these roles by emphasizing the "priesthood of all believers" and challenging any concentration of power. Contemporary scholars including Packer, Keller, and Bavinck¹⁸ continue to affirm that this model of distributed ministry remains highly relevant for addressing modern ecclesiastical challenges.

Modern congregations face a host of challenges—ranging from declining membership and shifting demographics to rapid cultural and technological changes—that demand leadership approaches which are both adaptive and distributed. In this context, the model of the early Church offers a rich repository of insights, as it seamlessly integrated spiritual leadership with practical service. By studying this model, contemporary ministries can learn to balance

¹⁶ Lloyd-Jones: *The Church According to Scripture*; T. Keller: *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City*. Zondervan, 2012.

¹⁷ Zizioulas: *Being as Communion*.

¹⁸ J.I. Packer: *Knowing God*. InterVarsity Press, 2001; Keller: *Center Church*; Bavinck: *Reformed Dogmatics*.

the nurturing of spiritual life with the need to address everyday practicalities, thus ensuring that all aspects of church life are well-managed.

In today's dynamic environment, relying on a single leader or a rigid hierarchical structure can lead to bottlenecks in decision-making and an increased risk of burnout. Distributed leadership involves the delegation of responsibilities among various leaders, each bringing their unique skills and perspectives to the table. This approach allows for more agile responses to the multifaceted challenges facing modern congregations. It echoes the early church's practice of sharing responsibilities among elders and deacons, which not only optimized effective leadership but also fostered a sense of collective ownership and accountability.

The early Church's organizational structure was characterized by a dual focus: spiritual oversight was balanced with practical service. This model ensured that the community's spiritual needs were met while also attending to the tangible aspects of daily life, such as resource management and social outreach. By integrating these two dimensions, early church leaders created a robust framework that promoted resilience and sustainability. Modern congregations can benefit from this historical precedent by incorporating similar practices—where spiritual guidance and practical service are not seen as mutually exclusive but as complementary pillars of ministry. Effective leadership in any context requires a foundation of rigorous training and mentorship. Comprehensive educational programs, as advocated by influential voices such as Stott and Fee,¹⁹ are crucial for preparing both elders and deacons. These programs provide the necessary theological grounding, practical ministry skills, and ethical frameworks for leaders to be able to navigate the complexities of contemporary ministry. Moreover, mentorship programs create supportive networks that help emerging leaders develop resilience, thereby reducing the risk of burnout. Clear definitions of roles are equally vital. When responsibilities are well delineated, each leader understands their unique contribution within the larger organizational framework. This clarity minimizes overlap, reduces internal conflicts, and ensures that every aspect of the ministry—from spiritual care to administrative duties—is addressed efficiently. Such an environment not only fosters individual accountability but also enhances overall team performance, leading to a more sustainable and mission-focused ministry.

A concept of servant leadership central to this discussion is Greenleaf's,²⁰ which continues to shape contemporary ecclesiastical practice. Greenleaf's model emphasizes that true leadership is defined not by the accumulation of power, but by the ability to serve others. In modern congregations, this means that leaders are called to prioritize the needs of their community, cultivating

¹⁹ Stott: *The Message of Acts*; G. Fee: *1 Timothy / Titus*.

²⁰ Greenleaf: *Servant Leadership*.

a culture of empathy, humility, and mutual respect. By placing service at the forefront of their leadership style, church leaders can create environments that are inclusive and responsive to the evolving needs of their congregants.

The enduring relevance of ancient ecclesiastical models is further underscored by ecumenical resources such as *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*²¹ and the seminal works of John Zizioulas.²² These texts provide a broader historical and theological context, illustrating how early church practices can inform modern ecclesiology across various traditions. They offer valuable insights into the ways in which ancient leadership models can be adapted to address contemporary challenges—bridging the gap between historical wisdom and modern innovation.

In summary, modern congregations require leadership that is both distributed and adaptive—a model that draws from the dual legacy of the early Church, where spiritual oversight was harmoniously integrated with practical service. By investing in effective training, fostering mentorship, and establishing clear definitions of roles, church leaders can build resilient and sustainable ministries. Influential scholars such as Stott (1990), Fee (1987), and Greenleaf²³ (2002), along with comprehensive resources like Cross & Livingstone and Zizioulas,²⁴ provide a robust foundation for reimagining ecclesiastical leadership in today's complex and rapidly evolving context.

Within the specific context of the Hungarian Reformed Church, ongoing social challenges and evolving cultural dynamics call for a renewed emphasis on servant leadership. By embracing the historical model of distributed ministry—where elders provide spiritual guidance and deacons address practical needs—the Hungarian Reformed Church can strengthen both its internal cohesion and its public witness. Drawing on insights from Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox traditions, church leaders in Hungary are encouraged to develop innovative training and mentorship programs that foster humility, accountability, and effective service.

CONCLUSION

As this study has demonstrated, the early Christian offices of elder and deacon offer a leadership model that is not only historically significant but is also profoundly relevant to today's ecclesiastical challenges. The offices of elder and deacon were established not to assert dominion, but rather to serve the

²¹ Cross – Livingstone: *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*.

²² Zizioulas: *Being as Communion*.

²³ Stott: *The Message of Acts*; Fee: *1 Timothy / Titus*; Greenleaf: *Servant Leadership*.

²⁴ Cross – Livingstone: *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*; Zizioulas: *Being as Communion*.

multifaceted needs of the community. In doing so, they laid a foundation for leadership that is deeply rooted in servanthood, humility, and the strategic delegation of responsibilities—a model that remains profoundly relevant for contemporary church governance. Christian leadership is fundamentally anchored in theological principles that emphasize service over authority. As illustrated in Mark 10:45, where Christ declared, “For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many,” the model of leadership advanced in the early Church stresses self-sacrifice, humility, and relational discipleship (Holy Bible, New International Version). According to this theological foundation, leaders should remain accountable, ethically driven, and committed to the well-being of the community. Modern church governance can benefit from such a paradigm by ensuring that leaders are, first and foremost, servants—a principle echoed in Greenleaf’s seminal work on servant leadership.²⁵ In contemporary church administration, the roles of spiritual oversight and practical governance often intersect. The clear division made by the early Church between the roles of elders and deacons offers a valuable framework for addressing this intersection. Elders were entrusted with preserving doctrinal integrity and providing pastoral care, tasks which required not only theological depth but also the capacity to mentor and inspire their communities. Conversely, deacons managed practical concerns such as resource allocation and community welfare, which necessitated robust administrative skills and a sensitivity to social outreach. This dual structure promotes balanced leadership by reducing burnout and enhancing overall efficiency, which suggests that modern ecclesiastical structures might benefit from a similar delineation of responsibilities.²⁶ One of the enduring lessons of early Christian leadership is the importance of accountability. The communal decision-making and mutual oversight observed in the early Church, notably during events like the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15), underscore the necessity of transparency and ethical conduct in leadership roles. Contemporary church governance must prioritize transparency in decision-making processes, ethical financial stewardship, and the active prevention of autocratic practices. By fostering a culture of accountability, modern church leaders can maintain the integrity of their institutions, build trust among congregants, and mitigate the risks of institutional corruption.²⁷ The servant leadership model, as demonstrated by early church leaders, presents a robust alternative to hierarchical or power-centric leadership structures. In today’s context, this model calls for leaders who place the needs of their community above personal ambitions.

²⁵ Greenleaf: *Servant Leadership*.

²⁶ M.J. Wilkins: *Church Leadership in the Biblical Tradition*. Oxford University Press, 2006.

²⁷ G. Barna: *The Power of Vision: How You Can Capture and Apply God’s Vision for Your Life and Ministry*. Zondervan, 2002.

Servant leadership encourages collaboration, inclusivity, and empathy—qualities that not only enhance internal community relations but also resonate with a broader societal shift toward participatory and ethical leadership. This model has been extensively articulated by Greenleaf,²⁸ who posited that true leadership emerges from a commitment to serving others rather than accumulating power or status. Such an approach is particularly crucial as churches seek to engage a diverse and often skeptical modern audience. Contemporary churches confront a host of challenges including declining membership, generational shifts, and evolving societal attitudes toward religious institutions. A leadership framework based on biblical servant leadership can counter these challenges by promoting an environment that values engagement, innovation, and relational ministry. By investing in comprehensive mentorship programs, dynamic leadership development initiatives, and fostering cross-generational dialogue, churches can build resilient and adaptive leadership structures. Integrating modern organizational theories with these timeless biblical principles offers a pathway toward sustainable growth and mission-oriented governance.²⁹

In sum, the leadership principles derived from the early Christian offices of elder and deacon remain vital for contemporary church governance. Embracing a model that harmonizes spiritual oversight with practical service, emphasizes accountability, and champions servanthood can transform modern ecclesiastical leadership. As churches navigate the complexities of a rapidly changing global landscape, the lessons gained from early ecclesiastical leadership provide a robust framework for cultivating resilient, ethical, and Christ-centered governance. The continued study and practical application of these principles will be critical to shaping the future of Christian leadership, ensuring that it remains both theologically sound and operationally effective.

REFERENCES

- BARNA, G.: *The Power of Vision: How You Can Capture and Apply God's Vision for Your Life and Ministry*. Zondervan, 2002.
- BAVINCK, H.: *Reformed Dogmatics, Vol. 1: The Christian Faith*. Baker Academic, 2004.
- CALVIN, J.: *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Trans. Ford Lewis Battles). Westminster John Knox Press, 1960. (Original work published 1559)
- CONGAR, Y.: *True and False Reform in the Church*. Herder & Herder, 1977.

²⁸ Greenleaf: *Servant Leadership*.

²⁹ D. Willard: *The Great Omission: Reclaiming Jesus' Essential Teachings on Discipleship*. HarperOne, 2006.

- CROSS, F. L. – LIVINGSTONE, E. A. (eds.): *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (3rd edn.). Oxford University Press, 2005.
- FEE, G.: *1 Timothy / Titus* (New International Commentary on the New Testament). Eerdmans, 1987.
- GREENLEAF, R. K.: *Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness* (25th Anniversary edn.). Paulist Press, 2002.
- KELLER, T.: *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City*. Zondervan, 2012.
- LLOYD-JONES, D. M.: *The Church According to Scripture. Banner of Truth*, 1991.
- LUMEN GENTIUM. APOSTOLIC CONSTITUTION. (1964) https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html
- LUTHER, M.: *Small Catechism*. Concordia Publishing House, 1983. (Original work published 1529)
- MARSHALL, I. H.: *Acts: An Introduction and Commentary*. InterVarsity Press, 1978.
- MOO, D. J.: *The Book of Acts*. Eerdmans, 1996.
- PACKER, J. I.: *Knowing God*. InterVarsity Press, 2001.
- PASTORES DABO VOBIS. Pastoral Constitution. (1992) (https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_25031992_pastores-da-bo-vobis.html)
- QUINN, P. – McCLOSKEY, E. (eds.): *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*. Prentice Hall, 1990.
- RATZINGER, J.: *The Spirit of the Liturgy*. Ignatius Press, 2000.
- STOTT, J.: *The Message of Acts*. InterVarsity Press, 1990.
- THE CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH (1992). Libreria Editrice Vaticana.
- WARE, B. K.: *The Orthodox Church*. Penguin Books, 1993.
- WELLS, D. F.: *No Place for Truth: The Challenge of Orthodoxy*. Eerdmans, 1999.
- WILKINS, M. J.: *Church Leadership in the Biblical Tradition*. Oxford University Press, 2006.
- WILLARD, D.: *The Great Omission: Reclaiming Jesus' Essential Teachings on Discipleship*. HarperOne, 2006.
- WRIGHT, N. T.: *Scripture and the Authority of God*. SPCK, 2004.
- ZIZIOULAS, J.: *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church*. St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985.