

FAITH AND PRACTICE

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The Eldership

The Biblical Foundations of Eldership 3

Examining the usages of the word "elder" from Genesis to Revelation
R. J. Gore, Associate Professor of Theology, Erskine Theological Seminary

The Ruling Elder in History 14

A survey of the historical debate over the identity, role, and calling of the ruling elder
Mark E. Ross, Associate Pastor for Teaching, First Presbyterian Church, Columbia, SC

The Elder As Presbyter 21

Seeking to determine the Scriptural warrant for the office of ruling elder
Joel S. Gillespie, Pastor of Covenant Fellowship, Greensboro, NC

The Shepherding Role of the Elder 33

A practical look at the shepherding ministry of the ruling elder
Mark E. Ross, Associate Pastor for Teaching, First Presbyterian Church, Columbia, SC

Raising Shepherds 39

Examining the "whys" and "hows" of elder preparation
Jonathan E. Taylor, Director of Regional Support, Covenant Theological Seminary, St. Louis, MO

Elders Standing in the Gap 44

Restoring church discipline in an undisciplined world
Mark B. Tankersley, Pastor of Pressly Memorial ARP Church, Statesville, NC

Choosing Your Elders 54

Practical advice for the officer nominating committee
James R. Augustine, Ruling Elder, First Presbyterian Church, Columbia, SC

The Offices of the Church 58

An analysis of the two office/three office debate from a three office perspective
Lee Irons, Stated Supply of Redeemer Orthodox Presbyterian Chapel, San Fernando Valley, CA
John Muether, Librarian at Reformed Theological Seminary, Orlando, FL

Also Inside

Introduction	2
The Elder and the Session: A Statement	20
The American Theological Library Association	53

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Introduction

Sometimes as a father it seems I just go through the motions. That is, I go to work, I come home, I talk and play and pray with the kids, I go to bed, and I get up and do it again the next day. Other times I'm sitting at the table, or driving down the road, or praying at bedtime, and it hits me. I am a father! What a calling! I am so privileged! I am so accountable! So I take an account of how I'm doing and I try to be more intentional in my relationships with my children.

Likewise with being an elder. Sometimes I just cruise along and do my pastor/elder thing. I go to the meetings, I prepare the sermons, I pray, I laugh, I cry, I worry. But other times as I read my Bible or pray or counsel with a growing believer I am struck by the seriousness of my calling. I am a shepherd over the flock of God's people! I am so privileged! I am so accountable! So I recommit myself to my calling, ask forgiveness for my negligence, and carry on with greater focus and intention. Editing this issue of *Faith and Practice* has provided me with just such an opportunity to re-examine what it is God has called me to be and to do as an elder in the Church of Jesus Christ.

The majority of you reading this issue of *Faith and Practice* are either already elders, or you serve in a church governed and led by men called elders. Many of you may be serving Christ in a Presbyterian setting. As you may know, our English word "Presbyterian" is a transliteration of the Greek word *presbuteros*, which is translated throughout Scripture as "elder." Thus the name "Presbyterian" implies a distinction from other branches of Christendom at just this point of government by elders. You'd think since "rule by eldership" is so tied to Presbyterian identity that there would be widespread agreement as to what an elder is.

Surprisingly perhaps, this is not the case. This means that elders often are just not sure who they are and what they are supposed to do. In particular, there is widespread debate about that office which we call the "ruling elder." What is the Scriptural warrant for the office of the "ruling elder"? What is the function of the "ruling elder" as compared to the function of the "teaching elder"? Does the "ruling elder" have a pastoral function? Why is it that "ruling elders" are said to be equal in authority as "teaching elders" but are not supposed to administer the

sacraments or moderate the session?

Many of the articles in this issue of *Faith and Practice* attempt to define this debate and offer at least tentative conclusions. These articles are a bit more technical than the others. R. J. Gore in "The Biblical Foundations of Eldership" examines the uses of the word *presbuteros* throughout the Bible. Mark Ross in "The Ruling Elder in History" surveys the vigorous historical debate surrounding the question of the office of the ruling elder. In "The Elder As Presbyter" I argue that there is really no such separate biblical office of ruling elder at all, concluding that the Bible recognizes only the two offices of elder-pastor-overseer and deacon. Alternatively, Lee Irons and John Muether look at this issue and argue in favor of a separate office of ruling elder distinct from that of the minister of the word.

Other articles approach the subject from a more practical standpoint. In "The Shepherding Role of the Elder" Mark Ross lays the biblical foundation for the elders' shepherding ministry and gives practical counsel for how the elder should carry out his shepherding function. Jonathan Taylor, in "Raising Shepherds," looks at how we should nurture and prepare future elders. Mark Tankersley examines the critical and forgotten function of church discipline in "Elders Standing in the Gap." And finally, James Augustine offers practical advice for the person serving on an elder nominating committee in "Choosing Your Elders."

For the reader unfamiliar with the original languages of the Bible, we have transliterated all Greek and Hebrew words into English. These transliterations are italicised throughout. For the reader well versed in Greek and Hebrew, you will notice that I have deviated somewhat from convention in these transliterations due to the fact that I do not have available various superscripts and accent marks. I thus accept responsibility for any and all transliteration oddities. Do not blame the authors for this!

All Scripture quotations throughout the issue are from the New International Version.

I want to offer thanks for those who have volunteered their time to read and edit these articles. Particularly I would thank Susan Gillespie, Eric Moore, and Gail Griffin for all their help in the final stages of getting out this issue.

Joel Gillespie
Managing Editor

Editing this issue of Faith and Practice has provided me with just such an opportunity to re-examine what it is God has called me to be and to do as an elder in the Church of Jesus Christ.

The Biblical Foundations of Eldership

R. J. Gore

Presbyterian history is replete with controversy over theology, polity, and practice; but there is at least one issue that has garnered widespread (if not universal) acceptance, namely, the necessity of elders as the governing authority in the Church. Charles Hodge, the eminent Princeton theologian, noted:

With regard to church order, it is contended that our church adopted from the beginning, and has ever continued to exercise that form of government which had been previously adopted in Scotland, Ireland, Holland, and among the Protestants of France. This system was every where[sic], in all its distinctive and essential features, the same. It required the government of individual congregations to be vested in the pastor and elders, and not in the brotherhood.¹

For Presbyterians, rule by elders is foundational to the church's identity. As Ed Clowney has summarized it, "Presbyterians . . . maintain that by precept and example the New Testament presents a church order in which a plurality of elders join in governing the church."² At the root of Presbyterianism, then, is its conviction that rule by elders is the biblical pattern of church government. Indeed, this principle holds true, regardless of the theological orientation of the given Presbyterian body. In a recent publication analyzing the uncertain confessional status of the mainline Presbyterian church, the authors conclude that "the unifying force in the PC(USA) may no longer be theology but polity. Because of the diversity of theological conviction and views of the church's mission, Presbyterians are united by a common process, rather than one vision."³

This does not mean that all Presbyterians have agreed on all the particulars in working out their allegiance to Presbyterian government. Indeed, much discussion has occurred over how the theory of *ius divinum* ("divine right") should be applied to Presbyterian government. *Ius Divinum* is the principle that

"the form and arrangements of ecclesiastical government have not been left to be fixed by the wisdom of man, nor reduced to the level of a question of mere Christian expediency, but have been determined by Divine authority, and are sufficiently exhibited in Scripture."⁴ Furthermore, there has been significant discussion over whether the office of ruling elder is the same office as that of the minister or whether it constitutes an additional office, intermediate in power and responsibility between deacon and minister.⁵

But just what is an "elder"? What is the meaning of the word? What are its Old Testament roots and Hebrew equivalents? How is the word used in the New Testament? These are important questions that warrant further reflection by Presbyterians, indeed by all earnest Christians who would be faithful to the biblical text. Making our task difficult is the necessity of examining the Old Testament use of the word "elder" to gain insight into the Jewish and, therefore, early Christian understanding of the term. Furthermore, our task is compounded by the fact that the Greek word for elder, *presbuteros*, admits of at least two distinct, though related, meanings.⁶ The peculiar problem of the use of *presbuteros* in Judaism and Christianity arises out of the two-fold meaning of the word, which can be employed both as a designation of age and also as a title of office.⁷ While the issue of age is not unimportant, certainly our focus must be on the elder as office-bearer. With this focus in mind, we turn now to the biblical text itself.

ELDER IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

A survey of the way in which elder is used in the Old Testament will provide helpful information for determining the context of its New Testament development. The Old Testament word for "elder" is *zagen*. The word *zagen* means "old," "ancient," "elder."⁸ This word is related to the word *zaqan*, "beard." Most likely, the primary meaning of *zagen* was advancement in years, a state usually indi-

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cated in Semitic cultures by the full growth of a beard. The secondary meaning of “elder” would then be a natural development from the primary meaning, assuming “the bearded one” to be a source of wisdom and guidance.⁹ In the Masoretic Text (Hebrew), *zagen* (and its related forms) occurs 178 times and (in the Authorized Version, KJV) is translated “elders” 115 times, “old” 23 times, “old man” 19 times, “ancient” 14 times, “aged” 3 times, “eldest” once, “ancient man” once, “senators” once, and “old women” once.¹⁰ The Septuagint (LXX) primarily uses two words to translate *zagen*: *gerousia*, which is used 35 times,¹¹ and *presbuteros*, which is used well over 200 times. While *gerousia* (and its related forms) captures the significance of a formal body of elders,¹² *presbuteros* (and its related forms) is more flexible, referring at times to one who is advanced in years and at other times to one(s) invested with some official capacity.

Elder in the Period of the Patriarchs

Zagen is used only twice (both occurrences in the same verse) in the patriarchal period to refer to a group of distinguished individuals in Pharaoh’s court (Gen. 50:7), “the dignitaries of his court,” “the dignitaries of Egypt.”¹³ All other references in Genesis are to individuals and the focus is on the advanced age of the individual in question (e.g., Gen. 18:11, 25:8).

Elder in the Time of Moses

The use of *zagen* occurs more frequently in the Mosaic period. The elders were “an established part of the patriarchal clan and tribal system.”¹⁴

The elders are representatives of the whole people, and they are this only in the sense of mere representation, not with any initiative or governing power, but along with and under leading figures like Moses and Joshua. On important occasions affecting the whole people they are assembled to receive the will of Yahweh.¹⁵

Three times reference is made to a person or persons of advanced age (Ex. 10:9, Lev. 19:32, Deut. 28:50). All other occurrences¹⁶ refer to a group (or groups) of individuals who exercise some form of

authority. The book of Exodus refers to the “elders of Israel” (Ex. 3:16, 18; 4:29; 12:21; 17:5, 6; 18:12), the “elders of the people” (Ex. 19:7), and the “elders” (Ex. 24:14). There are two references to the “seventy elders of Israel” (Ex. 24:1, 9), where the elders “witnessed the covenant ceremony.”¹⁷ Apparently this number is traditional, perhaps relating to the number of descendants of Jacob who went into Egypt (Ex. 1:5).¹⁸ Most likely, this group is a representative selection of the larger body of elders.¹⁹

There are two references in Leviticus, one to the “elders of the congregation” (Lev. 4:15) and the other to the “elders of Israel” (Lev. 9:1). In Leviticus 4:15, the elders function in an official capacity on behalf of the congregation that has sinned.²⁰ By laying hands on the sacrifice, they represented the congregation to the Lord and assumed responsibility on behalf of the congregation. In Numbers, there are three references again to the “seventy” elders of Israel (Lev. 11:16, 24, 25) who are described as “leaders” (Lev. 11:16b). These seventy are brought, by divine appointment, to “share with Moses the burden of the people” and to receive an empowerment by the Spirit, similar to that which Moses himself has experienced.²¹ There are two additional references linking the elders of Israel to Moses’ activities (Lev. 11:30, 16:25) and three references to the elders of Moab (Lev. 22:4, 7) and Midian (Lev. 22:7). These elders apparently exercised the authority of ambassadors. They are further described in Numbers 22:14 as “princes,” a term denoting leadership and responsibility.²²

The book of Deuteronomy uses *zagen* 20 times, 14 of which are references to the elders of a city. These references make it clear that once in the land of promise the elders would be responsible for decision-making (along with the judges, Deut. 21:2) in matters of the utmost importance, which included manslaughter (Deut. 19:12), murder (Deut. 21:2, 3, 4, 6), rebellion (punishable by death, Deut. 21:19, 20), marriage violations (Deut. 22:15, 16, 17, 18), and Levirate marriage (Deut. 25:7, 8, 9). Other references are significant as well. In Deuteronomy 27:1, “Moses and the elders” commanded the people to obey God’s commands; in Deuteronomy 29:10, the elders engaged in covenant making; in Deuteronomy 31:9 they received the written law of Moses which “had to be read every seven years”²³; and, in Deuteronomy 31:28, they gathered to hear Moses’ final words and witness his passing.

To summarize the function of elders during the

time of Moses, they were a group of (at least seventy) leaders who shared with Moses the burdens of bearing legal witness, decision-making, judging, and governing. They represented the people to God and spoke on God's behalf to the people. They were empowered by the Spirit of God for their task. Though not necessarily old, they were recognized for their wisdom, generally considered a characteristic of those who were elderly.

Elder in the Remainder of the Old Testament

The word "elder(s)" is used 125 times in the remainder of the Old Testament.²⁴ Many of these references are simply to one advanced in age, e.g. "old," "an old man," etc.²⁵ In two instances, II Kings 19:2 and Isaiah 37:2, *zaqen* is translated as an adjective,²⁶ "leading priests." In one instance, *zaqen* is translated as "veteran craftsmen" in the NIV, while all other versions prefer a more literal translation (KJV "ancients," ASV "old men," RSV and NASB "elders," Eze. 27:9). All of these references key on the primary meaning of *zaqen* as one advanced in years.

A second use of *zaqen* occurs sporadically throughout the remainder of the Old Testament. There are a number of verses that refer to the elders of various cities. For example, there is reference to the elders of the Gibeonites (Jos. 9:11), the elders of Succoth (Jud. 8:14,16), and the elders of Gilead (Jud. 11:5,7,8,9,11). Boaz, on Ruth's behalf, serves as kinsman-redeemer before the elders in Bethlehem (Ruth 4:2,4,9,11). Saul rescues Jabesh Gilead from the Ammonites at the entreaty of the elders in Bethlehem (I Sam. 11:3) and Jezebel conspires against Naboth by enlisting the support of the elders of Jezreel (I Kings 21:8,11). At the end of the exile, it is the elders and judges of every city who help resolve the issue of the foreign wives (Ezra 10:14). These references establish the fact that elders served as a ruling or governing body, "a type of municipal council,"²⁷ in the local town or city, Israelite or non-Israelite.

The remainder of occurrences of *zaqen* refer to a group of leaders that exercised a national role, as first portrayed in the Mosaic period. During the period of the conquest, the elders joined with Joshua in repenting for Achsan's sin (Jos. 7:6), marching against Ai (Jos. 8:10), and renewing the covenant at Mt. Ebal (Jos. 8:33) and Shechem (Jos. 24:1). The elders were charged by God to oversee the cities of

refuge (Jos. 20:4) and were summoned by Joshua to hear his final words (Jos. 23:2). We are told in the closing verses of Joshua that Israel remained faithful to the Lord throughout the lifetime of those elders who had experienced God's redemptive power (Jos. 24:31; see also Jud. 2:7).

During the time of Samuel the elders led the nation in battle (I Sam. 4:3) and requested Samuel to appoint a king for Israel (I Sam. 8:4). Saul asked that Samuel would honor him before the elders, even though he had sinned (I Sam. 15:30); and Abner negotiated with the elders of Israel for David to become king (2 Sam. 3:17; 5:3; cf. also 1 Chr. 11:3). The elders collaborated with Absalom in his conspiracy (2 Sam. 17:4,15), and David sought the help of the elders of Judah to regain his throne (2 Sam. 19:11).

Throughout the monarchy and later divided kingdom, the elders continued to officiate at state functions (1 Kings 8:1,3; 2 Chr. 5:2,4), give counsel (1 Kings 12:6; 20:7,8; 2 Chr. 10:6), and provide leadership during a period of covenant renewal (2 Kings 23:1; 2 Chr. 34:29). Compared to the earlier periods, "their authority was lessened by the creation of a centralized government with its civil service."²⁸ In the period of the prophets, the elders are among the unfaithful leaders who will be cut off (Isa. 3:2,14; 9:15), but will be present in the glorious day of the Lord (Isa 24:23). The elders in exile²⁹ receive a letter from Jeremiah to the captive people (Jer. 29:1). The elders represent the people of Judah who receive the prophecy of judgment (Jer. 19:1; Joel 1:14) and undergo judgment themselves (Lam. 1:19; 4:16; 5:12,14; Eze. 9:6) for their idolatry (Eze. 8:11,12; 14:1). The elders sit with the prophet Ezekiel (Eze. 8:1), but the time will come, in judgment, when their counsel will no longer be heard (Eze. 7:26) and their inquiries rejected (Eze. 20:1,3). On a positive note, the elders courageously speak out against the king on behalf of the prophet Jeremiah (Jer. 26:17). They exhibit great sorrow over the destruction of Jerusalem (Lam. 2:10) and are invited, as the people's representatives, to seek God's mercy (Joel 2:16).

Summary

In reviewing the Old Testament teaching on the *zaqen*, or elder, we can confidently make a number of assertions. First, the office of elder is a very ancient and widespread institution, formally recognized under Moses. Second, elders functioned as heads of

To summarize the function of elders during the time of Moses, they were a group of (at least seventy) leaders who shared with Moses the burdens of bearing legal witness, decision-making, judging, and governing.

clans, tribes, and municipalities. Third, a formal body of elders functioned nationally as a representative group of district or local elders. Fourth, elders shared responsibility for governing and decision-making under Moses, under the judges, and under the kings of the monarchy. Fifth, they are praised for the exemplary behavior of the people and held accountable for their evil behavior. Finally, they are both representatives of the people to their God and representatives of God to his people.

ELDER IN THE INTERTESTAMENTAL PERIOD

During the intertestamental period, there is little direct evidence concerning the role of elders. There is, however, a mention of the "sanhedrim [sic] at Jerusalem" in Josephus.³⁰ Furthermore, a number of secondary sources refer to the letter of Antiochus III ("the Great," 223-187 B.C.), recorded by Josephus, in which he says, "the Jews, upon our first entrance on their country demonstrated their friendship towards us; and when we came to their city [Jerusalem], received us in a splendid manner, and came to meet us with their senate . . .".³¹ This reference to the Sanhedrin as *gerousia* indicates that a fixed, recognizable council of elders existed at the close of the third century before Christ.

During the reign of the Hasmoneans, [John Hyrcanus, et al, 135-63 B.C.] however, the makeup of the Gerousia was altered again. Their powers were reduced due to the monarchic tendencies of the rulers, and there was a growing influx of scribal (Pharisaic) leaders, with the result that the power structure was divided into nobility (elders and priests) and lay (scribes) factions. This continued into the NT period³²

The synagogues of the New Testament were also governed by a "board of elders" (Mark 5:22, Acts 13:5) which reflected developments from the exilic/post-exilic period. Among the most important of these developments was the democratization of the synagogue. "After the collapse of the monarchy and its attendant feudalism and the rise of an entrepreneurial class in the period of Hellenism the offices of the synagogue were open to all."³³ It is this background that provides the stage for the New Testa-

ment and its development of the Christian notion of elder.

ELDER IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

The word "elder," *presbuteros* (in its various forms)³⁴ occurs 69 times in the New Testament. It is the comparative of *presbus*, "old," and means, at its simplest, "older," or "elder."³⁵ In the Authorized Version (KJV), *presbuteros* (and its related forms) is translated "elders" 60 times, "elder" 5 times, "presbytery" once, "elder son" once, "old men" once, "elder women" once, and "eldest" once.³⁶ There are also two words related to *presbus*. *presbutis* occurs twice and is translated as "old man" (Luke 1:18) and "the aged" (Phil. 9); *presbutas* occurs once and is translated "aged men" (Tit. 2:2). Other related words include *presbeia* which "occurs only in parables (Lk. 14:32; 19:14) in the sense of a political delegation, embassy" and "the vb. *presbeuo* [which] is used twice by Paul" (2 Cor. 5:20, Eph. 6:20), both times indicating "the official character of the message of reconciliation which he brings."³⁷ These many and varied translations can be broken down into three major categories.

... *presbuteros* is found in the NT in three senses. In the synoptic gospels, and at the beginning and end of Acts, the sub. is used of the lay members of the Sanhedrin.... In the central portion of Acts, the Pastoral Epistles, Jas. 5:14 and the salutations in 2 and 3 Jn., the Christian elder is meant.... Finally, in Rev., it denotes heavenly beings... although it remains an open question whether they surround the divine throne as representatives of the heavenly or earthly church.³⁸

Elder in the Gospels

In the Synoptic Gospels,³⁹ the word *presbuteros* (in its various forms) is used 26 times. There are two occurrences in the Gospel of Luke that are not particularly important to the discussion at hand, Luke 7:3 and 15:25.⁴⁰ There are 3 references to the "traditions of the elders" (Matt. 15:2 and Mark 7:3,5), where Jesus is confronted by the Pharisees and the teachers of the law over matters of ceremonial washing. The remainder of the references are compound references that demand further consideration. There are nine references where the chief priests and the

During the intertestamental period, there is little direct evidence concerning the role of elders.

elders are linked together, Matthew 21:23; 26:3,47, (26:59, "chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin"); 27:1,3,12,20; 28:12. There are ten references that link chief priests, teachers of the law, and elders (Matt. 16:21; 26:57; 27:41; Mark 8:31; 11:27; 14:43,53; Luke 9:22; 20:1; 22:66), and one reference that links "the chief priest, the elders, the teachers of the law, and the whole Sanhedrin" (Mark 15:1). In Luke 22:52, there is a reference to "the chief priests, the officers of the temple guard, and the elders."

The majority of these occurrences clearly fall into the first sense noted above. The elders are "lay members of the Sanhedrin, drawn from the patrician families of Jerusalem."⁴¹

It is during the period of the Rom. procurators (A.D. 6-66) that the Sanhedrin came to possess the greatest power and jurisdiction of its history, although the Jewish authority was always ultimately answerable to the Rom. governor....This is the Sanhedrin which we encounter in the NT documents.⁴²

The Sanhedrin, in effect, replaces the nationwide representative council of elders that functioned during the time of the monarchy and the divided kingdom. While elders continue on the local, or municipal level as well (cf. Luke 7:6), there are some elders who also hold office in the synagogues. These elders are called *archon*, "rulers," of the synagogue.⁴³ "A group of elders would direct the activities of the synagogue. The chief ruler, or, *archisynagogos*, was probably chosen from among them."⁴⁴ Concerning these elders, Alfred Edersheim explains:

...all the rulers of the Synagogue were duly examined as to their knowledge, and ordained to the office. They formed the local Sanhedrin or tribunal. But their election depended on the choice of the congregation; and absence of pride, as well as gentleness and humility, are mentioned as special qualifications.⁴⁵

The various ways in which elders are grouped with other politico-religious factions may occur simply because of the interests of the evangelists. Luke uses the full formula to place responsibility on the leaders of Israel as a whole,⁴⁶ while Matthew is more interested in depicting the elders as representatives of the people.⁴⁷

Elder in the Book of Acts

The word *presbiteros* (in its various forms) occurs 19 times in the book of Acts. There are at least two different senses in which *presbiteros* is used.⁴⁸ The *first* sense, with seven instances, is similar to the majority of occurrences found in the Synoptic gospels. While maintaining their distinct identity, the elders are again linked with other significant factions in the Jewish political landscape: "the rulers, elders and teachers of the law" (Acts 4:5); "rulers and elders of the people" (Acts 4:8); "the chief priests and elders" (Acts 4:23; 23:14; 25:15); "the elders and the teachers of the law" (Acts 6:12); "the high priest and all the council" (Acts 22:5); and "the high priest Ananias ... with some of the elders" (Acts 24:1).⁴⁹

The *second* sense, with ten instances, refers to the Christian elder. Luke does not introduce this function or office. Instead, "the first Christians were Jewish and the office was familiar to them. Thus, Luke did not need to explain his first reference to Christian elders in Acts 11:30."⁵⁰ This body apparently functioned alongside the apostles as "a kind of Nazarene Sanhedrin"⁵¹ and was responsible for managing the funds forwarded from Antioch. This same group appears again in Acts 15:2,4,6 to receive the question forwarded to it by the delegation from Antioch. Assuming this council (*gerousia*) was indeed based on the Jewish model, this council of elders was one in which the apostles played the leading role (perhaps the Christian equivalent to the Jewish priestly aristocracy).⁵² In Acts 15:22, 23,⁵³ the elders participate with the apostles in formulating and issuing the decision (see also Acts 16:4). The final reference to the elders in Jerusalem is Acts 21:18, which indicates that James and the elders of the Jerusalem church gathered to receive Paul.

There are two other references to the Christian elder in the book of Acts. In Acts 14:23, while on missionary work planting churches in south Galatia, "Paul and Barnabas appointed elders ... in each church,"⁵⁴ resulting in a church structure that looked remarkably like that in Jerusalem. In Acts 20:17, in the midst of his journey to Jerusalem, Paul calls for the elders in Ephesus and exhorts them to guard the flock (Acts 28:28,31), to "be shepherds of the church" (Acts 28:28), and to beware of "savage wolves" (Acts 28:29). Perhaps the most significant fact offered by this passage is the use of the word *episkopous*, (translated as "overseers" or "bishops"), in verse 28 as a synonym for *presbiteros*. "When Paul

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called for the elders of the church at Ephesus to come to Miletus, and then gave them the solemn charge of Acts 20:28... it is implied that the elders exercised the most responsible functions in the church at Ephesus.⁵⁵

As F. F. Bruce explains:

There was in apostolic times no distinction between the elders (presbyters) and bishops such as we find from the second century onwards: the leaders of the Ephesian church are indiscriminately described as elders, bishops, (i.e., superintendents) and shepherds (or pastors).⁵⁶

Furthermore, "by the time of the composition of Acts, it is clear that the Pauline churches of Asia Minor had adopted the "presbyterian" system of government."⁵⁷

Elder in the Epistles

The word *presbuteros* (in its various forms) occurs 12 times in the New Testament letters: 6 times in Paul's letters, once in the book of Hebrews, once in the letter of James, twice in Peter's letters, and twice in the letters of John. Of these occurrences, three are references to people of advanced age and are not important to our discussion: in 1 Timothy 5:1,2 Paul refers to "an older man" and to the "older women." Peter (1 Pet. 5:5) exhorts the "young men ... [to] be submissive to those who are older." There is a fourth, and similar, reference in Hebrews 11:2 which refers to "the ancients." The context indicates that the referents were Old Testament heroes of faith ("the old-timers") and is similar in meaning to the "forefathers" in Hebrews 1:1.

Two other references to elder are found in 2 John 1 and 3 John 1 where the author designates himself as "the elder." While it is possible that this means simply "old man," it is more than likely that it refers to the respect, the esteem in which the author was held by his readers. "In both letters John identifies himself as 'the elder,' not in the sense of an officer in a local church, but in the sense of an elder statesman of the church at large, that is, an apostle (compare 1 Pet. 5:1)."⁵⁸

This leaves six instances where *presbuteros* (in its various forms) is used in the second sense of Christian elder: 1 Timothy 4:14; 5:17,19; Titus 1:5; James 5:14; 1 Peter 5:1. These will be discussed in order of

their canonical occurrence. In 1 Timothy 4:14, Paul exhorts Timothy to exercise his gift, given "through a prophetic message when the body of elders laid their hands on you." This involvement of the presbytery in the "laying on of hands" indicates "the collegiate character of their working."⁵⁹ The importance of this act can only be seen when it is considered in light of parallel passages where this investiture also occurred.

When Paul and Barnabas were set apart for a missionary undertaking, the prophets and teachers at Antioch "fasted and prayed and laid their hands on them" (Acts 13:3). The practice of laying on hands is of such a character that reference to this action on the part of the presbytery (1 Tim. 4:14), and the laying on of hands in the appointment of the seven (Acts 6:6), create the strongest presumption that "the presbytery," in the ordination of elders, laid on hands as the consummating act in appointment to office.⁶⁰

However this text is handled, it does indicate the involvement of the elders, as a council, officially commanding/setting apart Timothy for the discharge of some ministerial duties.

In 1 Timothy 5:17 Paul says, "The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching." Here is a clear reference to the Christian elder as a "ruling elder" who governs the church.⁶¹

In the description of the offices in 1 Timothy 5:17, 19 and Titus 1:5 *presbuteros* has become the title of honour for members of a body which cares for the members the life of the church.... From this body those who "preside" in the strict sense ... and the preachers and teachers are drawn (1 Tim. 5:17). Here we find the root of the present-day Presbyterian system.⁶²

There is, then, a reference to "teaching elders," or those who "devote themselves to the preaching and teaching of the Word of God and, are thus in a special way accounted worthy of the compensation which their labor warrants (cf. vs. 18)."⁶³ Such a one deserves "double honor." Although not employed full-time in ministry, they nonetheless expend much

However this text is handled, it does indicate the involvement of the elders, as a council, officially commanding/setting apart Timothy for the discharge of some ministerial duties.

effort in the ministry of word and doctrine.⁶⁴ These elders who are worthy of honor and should be treated fairly when accused (1 Tim. 5:19). The requirement for two or three witnesses was not to make it difficult to bring an accusation against an elder; instead, it was to make certain that those who lead "should enjoy at least as much protection as the ordinary Jew had under the law (see Deut. 17:6; 19:15)."⁶⁵

The final Pauline occurrence of *presbiteros* is Titus 1:5, where Paul reminds Titus he left him in Crete "to appoint elders in every town, as I directed you." Here again we see the necessity of establishing a council, a plurality of elders, to function according to the Jewish model. What follows in the next two verses is significant. Paul immediately begins to discuss the requirements of a "bishop" or "overseer." Just as we saw these terms used interchangeably in Acts 20:17, 20:28, here Paul shifts fluidly between these terms. The expression "an elder" is not repeated at the beginning of verse 6 in the Greek text; rather, it is implied.⁶⁶ The proof of the identity of these terms lies in the use of *episkopon* in verse 7, a term Paul uses as a synonym for elder.⁶⁷ For Paul, then, the elder is the bishop and the bishop is the elder.⁶⁸

There are two final occurrences of *presbiteros*. James 5:14 and 1 Peter 5:1. In James 5:14, James exhorts anyone who is sick "to call the elders of the church" to pray for him and anoint him with oil. The elders here are understood as "office-bearers of the local congregation."⁶⁹ In 1 Peter 5:1, Peter exhorts the elders of the congregations. There is much here to be considered.

First, he tells them to "be shepherds of God's flock." Here he ties together the role of *presbiteros* and *poimen*, or pastor.

The Greek term means literally "shepherd" and is used in this literal sense in the New Testament of the shepherds to whom Jesus' birth is announced. Because the people of God are figuratively regarded as sheep, the one who tends, feeds, and exercises oversight over them is called the shepherd in a figurative sense.⁷⁰

The linking of elders with pastors now provides additional insight into their responsibilities and functions.⁷¹

Second, Peter refers to himself as a "fellow elder" thus elevating the office of elder. "It is true that the apostle is here setting himself alongside the

presbyters with emphatic modesty. It is also true, however, that he is setting them alongside himself."⁷² Third, he links the shepherding work of the elder with the oversight of the bishop (I Pet. 5:2), "serving as overseers."⁷³ Here, Peter has brought together a number of roles and functions, that of pastor, elder, and bishop, attributing them all to those whom he addresses first as elders. His exhortation is remarkably similar to Paul's address to the Ephesian elders at Miletus.

Elder in the Apocalypse

The word *presbiteros* (in its various forms) occurs twelve times in the Apocalypse, Revelation 4:4,10; 5:5,6,8,11,14; 7:11,13; 11:16; 14:3; 19:4. These occurrences suggest a third sense in which *presbiteros* is used. The likelihood is that these twenty-four elders "probably represent the entire church (twenty-four for the twelve patriarchs of the Old Testament and the twelve apostles of the New Testament)."⁷⁴ While the vision of these beings may indicate something to us about heavenly praise and worship of God, they do not add anything substantial to our study of the office of elder.

Summary

In reviewing the New Testament teaching on *presbiteros*, or elder, we can confidently make a number of assertions regarding the Christian elder.

First, the office of elder was a continuation of a very ancient and widespread institution, modified by the Jews and adapted by the early Christian communities.

Second, elders functioned as overseers of particular congregations, first at Jerusalem, and then in other localities as appointed by the apostles.

Third, elders exercised their authority jointly or corporately, and not individually.

Fourth, elders all governed, and all were to be apt to teach; some specialized in teaching, however, and were honored for so doing.

Fifth, elders were responsible for more than mere government; their responsibilities extended to shepherding and overseeing.

Finally, elders were both representatives of the people to God and representative of God to his people.

Here, Peter has brought together a number of roles and functions, that of pastor, elder, and bishop, attributing them all to those whom he addresses first as elders.

CONCLUSION

In surveying the vast material of the biblical foundations of eldership, we have discovered the Jewish roots of eldership and the Christian adaptation of that office. As we try to summarize what can be asserted without equivocation, we can note the following affirmations:

Elders, generally, are those who have attained the wisdom associated with advancing age.

Specifically, age is not a requirement for eldership; rather, maturity and wisdom.

Elders appointed to office may receive the laying on of hands.

Elders function in a collegial relationship.

All elders are responsible for overseeing the church, for ruling and governing.

All elders are expected to shepherd the flock.

All elders are expected to have some ability to teach doctrine.

Some elders have special aptitude and specialize in teaching and are worthy of "double honor" for that ministry.

Elders in particular congregations have a relationship with elders in other particular congregations (responsibilities are "joint" and not individual) for the governing of the church.

These affirmations, it seems, are at the heart of the theory of *ius divinum*. These principles we may assert with vigor and without apology, for they are the biblical foundations of eldership.

We can go this far based on biblical foundations alone. Some of the particulars of Presbyterian church government, however, go beyond these affirmations. Many of those particulars may be the results of solid theological reflection. Some parts of our forms of government (or, books of church order), however, may be attributed more to cultural, social, or political influences than to a clearly articulated, "thus says the Lord." If this suspicion is true, we who are Presbyterian would do well to exercise much humility in

ordering the particulars of our church government. We should seek to determine the "things revealed in the word" and those "which are to be ordered by the light of nature and Christian prudence."⁷⁵ Above all, we must practice charity even as we seek for greater clarity. And, in these matters, as in all others, we continue to confess, "In Thy light shall we see light."

ENDNOTES

¹ Charles Hodge, *The Constitutional History of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1851, reprint; n.p., 1983), p. 12.

² Edmund P. Clowney, *The Church in Contours of Christian Theology*, Gerald Bray, ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1995), p. 205.

³ Milton J. Coalter, John M. Mulder, and Louis B. Weeks, *The Re-Forming Tradition: Presbyterians and Mainstream Protestantism in The Presbyterian Presence: The Twentieth-Century Experience* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1992), pp. 114-115.

⁴ James Bannerman, *The Church of Christ*, 2 vols. (1860, reprint; Carlisle: Banner of Truth, 1974), 2:203-204. See also Iain H. Murray, ed., *The Reformation of the Church* (1965; reprint, Carlisle: Banner of Truth, 1987), pp. 293-296 for a portion of the document *Jus Divinum Regiminis Ecclesiastici* (The Divine Right of Church Government), published in 1646 in London and representing the Presbyterian view.

⁵ This debate is over the nature of the eldership and divides over whether one holds to a "Two-Office" view or "Three-Office" view. The "Two-Office" view says, essentially, that Deacons and Elders constitute two offices, while Elders have two functions. All elders rule, while some elders are especially responsible for teaching. These are "Teaching Elders," or, what many call "Ministers." The "Three-Office" view says that Deacons, Elders, and Ministers all constitute separate offices. Supporting the "Two Office" view are Bannerman, op. cit., 2:305-7; James H. Thornwell, *The Collected Writings of James Henley Thornwell*, vol. 4, *Ecclesiastical* (1875, reprint; Carlisle: Banner of Truth, 1986), pp. 115ff, 139-140; Robert L. Dabney, *Discussions of Robert Lewis Dabney*, 3 vols. (1891, reprint; Carlisle: Banner of Truth, 1982), 2:119ff. The most famous proponent of the "Three-Office" view was Princeton's Charles Hodge. See his article on "Presbyterianism" in Thornwell, *Collected Writings*, 4:616ff (Appendix B). Also supporting the three office view is Samuel Miller, in *The*

Ruling Elder (reprint; Dallas: Presbyterian Heritage Publications, 1987). Generally speaking, the Presbyterian Church in America is committed to the "Two-Office" view while the Presbyterian Church (USA) and the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church are committed to the "Three-Office" view. For an informative article on this issue, see George W. Knight, III, "Two Offices," *Presbyterian* 11:1 (Spring 1985): pp. 1-12.

⁶ As will be demonstrated shortly, this is also a problem with the Hebrew word for "elder."

⁷ Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. Translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley. 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), s.v. "*presbus*" by Gunther Bornkamm. Hereinafter referenced as *TDNT*.

⁸ R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr. and Bruce K. Waltke, eds., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, 2 vols. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), s.v. "*zaqen*," by Jack P. Lewis. Hereinafter referenced as *TWOT*. Also, Francis S. Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, eds., *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), pp. 278-9. Hereinafter referenced as *BDB*. *Gadol* is another Hebrew term for elder. Its root meaning, however, is "grow up, become great" and is not particularly important to the discussion at hand, *BDB*, p. 152.

⁹ *Harper's Encyclopedia of Bible Life*, 3rd revised edition (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1982), p. 241.

¹⁰ *Bible Works* CD-ROM V. 3.5 (Big Fork, MT: Hermeneutika Computer Aided Bible Research, 1996).

¹¹ Eight instances occur in the Apocrypha. LXX data is based on the Rahlfs' edition contained in *Bible Works* CD-ROM V. 3.5.

¹² In every instance but one, in which *gerousia* is used to translate *zaqen*, the context indicates that a recognizable body of elders, or council, is in view. These councils include "elders of the city/that city" (Deut. 19:12; 21:3,4,6,19; 22:15,16,17,18; 25:8,9), "elders of Moab/Midian" (Num. 22:4,7), "elders of Israel, your elders" (Ex. 3:16,18; 12:21; 24:9; Lev. 9:1; Deut. 5:23, 21:2; 27:1; 25:7; 29:9; Jos. 23:2) and the compound expression, "elders of the sons of Israel" (Ex. 4:29). The exception is Leviticus 9:3, where *gerousia* is used to translate *ben Israel* ("sons of Israel").

¹³ All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise noted, are from the New International Version of

the Holy Bible. Lexical usage is determined by the listings contained in *The Englishmen's Hebrew and Chaldee Concordance of the Old Testament*, 5th Edition. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970), s.v. "*zaqen*" in comparison with the lists contained in *Bible Works* CD-ROM V. 3.5.

¹⁴ Colin Brown, ed., *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), s.v. "*presbuteros*," by L. Coenen. Hereinafter referenced as *NIDNTT*.

¹⁵ *TDNT*, 6:655.

¹⁶ *Zaqen* is used, additionally, 10x in Exodus, 2x in Leviticus, 9x in Numbers, and 20x in Deuteronomy.

¹⁷ *TWOT*, 1:250.

¹⁸ This is suggested as a *possible* explanation by R. Alan Cole, *Exodus* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1973), p. 184. B. S. Childs also speculates that the number 70 may be traditional, *The Book of Exodus* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1974), p. 504, while W.H. Gispen, *Exodus*, translated by Ed van der Maas (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), p. 237, suggests the number "pointed to the holiness of Israel as the Lord's people."

¹⁹ *NIDNTT*, 1:195; also, *Harper's Encyclopedia of Bible Life*, p. 241.

²⁰ See Gordon J. Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), pp. 97-99 for a discussion of the meaning of "congregation" and its sin.

²¹ A. Noordzij, *Numbers*, translated by Ed van der Maas (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), p. 101.

²² *TWOT*, 2:885.

²³ *Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), s.v. "Elder," by Cornelis Van Dam.

²⁴ *Englishmen's Hebrew and Chaldee Concordance of the Old Testament*, s.v. "*zaqen*."

²⁵ "Old" or "old man" (Jud. 19:16,17,20,22; I Sam. 2:31,32; 28:14; Job 42:17; Ps. 148:12; Prov. 17:6, 20:29; Eccl. 4:13; Isa. 3:5; 65:20; Jer. 6:11; Eze. 9:6; Joel 1:2, 2:28; Zech. 8:4), "a certain old prophet" (I Kings 13:11, also 25,29), "men and women, young and old" (Jos. 6:21; also II Chr. 36:17; Est. 3:13; Isa. 20:4; Jer. 31:13, 51:22; Lam. 2:21), "older priests" (Ezra 3:12), "older than he" (Job 32:4), "aged" (Job 32:9; Isa. 47:6), and "old women" (Zech. 8:4).

²⁶ Grammatically in these cases, *zaqen* is in the construct state. In Jeremiah 19:1, the same construction appears. Most translations reflect the construct relationship as a simple genitive, "elders of the

people" and "elders of the priests."³⁷ Interestingly, the RSV and the NASB translate the second construct relationship adjectively, "senior priests."

²⁷ *Harper's Encyclopedia of Bible Life*, p. 242.

²⁸ *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1992), s.v. "Elder," by G. R. Osborne.

²⁹ "At the head of the community of exiles there are also elders, Jer. 29:1; Ez. 8:1; 14:1; 20:1,2. Indeed, in exile, when all other political forms have been shattered, the elders take on an enhanced significance as those who exercise limited self-government on behalf of the people." *TDNT*, 6:658.

³⁰ Flavius Josephus, *The Life of Flavius Josephus* in *Works of Flavius Josephus*, 4 vols. translated by William Whiston (reprint; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1974), section 12. Osborne, *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, p. 202, is convinced as well that the reference in *Wars of the Jews*, 2.18.6, to "certain men, seventy in number,..., who were the most considerable for their families" is a reference to the Sanhedrin.

³¹ Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 12.3.3, in *The Works of Flavius Josephus*.

³² *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, p. 202.

³³ *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, 5 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), s.v. "Synagogue," by W. White, Jr. Hereinafter, *ZPEB*.

³⁴ The various forms and their frequency of occurrence in the Greek text (UBS 4th) are as follows: *presbuteras* once; *presbuterion*, twice; *presbuterou*, once; *presbuteroi*, 21 times; *presbuterois*, 5 times; *presbuteros*, 3 times; *presbuteron*, 22 times; *presbutero*, once; *presbuterous*, 12 times; *presbuterou*, once. *Bible Works* CD-ROM V. 3.5.

³⁵ William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 4th revised edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), s.v. "presbuteros." Hereinafter, *BAG*.

³⁶ Lexical usage is determined by the listings contained in *The Englishmen's Greek Concordance of the New Testament*, 9th Edition (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970) in comparison with the lists contained in *Bible Works* CD-ROM V. 3.5 and W. F. Moulton and A. S. Geden, eds. *A Concordance to the Greek New Testament*, 5th revised edition edited by H. K. Moulton (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1978). The extra KJV reference is to Matt. 26:59 which is in the Textus Receptus and KJV, not in UBS 4th and NIV.

³⁷ *NIDNTT*, 1:197.

³⁸ *NIDNTT*, 1:198.

³⁹ The word is used only once in the Gospel of John, 8:9, to refer to a ranking in age, beginning with "the older ones first." (Of course, the entire pericope, John 7:53-8:11 is poorly attested in the earlier and better manuscripts.) Two occurrences in the Johannine letters will be considered later.

⁴⁰ Luke 7:3 recounts the healing of the centurion's servant and the visit of "some elders of the Jews" to seek help from Jesus on behalf of the centurion. These were local or municipal leaders, demonstrating only that the ancient practice of local eldership continued at this time. Luke 15:25 is simply the comparative use, describing the "older son" in the parable of the prodigal son.

⁴¹ *NIDNTT*, 1:198. See also, Osborne, *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, p. 202.

⁴² *ZPEB*, s.v. "Sanhedrin," by D.A. Hagner.

⁴³ See, for example, Matthew 9:18, 23; Luke 8:41, 18:18. Osborne considers these two groups to have been identical "in the average Jewish community," *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, p. 202.

⁴⁴ *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1992), s.v. "Synagogue," by E. Yamauchi.

⁴⁵ Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, one-volume edition. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 1:438. He is using the rabbinic sources, *Sanhedrin* 92a and *Chagigah* 5b.

⁴⁶ *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, p. 203.

⁴⁷ *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, p. 203., also, *NIDNTT*, 1:199. This body of laymen was second in prestige to the "priestly aristocracy," according to *ZPEB*, 5:271.

⁴⁸ There is also a simple comparative use in Acts 2:17, quoting from Joel 2:28 (3:1, Heb.), "your young men will see visions, your *old men* will dream dreams." This makes the total 18.

⁴⁹ All of these are references to the Sanhedrin, F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), ad. loc.

⁵⁰ *Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, p. 198; "Luke is not only the first to use the term *Christianoi* for the members of the Christian church (Acts 11:26), but also to introduce the expression *presbuteroi* in the same context to describe men who exercised leadership in the Christian church at Jerusalem on the Jewish synagogue pattern (Acts 11:30; 21:18)." *NIDNTT*, 1:199.

⁵¹ Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, 244; *TDNT*, 6:662-663.

⁵² *NIDNTT*, 1:199.

⁵³ The question of how to understand *adelphoi* in this verse is difficult. It may be nothing more than a simple apposition to "elders and apostles" in which case "as brethren they sent a message to brethren." W. Robertson Nicoll, ed., *The Expositor's Greek Testament* (reprint; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 2:326. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, p. 314, suggests it may be best to read *hoi presbiteroi adelphoias* "elder brethren."

⁵⁴ Although the verb *cheirotöneo* means, literally, "to choose, elect by raising hands," *BAG*, ad. loc., in this instance elders are appointed by apostolic authority. *The Expositor's Greek New Testament*, 2:312; Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, p. 296.

⁵⁵ John Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray*, 4 vols. (Carlisle: Banner of Truth, 1976-82), 2:362.

⁵⁶ Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, p. 415.

⁵⁷ *NIDNTT*, 1:199.

⁵⁸ Robert H. Gundry, *A Survey of the New Testament*, 3rd edition (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 451; *NIDNTT*, 1:200; see *The Expositor's Greek Testament*, 5:159-161 and Frank E. Gaebelein, ed., *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 12:361.

⁵⁹ *NIDNTT*, p. 199.

⁶⁰ Murray, *Collected Writings*, 2:362. Whether this is the same as our notion of ordination is questioned by some, e.g., *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, p. 135. Commentators tend to reflect their church traditions in commenting on this text.

⁶¹ "With respect to the elder's task of ruling and guiding, he has been set over the congregation (1 Thess. 5:12; 1 Tim. 5:17)." *Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, p. 199.

⁶² *NIDNTT*, 1:199. *The New American Commentary*, 34:277, reminds us "that so much of our knowledge of early church organization is based upon incidental references." We would be wise to avoid reading too much into the texts.

⁶³ Murray, *Collected Writings*, 2:360.

⁶⁴ *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1993), s.v. "Church Order and Government," by R. Banks.

⁶⁵ David S. Dockery, ed., *The New American Commentary*, 40 vols. (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 34:156; *The Expositor's Greek Testament*, 4:135.

⁶⁶ The NIV has taken interpretive liberties here. The requirements for elders are most important, but beyond the scope of this paper.

⁶⁷ Murray, *Collected Writings*, 2:358-9; *The New*

American Commentary, 34:283.

⁶⁸ Both *TDNT*, 6:667 and *NIDNTT*, 1:199 caution against a "complete" identification of these terms.

⁶⁹ *TDNT*, 6:664.

⁷⁰ Knight, "Two Offices," p. 9.

⁷¹ See Murray's discussion of "shepherding the flock of God," *Collected Writings*, 1:265-268.

⁷² *TDNT*, 6:666.

⁷³ Admittedly, there is a textual problem, *episkopountes* not occurring in some important manuscripts. Nevertheless, the linking of these three terms does not stand or fall on this text alone.

⁷⁴ *Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, p. 199.

⁷⁵ *The Confession of Faith of the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church in The Standards of the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church* (General Synod, 1976), 1:6.

The Ruling Elder in History

Mark E. Ross

**Presbyterians
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Presbyterians are united in the conviction that Jesus Christ has placed the government of the church in the hands of elders; they are not, however, united in their understanding of what an elder is. Whether the elder be a clergyman or layman, whether he shares in the New Testament office of "presbyter" with the pastor or holds a separate office, whether he differs from a pastor by a distinction of gifts, or merely by function or emphasis of labor, and whether he has an office instituted by the New Testament or by the church—these are among the questions that have divided Presbyterians in their views on the elder. The problems are both old and recent. Other articles in this journal address the problems in some recent manifestations.¹ This article will provide historical background for understanding some of the diversity which has been exhibited within the Presbyterian tradition.

We may begin our investigation with the sixteenth century. It seems that Johannes Oecolampadius (1482-1531), the great reformer of Basel, was the first to institute an eldership independent of the civil authorities.² His views were then adopted by Martin Bucer of Strassburg. Bucer, according to Henderson, explicitly identified these "elders from among the people" as being like both the Jewish "elders of the people," who are frequently mentioned in the Old Testament as sharing in the government of the people, and the "elders" of Titus 1 and I Timothy. Bucer did not maintain that all such "elders" were teachers of the word, or ministers; he accepted a division between two types of elders. John Calvin followed this same pattern. In his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* Calvin speaks of "governors" who were "elders chosen from the people," and he justifies their place in church government by appeal to I Corinthians 12:28 and Romans 12:8.³ The New Testament word *presbiteroi* Calvin treats in most places as referring to the same officers of the church elsewhere in Scripture called "pastors," "bishops," and "ministers." To these, says Calvin, the ministry of the word is entrusted. However, Calvin does not mean to restrict the use of "presbyter" only to the preaching or teaching office. He also states that pastors and teachers⁴ are chosen "from the order of presbyters," thus distin-

guishing two types of presbyters: one charged with the ministry of the word, and another charged with the censure and correction of morals.⁵ The Scriptural justification for such a conception Calvin believes can be found in I Timothy 5:17:

In the letter to Timothy, also, he distinguishes two kinds of presbyters: those who labor in the Word, and those who do not carry on the preaching of the Word yet rule well (I Tim. 5:17).⁶

For Calvin, then, Scripture teaches that the government of the church is committed to the *presbyters*, of which there are two types: those who labor in preaching and those who rule, *i.e.* are concerned with the moral conduct of the church members.

The Book of Discipline

Due to the enormous influence of Calvin, this same pattern of church government spread elsewhere. It was adopted by the French Huguenot church, and by the reformed churches among Dutch and German speaking peoples. It also spread across the sea to Great Britain.⁷ Both the *First* and *Second Book of Discipline* among the Scots provided for elders to join with the minister in governing the congregation. In addition to watching over the morals of the congregation, the Scottish elders were to sit with the ministers in the courts of the church. They were to participate in the examination and ordination of ministers, and they were to watch over the conduct of the ministers and admonish them if and as needed. Given that they were to participate in the examination of candidates for the ministry, competency in the Scriptures would be most necessary. Thus the *First Book of Discipline* said that to this office must be chosen:

Men of best knowledge in God's word and cleanest life, men faithfull and of most honest conversation (*i.e.* conduct) that can be found in the kirk.⁸

Moreover, much of what we would call "pastoral

work" was also to be entrusted to their charge, *The Second Book of Discipline* assigns them responsibility for watching diligently over the flock, both publicly and privately, that no corruption of religion or conduct enter therein; careful seeking of the fruit of the preached word among the people; examining those who would come to the Lord's table; visiting the sick; admonishing all men of their duties; and bringing before the whole session of elders those who could not be corrected by private admonition.⁹

The Westminster Assembly

After *The Second Book of Discipline*, the next significant development in Reformed thinking on the office of elder is in the Westminster Assembly (1643-48), and in *The Form of Presbyterian Church Government* produced by it, which was adopted by the Church of Scotland in place of its own standards in 1645. In that Assembly, the Scottish commissioners faced formidable opposition and challenge to their long standing institution of the ruling elder. The claim that this office was instituted by Christ in the New Testament was put to the most severe of tests. The product of the ensuing debate—*The Form of Presbyterian Church Government*—reveals an important shift. In that document, what Calvin and the Church of Scotland had been calling "elders," "presbyters," or "seniors" are referred to as "other church governors." The justification for their appointment in the church is given as follows:

As there were in the Jewish church elders of the people joined with the priests and Levites in the government of the church; so Christ, who hath instituted government, and governors ecclesiastical in the church, hath furnished some in his church, beside the ministers of the word, 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. Which officers reformed churches commonly call Elders.¹⁰

What is remarkable about this passage is as much in what it does not say as in what it does say. For example, the Biblical justification given by the Westminster divines for this office is, on the one hand, Old Testament precedent, as witnessed by II Chronicles 19:8-10; and, on the other hand, the New Testament proof-texts of Romans 12:8 and I

Corinthians 12:28, neither of which uses the Greek word for "elder," *presbiteros*. It is striking that neither a verse like Acts 14:23 ("And when they had appointed elders for them in every church..."), nor Titus 1:5 ("...appoint elders in every city as I directed you.") is mentioned. The reason for this is that among the Westminster divines there were some, indeed many at the first, who did not think that these "other church governors" were elders (*presbiteroi*) in the Biblical sense. According to their view, the passages using the word *presbiteroi* were all talking about what we call "pastors" or "ministers of the word," not ruling elders.

Most significant of all is the omission of I Timothy 5:17, which had been used by Bucer, Calvin, *et al.*, to justify two kinds of presbyters or elders: those who rule and teach, and those who only rule. This verse had been included in the list of proof-texts, along with Romans 12:8 and I Corinthians 12:28, when the issue first came to the floor of the Assembly for debate. The proposition which introduced the debate read as follows:

That besides those presbyters which rule well and labour in word and doctrine, there be other presbyters who especially apply themselves to ruling, though they do not labour in the word and doctrine; I Tim. 5:17; Rom. 12:8; I Cor. 12:28.¹¹

The very wording of this proposition is derived from I Timothy 5:17. The fact that this verse is later missing from the approved proof-texts concerning the "other church governors" indicates how significant the opposition was to founding the office upon this text and for using the term *presbiteroi* for such officers.¹² Here we can see that for many of the Westminster Divines, it was only "the reformed churches" who called these "church governors" *elders*, not the New Testament. This view is reflected in that section of *The Form of Presbyterian Church Government* dealing with pastors: "The office of the elder (that is, the pastor) is to pray for the sick..."¹³

Interestingly, however, years later, after *The Form of Presbyterian Church Government* was finished by the Westminster divines and the Scottish commissioners had returned to their homeland, the Assembly undertook to answer a set of questions previously given to it by Parliament, but to which no official response had been made.¹⁴ A committee set before the Assembly the proposition that: "The

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government which is *jure divino* (“by divine right”) is that which is by *preaching* and *ruling* elders in presbyteries and synods by way of subordination and appeals.¹⁵ Alexander Mitchell argues that such a proposition being introduced at this date (1648) indicates that the Assembly cannot be understood to have *rejected* earlier the notion that the ruling elder is also a New Testament presbyter, even though it did not explicitly endorse it. As additional support for this claim, he points out that at this very same time, various London ministers, under the watchful eyes of the Westminster Assembly, published a treatise in support of Presbyterian church government in which they maintained that:

The third argument for the divine right of the mere *ruling elder* shall be drawn from I Tim. 5:17: “Let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honour, especially those that labour in the word and doctrine.” From which words we may thus argue for the divine right of the *ruling elder*.¹⁶

Mitchell’s point is well taken. Even so, what we must conclude from this episode in history is that the Presbyterian house was then divided over the question of whether the ruling elder was indeed a presbyter in the New Testament sense, or whether his office was established purely on the grounds of Romans 12:8 and I Corinthians 12:28, and Old Testament precedent. In any event, practice among the Presbyterians remained remarkably similar: sharp differences existed between ministers and ruling elders, though both sat in the courts of the church. The same struggle, however, was to re-emerge in the 19th century in a powerful clash between leading theologians of the time, including the two greatest: Charles Hodge of Princeton, and James Henley Thornwell of Columbia, South Carolina.¹⁷

Samuel Miller

Early in that century Samuel Miller published *An Essay on the Warrant, Nature and Duties of the Office of the Ruling Elder in the Presbyterian Church*.¹⁸ Miller wrote his essay seeking to revive an appreciation and to elevate the importance of the work of ruling elders as they existed in the Presbyterian churches. In outlining this work from the Scriptures, Miller cited New Testament texts using the term *presbuteroi*,¹⁹ texts studiously avoided by the

Westminster Assembly in its *Form of Presbyterian Church Government* when dealing with, what were later called, “ruling elders.” These texts were widely acknowledged in the Presbyterian tradition to be concerned with the office of pastor or minister of the word, but their application to the office of ruling elder was disputed. Hodge, for instance, denied that ruling elders were *presbuteroi* in the official sense, i.e. in the sense of denoting an office in the church. He would only allow that the term applied to ruling elders in a general sense, just as Paul calls himself a *diakonos* (“deacon”) even though he is not officially (that is, did not hold the office of) a deacon.²⁰

Miller, however, following the lead of Calvin, et al., saw in the New Testament that those who both preach and rule and those who only rule were both considered “elders” (*presbuteroi*), however different they might be in other respects. Like others before him, he thought this distinction to be clearly taught in I Timothy 5:17. But he also thought that this distinction was taught elsewhere in the Scriptures. For instance, he found evidence of this distinction in the fact that distinct gifts are mentioned for ruling and for teaching in Romans 12 and I Corinthians 12. Also, from the fact that *a plurality of elders* was indicated in each of the churches where they are mentioned (e.g. Acts 14:23 and Titus 1:5), Miller concluded that there must be some elders among them who only ruled. To have more than one preacher would not be feasible for every church. There would not be sufficient need, nor would there be sufficient resources for supporting a multiplicity of preachers in every church.²¹

Yet, however much Miller applied the *presbuteroi* passages to the ruling elders, he remained committed to “three distinct classes of officers:” 1) the Teaching Elder, Bishop or Pastor, 2) the Ruling Elder, and 3) the Deacon. The Teaching Elder and the Ruling Elder were both presbyters and thus both entitled and called to rule in the church; yet the Teaching Elder also preached and administered the sacraments, functions denied to the Ruling Elder. Thus, there was very little difference in practice between his view and Hodge’s, a point noted by Hodge himself. Their only difference, said Hodge, was in the method of establishing the divine warrant for the office.²²

Hodge and Thornwell

Charles Hodge and James Henley Thornwell clashed in a mighty way in the mid-century.

Thornwell was provoked into controversy over actions of the General Assembly in the 1840's. Successive General Assemblies had approved a motion declaring that a quorum for a presbytery meeting would be three ministers. It also declared that the right to ordain *ministers* belonged exclusively to ministers: it was, according to the General Assembly's motion, "simply a declaratory ministerial act... (which) belonged properly to ministers."²³

Quorum

On the issue of quorum, of course, Thornwell did believe that a presbytery could be formed and exist with only three ministers, and cited as an example the formation of the Associate Presbytery in Scotland by Ebenezer Erskine, James Fisher, William Wilson, and Alexander Moncrieff. It was not Thornwell's contention that the presence of ruling elders is absolutely essential to the being of a presbytery. However, neither was it his conviction that the presence of *ministers* is absolutely essential to the being of a presbytery: the Associate Presbytery, for instance, might just as well have been formed by four ruling elders. What is essential to the formation and being of a presbytery is, simply, *presbyters*, whether ministers or ruling elders. It does not matter which it is.

In Thornwell's view, a *presbyter* in the New Testament sense is a ruling officer—nothing more, nothing less—of which there are two types. Ruling elders are ruling officers *simply*. Their function is to rule, *i.e.* to govern the church and its members. We must recognize that this is not just a decision-making role, in Thornwell's view. It is a shepherding role: watching over the flock to insure its well-being. It would include many pastoral duties. Ministers, by contrast, are ruling officers in this sense, but they also have added to their duties that of preaching the word and administrating the sacraments. These added duties do not belong to the office of *presbyter* as such, for being a *presbyter* does not automatically entitle one to preach and administer the sacraments.

It was Thornwell's view that both ministers and ruling elders are necessary for a *regular* and *complete* presbytery, one fully conforming to the teaching of the Scriptures.²⁴ Standing especially on the central text of I Timothy 5:17, Thornwell contended that two types of presbyters were to be found in a properly constituted New Testament presbytery, and that both were required for complete conformity to the

Scriptures.

Ordination

With regard to the question of ordination, Thornwell argued that it was not simply "a declaratory ministerial act," but a *governmental* act; it belonged to a presbytery as such, not to any one of its members individually considered nor to the ministers exclusively.²⁵ Thornwell cites I Timothy 4:14, Timothy's ordination, "when the body of elders laid their hands on you." Older translations simply use the word "presbytery" here. Thornwell takes this to be decisive for the case: it is *presbyteries* that ordain, not ministers as such; if it then belongs to presbyteries, and thus to *presbyters* according to their officer, there is no basis for excluding ruling elders from the ordination of ministers since they are as much presbyters as are the ministers.

The disagreements between Thornwell and Hodge were important and mighty. Nonetheless, apart from the two issues of quorum and ordination, there was actually very little difference in their respective positions on the elder and minister as things practically worked out in the church. Both restricted preaching and the administration of the sacraments to the minister or preacher. Both allowed for ministers and ruling elders a place of importance in the government of the church. Both took the offices of minister and ruling elder to be established by the Scriptures (though they differed on how the offices were established). And for the most part, these positions still define the nature of Presbyterianism as it exists today. Yet, unresolved questions remain under the surface of our present and past polity.

Like Bucer, Calvin, and many others before him, Thornwell maintains that I Timothy 5:17 establishes the existence of two distinct types of presbyters, those who rule only, and those who both teach and rule.²⁶ However, not all Presbyterians have been convinced of this position. For instance, a study committee of the Reformed Presbyterian Church, Evangelical Synod, (the churches of which now belong to the Presbyterian Church in America) presented to its General Synod a paper exploring the issue of the eldership. That report contained papers by the very highly respected George W. Knight, III and Edmund P. Clowney, both of whom defended the traditional interpretation of I Timothy 5:17. Yet the committee found it necessary to dissent from this

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interpretation in their report to the Synod, and published an appendix to their report indicating an alternative interpretation.²⁷ The same struggle that so agitated the Westminster Assembly is still with us today: does I Timothy 5:17 actually teach a distinction between two types of elders?

Additional Questions

Additional questions remain.²⁸ Assuming that a distinction is to be made between two types of elders, what is the difference between them? What is suggested by the text is that one type both teaches and rules, while the other only rules. But why then does Paul require Titus to appoint in every city elders (*presbuteroi*) who "can encourage in sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it" (Tit. 1:9)? He seems to be requiring this ability in all the elders. Likewise, in I Timothy 3:2, Paul requires that overseers be "apt to teach." The word "overseer" (*episcopoi*) is used in Titus 1:7 to refer to the same group of officers known as "elders" in Titus 1:5. These two terms are also used as synonyms in Acts 20:17,28. In that passage, Paul commits his own work of ministry to the elders/overseers of the Ephesian church, a ministry which included teaching both publicly and from house to house (v. 20). Also, Paul prefaces his list of qualifications for overseers in I Timothy 3 by the words "must be," which translate the Greek word *dei* meaning "it is necessary." Paul is making it mandatory for an "overseer" to be "apt to teach." On what basis, then, would the church recognize "non-teaching" elders, elders who only rule? How can Thornwell maintain that a presbyter is simply a ruling officer if in fact the Scriptures require that he be "able to teach...so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it" (I Timothy 3:2, Titus 1:9)? Given that ruling elders are given the right to sit in the courts of the church, participate in the examination of ministers, in doctrinal controversies, etc., surely they must be "able to teach" sound doctrine and able "to refute those who oppose it." If they possess equal authority, must they not also possess equal competency?

Moreover, if Miller is correct in finding the office of ruling elder in Acts 14:23, 15:4-6, 20:28, and I Thessalonians 5:12-13, as most Presbyterians tend to do today, then on what basis does he omit from I Timothy 3 the qualification "able to teach" when he discusses the qualifications for ruling elders?²⁹

But, if all elders are then to be able to teach, and

to refute those who oppose sound teaching, on what basis could we maintain that some duties are peculiar to ministers as such, such as preaching and administering the sacraments? Today, many Presbyterian churches do permit others besides ministers to preach. Indeed, it is a widespread practice that not just elders, but deacons, laymen, even youth are sometimes given the pulpit; practices far afield from our traditional understanding of the preaching office. If elders can preach, why can they not administer the sacraments?

These are the kinds of questions that remain for us. Presbyterians have a heritage which has stressed that a Scriptural foundation must be given for all our doctrine, ethics, worship, and church government. Among those Presbyterian bodies that strictly adhere to the complete authority of the Bible, there is remarkable similarity in their forms of government. Nonetheless, underneath all this similarity there are many places where questions might legitimately be raised about the Biblical foundations for our structures and our practice. The matter bears further examination. It is hoped that the other articles in this journal will assist the reader in undertaking such further examination.

Endnotes

¹ Various inconsistencies within the Forms of Government for particular Presbyterian denominations are explored in articles by Joel Gillespie and by Lee Irons and John Muether in this issue of *Faith and Practice*.

² This is the view of G. D. Henderson, *Presbyterianism* (Aberdeen: The University Press, 1954), Ch. IV, "Origins of the Eldership," pp. 53-71; also the view of C. P. Williams in the article on Oecolampadius in the *New Dictionary of Theology* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press, 1988), p. 475. It also seems to be implied by R. W. Henderson in "Concerning the Eldership, Part One," *Reformed World*, Vol. 32, No. 8, Dec. 1973, pp. 363-373. In this context, "first" does not mean the very first in history, but first of those who form the Reformed tradition of thought. R. W. Henderson (*op. cit.*, p. 364) indicates that a complete history of this subject would have to include pre-Reformation developments such as those among the Waldensians and the Bohemian Brethren or Moravians.

³ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. by John T. McNeill, trans. by Ford Lewis

But, if all elders are then to be able to teach, and to refute those who oppose sound teaching, on what basis could we maintain that some duties are peculiar to ministers as such, such as preaching and administering the sacraments?

Battles (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975), Book IV, Ch. III, sec. 8, pp. 1060f.

⁴ Calvin, and after him many others in the Reformed tradition, distinguished between pastors and teachers, the latter being called “doctors” sometimes. Eventually, however, the distinction was lost, and the office of teacher was absorbed into the pastoral office. For a history of the doctoral office in the church, see Robert W. Henderson, *The Teaching Office in the Reformed Tradition: A History of the Doctoral Ministry* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1962). The purposes of this essay do not require us to observe the distinction between pastors and doctors; both were clearly presbyters in the New Testament sense.

⁵ Calvin, *Institutes*, Book IV, Ch. IV, sec. 1, p. 1069.

⁶ Calvin, *Institutes*, Book IV, Ch. XI, sec. 1, p. 1211. Calvin also cites this text to that effect in his commentaries on Acts 14:23, I Corinthians 12:28, I Timothy 5:17, and Titus 1:7, and in his sermon on I Timothy 5:17.

⁷ G. D. Henderson, *op. cit.*, pp. 66ff.

⁸ *The First Book of Discipline*, James K. Cameron, ed. (Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, 1972), p. 174.

⁹ *The Second Book of Discipline*, James Kirk, ed. (Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, 1980), pp. 193f.

¹⁰ The most conveniently available edition of the standards of the Westminster Assembly is the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1983). This edition contains nearly all the official documents produced by the Assembly (the edition of the psalter is excepted), together with other significant documents related to them. The quotation above is from p. 402.

¹¹ William Beveridge, *A Short History of the Westminster Assembly*. Revised and edited by J. Ligon Duncan, III (Greenville, SC: Reformed Academic Press, 1993). The citation from I Corinthians 12 is actually given as “I Cor. 12:8” in the Duncan edition of Beveridge’s *Short History*. It should, of course, be verse 28, as indicated previously in this article. Beveridge is quoting from Lightfoot’s *Journal* of the Westminster Assembly’s deliberations, a key historical source for our information on the Assembly. Whether the error in citation is in Lightfoot’s, Beveridge’s or Duncan’s text I cannot say, since neither Lightfoot’s nor Beveridge’s original texts have been available to me while writing this article.

¹² To be sure, I Timothy 5:17 does appear in the proof-texts of *The Form of Presbyterian Church Government*, but only in support of the preaching offices of pastor and teacher (doctor).

¹³ The statement in parenthesis is original to the text; see p. 399 of the edition cited in n. 10.

¹⁴ See Robert S. Paul, *The Assembly of the Lord* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1985), pp. 506ff. and Alexander F. Mitchell, *The Westminster Assembly: Its History and Standards* (Edmonton, Canada: Still Waters Revival Books, 1992), pp. 186ff.

¹⁵ *Minutes of the Westminster Assembly (1644-49)*, ed. by Alexander Mitchell and John Struthers (Edmonton, Canada: Still Waters Revival Books, 1991), p. 525; see also Mitchell, *The Westminster Assembly*, p. 190f.

¹⁶ Mitchell, *The Westminster Assembly*, pp. 487f. Mitchell notes there that a detailed defense of this position is given, extending to twenty pages. He also includes quotations from many other contemporary sources indicating the frequent citation of I Timothy 5:17 in support of two types of elders.

¹⁷ A good summary of this debate may be found in Iain Murray, “Ruling Elders—A Sketch of a Controversy,” *Banner of Truth Magazine*, No. 235; April, 1983. This article can also be found in *Order in the Offices: Essays Defining the Roles of Church Officers*, Mark R. Brown, ed. (Duncansville, PA: Classic Presbyterian Government Resources, 1993), pp. 157-168. I am greatly indebted to Murray’s article for the following synopsis of this controversy.

¹⁸ This essay grew out of a sermon preached in 1809 and published in 1811. It was developed into an essay in 1821 and was subsequently enlarged (1831). British editions also appeared in 1835 and 1842. It is now back in print through Presbyterian Heritage Publications. Citations to Miller in this article are to the second edition (1832) of Miller’s essay as republished by Presbyterian Heritage Publications, 1987.

¹⁹ See, for instance, pp. 51f. where he cites such passages as Acts 14:23; 20:20,28; James 5:14; I Peter 5:1-3; Titus 1:5, and, of course, I Timothy 5:17.

²⁰ Hodge’s article, “Presbyterianism,” can be found as Appendix B in *The Collected Writings of James Henley Thornwell, Vol. 4: Ecclesiastical* (Edinburgh, Scotland and Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1974). The citation here is to p. 629 in the Thornwell volume.

²¹ Miller, pp. 49-72.

²² Hodge, p. 628.

²³ B. M. Palmer, *The Life and Letters of James Henley Thornwell* (Edinburgh, Scotland and Carlisle, Pennsylvania: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1986), pp. 251ff. Chapter XVIII is devoted to “The Elder Controversy” and contains a good deal of original correspondence between Thornwell and R. J. Breckinridge, his supporter and ally in the controversy, well worth the reading.

²⁴ Thornwell, *Collected Writings*, Vol. IV, “The Ruling Elder,” pp. 43-114. On the present point, see especially pp. 43-49.

²⁵ Thornwell, “The Ruling Elder,” pp. 115-131. See especially n. 3, pp. 129f.

²⁶ Interestingly, both Thornwell and Miller cite with much recommendation the treatment of I Timothy 5:17 by John Owen in “On the True Na-

ture of a Gospel Church” (see Vol. 20 of Owen’s Works). For Thornwell’s recommendation, see *Collected Works*, Vol. IV, pp. 118f., n. 2. For Miller, see *The Ruling Elder*, pp. 58f.

²⁷ See *Documents of Synod: Study Papers and Actions of the Reformed Presbyterian Church, Evangelical Synod—1965-1982*, Paul R. Gilchrist, ed. (Lookout Mountain, TN: Reformed Presbyterian Church, Evangelical Synod), p. 240.

²⁸ For an exploration of some of these questions, see the article by Joel Gillespie in this issue of *Faith and Practice*.

²⁹ See p. 246 of “The Ruling Elder,” where the qualifications of a ruling elder are listed, taken directly from I Timothy 3:1-7, but which strikingly omits “apt to teach.”

The Elder and the Session

Jesus Christ, now and forever the Great Shepherd and Head of the church, has chosen to shepherd and rule His flock through the life and ministry of human servants. This is seen clearly in the witness of New Testament scripture.

As the apostles and evangelists established local churches in various cities, they left these fledgling churches under the care and direction of a group of men referred to variously as elders, overseers, and shepherds. These elders had the dual function of shepherding and overseeing the affairs of the local congregation.

Our *Form of Government* designates these elders or presbyters as ruling elders (or just “elders”) and teaching elders (or “pastors” or “ministers”).

The body of elders gathered together in its official capacity is referred to as the session. The session is the lowest court or official governing body in our denomination, and under the guidance of presbytery and synod has jurisdiction over the affairs of the local assembly. Each elder is called to fulfill a role both as an individual leader and as a voting member of the session.

As a shepherd, he is to provide an example of life, character, and witness for the flock. He is also called to protect, care for, and nourish the “sheep” who make up the local flock. That is, he is to protect the flock from false teaching, false teachers, and from unruly and divisive individuals; he is to get out

among the flock, getting to know, showing concern for, and caring for the individual sheep; and he is to feed the flock through admonition and teaching from the word of God. This shepherding function is fulfilled through individual ministry amongst the flock, as well as through decisions made by the session as a body.

As an overseer, each elder sits on the session, and through prayer, discussion, debate, deliberation, and vote, participates in the governing and ruling of the total ministry of the congregation. In addition the elder may be called individually to manage or oversee specific ministry areas under the authority of the session as a whole.

As outlined by Paul in his letters to Timothy and Titus, the elder must be a man who leads an exemplary life. In summary, he must be someone with a good reputation, self-control, godly wisdom and values, a loving heart, and healthy home, a mature faith, and a temperate and teachable spirit. He must also be doctrinally sound, well versed in Scripture, able to teach and admonish the flock in the things of God, discerning truth from falsehood in doctrine and morals. It is admitted that no one has all these qualities in full measure, although these qualities must generally characterize the elder, even as the elder continues to grow in each area as outlined by Paul.

The Elder As Presbyter

Joel S. Gillespie

Some of the most profound thinking about Presbyterian church government grew out of the great church polity debates of the 1830's and 1840's in the United States.¹ Of particular interest was the prolonged written engagement between Dr. Charles Hodge of Princeton Seminary and Dr. James Henry Thornwell of Columbia Seminary, over the issue of the role and status of the ruling elder. Hodge took the position that the ruling elder was *not* to be equated with the *presbiteros* (normally translated as "elder" and which I refer to as "presbyter") of the New Testament. That is, where we read the word "elder" in our New Testament translations, we should not generally, according to Hodge, translate or interpret this as "ruling elder," the latter being a different office altogether from the New Testament *presbiteros*. Thornwell, on the other hand, tended to equate the ruling elder with the New Testament presbyter.² Thus, according to Thornwell, it is proper, indeed necessary, to include in our understanding of those New Testament *presbiteros* passages the idea of "ruling elder."

Though differing on whether a ruling elder was a presbyter, Hodge and Thornwell were both very concerned to distinguish the role of the ruling elder from that of the minister or teaching elder. If Thornwell's view is right, then both the minister and ruling elder can look to the New Testament *presbiteros* passages for guidance, for both are new Testament presbyters. Nevertheless they differ in other significant ways, since for Thornwell only the minister carries out the ministry of the word and sacraments. If Hodge's view is right then only the minister, or "teaching elder," can rightfully look to the New Testament *presbiteros* passages for guidance. To Hodge, the ruling elder, along the lines of thinking of the Westminster Divines, is another office altogether, based on the Old Testament pattern of "elders of the people," elders who served in a civil capacity yet "shared with the religious leaders responsibility for governing the public life of the people of God."³

This issue of biblical eldership was revisited in an important essay by T.F. Torrance, "The Eldership in the Reformed Church," published in 1984 in the *Scottish Journal of Theology*.⁴ This paper was impor-

tant in that it called for a fundamental re-examination of the very concept of ruling elder, a concept undoubtedly close to the core of distinctive Presbyterianism. Although he does not address the Thornwell debate directly, Torrance stands with Hodge in refusing to equate the ruling elder with the New Testament *presbiteros*.⁵ Yet Torrance stands against Hodge in challenging Hodge's theory that there were two kinds of elder in the New Testament—a teaching elder *and* a ruling elder.⁶ In Torrance's view there is only one kind of New Testament "elder," and this is the equivalent of our minister of the word. Because of semantic confusion around the use of the word "elder," Torrance would prefer not to use that term for the biblical office of *presbiteros*. Thus the real challenge of Torrance is more profound than whether Hodge or Thornwell is more right in his respective analysis of the relationship between the ruling elder and teaching elder. Torrance's challenge is that we should question the very notion of the ruling elder as a New Testament office.

This paper is a preliminary response to Torrance's challenge. Its burden is to determine who can lay claim to being the equivalent of the New Testament *presbiteros*. Is Hodge right that only the minister can lay claim to being a *presbiteros*? Is Thornwell right that the "ruling elder" is also a New Testament *presbiteros*? Is Torrance right that whoever the New Testament *presbiteros* is, only this person should lay claim to the title of elder? Whatever the answer is, the implications are far reaching.

The paper is divided into three parts: 1) a review of the pertinent New Testament texts, 2) a tentative appraisal of the issue, and 3) a reflection upon the implications of this appraisal.

THE BIBLICAL TEXTS

The term "elder" in most versions of the New Testament is a translation of *presbiteros* in one or another of its forms. There are several key passages and groups of passages which are particularly revealing as to the meaning of this important term. These will be examined in turn.

This paper is a preliminary response to Torrance's challenge. Its burden is to determine who can lay claim to being the equivalent of the New Testament *presbiteros*.

Acts 14:21-23

After having established and encouraged disciples in various Asia Minor communities, Paul and Barnabas appointed elders, or *presbuteroi*, in every church, after having prayed with fasting:

They preached the good news in that city and won a large number of disciples. Then they returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith. "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God," they said. Paul and Barnabas appointed elders [*presbuteroi*] for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust (Acts 14:21-23).

There is no evidence in this passage for a subgroup of *prebuteroi* who rule only, who are not involved in the ministry of the word.

Three things are of special note here. First, *presbuteroi* here is plural, as it almost always is in the New Testament. It is a plurality of *presbuteroi* that is appointed. Second, this plurality of *presbuteroi* is appointed in every church. No church (whether a city-church or a more local congregation) was to be without *presbuteroi*. Third, the matter of appointing is very serious, as evidenced by the prayer with fasting. For Paul, moving on as he was from these fledgling church bodies, it was imperative that they be placed in the hands of the right leaders.

Acts 20:16-31

This text is central to the discussion. Paul, in a hurry to get to Jerusalem by Pentecost, was unwilling to stop over in Asia Minor, so, landing on a nearby island of Miletus, he sends word for the elders of the church at Ephesus to meet him at Miletus:

Paul had decided to sail past Ephesus to avoid spending time in the province of Asia, for he was in a hurry to reach Jerusalem, if possible, by the day of Pentecost. From Miletus, Paul sent to Ephesus for the elders [*presbuteroi*] of the church (Acts 20:16-17).

Speaking to these Ephesian *presbuteroi* on the waterfront in Miletus, Paul says:

Now I know that none of you among whom I have gone about preaching the kingdom will

ever see me again. Therefore, I declare to you today that I am innocent of the blood of all men. For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God. Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock [*poimnio*] of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers [*episkopous*]. Be shepherds [*poimanein*] of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock [*poimniou*]. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears (Acts 20:25-31).

There are several things to note in this passage. First, the Ephesian *presbuteroi* have care over a *flock*, which they are to *shepherd*. *Poimanein*, "to shepherd," (and translated in the NIV here as "Be shepherds") is the infinitive form of the verb *poimaino*, which means to tend like a shepherd, to keep sheep, to tend a flock, etc. Our concept of pastoring is rooted in this rich Greek word group. Jeremias summarizes the shepherd's task: "the pastor's task is to care for the congregation, seek the lost, and to combat heresy."⁷ These Ephesian shepherds in Acts 20 are thus to protect the flock against dangers which threaten from within and without. As Jeremias puts it: "Here for the first time they appear '*in corpore*' as guardians of the tradition of the apostles who appointed them and entrusted the guidance of the community to them."⁸ The *presbuteroi* of Ephesus, therefore, are pastors, and have the function of shepherding the flock of God.

The second thing to note is that the *presbuteroi* of Ephesus are also *episkopoi*, translated variously as "overseers" or "bishops," and have been made such by the Holy Spirit. As *episkopoi*, these *presbuteroi* are to exercise loving oversight and governance of the congregation. They are to keep watch as guardians of the flock.

In summary, the Ephesian *presbuteros* is also an *episkopos* and a *poimein*; that is, the Ephesian elder is also an overseer and a pastor. There is no evidence in this passage for a subgroup of *prebuteroi* who rule only, who are not involved in the ministry of the word. Nor is there any evidence for a separate group of leaders apart from the *presbuteroi* who oversee and pastor the flock.

Acts 15

On six occasions in Acts 15, variations of the phrase *apostoloi kai presbuteroi* (apostles and elders) are used of the governing leaders in Jerusalem, leaders who, in the words of Jeremias, “clearly function as a supreme court and normative teaching office for the whole church.”⁹ This function was that of the “elders” as well as of the apostles; thus, whoever the elders were, they, with the apostles, had control of doctrinal or teaching matters.

1 Peter 5:1-4

Once again an apostle makes an appeal to the leadership of the churches to whom he is writing:

To the elders [*presbuteroi*] among you, I appeal as a fellow elder [*synpresbuteros*], a witness of Christ’s sufferings and one who also will share in the glory to be revealed: Be shepherds [*poimantei*] of God’s flock [*poimnion*] that is under your care, serving as overseers [*episkopountes*]—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock [*poimniou*]. And when the Chief Shepherd [*archipoimenos*] appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away (1 Peter 5:1-4).

As in the previous passage, these *presbuteroi* are to function as shepherds or pastors over the flock. And, again, these *presbuteroi* are also designated as “overseers.” The admonition not to “lord over” the church suggests that the “elders” had disciplinary powers.¹⁰ The exhortation that they are not to be “greedy for money” suggests either that they had charge of the community purse,¹¹ or that they were recompensed for their labors. Their charge to shepherd voluntarily, not under compulsion, and with eagerness, suggests that the shepherds were in an office or “recognized position which carried obligation.”¹² Clearly these *presbuteroi* are the recognized leaders of the congregations. Once again, in an important passage dealing with the ministry of the New Testament *presbuteroi*, there is neither evidence for a subgroup of *presbuteroi* who rule only, nor is there evidence of any other group of leaders who

would correspond to Hodge’s non-*presbuteros* ruling elders.

Titus 1:5-11

Although we know relatively little about Paul’s mission in Crete, it appears that he had had to leave Crete with unfinished business, and so he had left Titus there to complete what he had left undone:

The reason I left you in Crete was that you might straighten out what was left unfinished and appoint elders [*presbuteros*] in every town, as I directed you. An elder [*presbuteros*] must be blameless, the husband of but one wife, a man whose children believe and are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient (Titus 1:5-6).

We do not know how many elders were appointed in each town, how many separate fellowships may have existed in each town, or whether Titus appointed them by himself.¹³ But we do know that Paul was very concerned that the appointees be solidly committed to sound doctrine and able to discern truth from error. Interestingly, as Paul goes on to describe in more detail the needed character of these appointed elders, he shifts to the use of the word “overseer” or *episkopon* in verse 7.

Since an overseer [*episkopon*] is entrusted with God’s work, he must be blameless—not overbearing, not quick-tempered, not given to drunkenness, not violent, not pursuing dishonest gain. Rather he must be hospitable, one who loves what is good, who is self-controlled, upright, holy and disciplined. He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it. For there are many rebellious people, mere talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision group. They must be silenced, because they are ruining whole households by teaching things they ought not to teach—and that for the sake of dishonest gain (Titus 1:7-9).

Once again the appointed *presbuteroi* are also referred to as overseers.¹⁴ And again, these elder-overseers

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must have a firm grasp on orthodox doctrine, so as to be able refute those (in this case, the circumcision group) who bring false teaching into and ruin upon the churches. And although the shepherding word group is not used here in Titus, one is struck by the similarity in function between the elder-overseers in Titus and the elder-overseer-shepherds in Acts 20 and 1 Peter 5. In both cases these elders were to be guardians of sound doctrine. In both cases they were to be able to discern truth from error. In both cases they were to protect the flock from deceivers and false teachers.

1 Timothy 3:1-13

This passage is possibly the first to which an average reader of the New Testament today would turn in order to discern the qualifications and necessary character traits of “elders.” Yet, to be precise, this passage deals with the characteristics of “overseers,” not “elders.”

Here is a trustworthy saying: If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer [*episkopeis*], he desires a noble task. Now the overseer [*episkopon*] must be above reproach, the husband of but one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach... (1 Tim. 3:1-2).

The word *presbuteroi* does not appear in this passage. However, the similarities between this list of qualifications and the list in Titus are too striking to suggest that the Timothy list does not deal also with *presbuteroi*. This overseer in 1 Timothy must be able and willing to teach, which implies an ability to discern that which constitutes sound doctrine. This overseer must also be able to “rule” or “manage” his household well, since he will also be called to manage God’s household:

He [the overseer] must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect. (If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God’s church?) (1 Tim. 3:4-5).

The household which the overseer was to manage or rule well was more extensive than the household of today. This phrase “managing his own family well” probably included managing servants or slaves,

managing a business or estate, as well as managing children. That the *proisteimi* word group means more than “rule” in the normal sense in which the word “rule” is used today is clear from the way it is set in parallel to the verb “to take care of” in verse 5. As F. F. Bruce notes, this verb group “combines the ideas of leading, protecting, and caring for.”¹⁵ These responsibilities dovetail nicely with those of the elder-overseer-shepherds in the previous sections.

Another hint that this overseer is, after all, our familiar *presbuteros*, is the way that Paul picks the discussion of leadership up again later in the 5th chapter:

The elders [*presbuteroi*] who direct the affairs [*proestotes*] of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching (1 Tim. 5:17).

Although *presbuteroi* had appeared back in 1 Timothy 5:1 as a reference simply to older men, here Paul is referring to the leaders of the churches under Timothy’s care.¹⁶ He speaks of the *presbuteroi* who *direct the affairs* of the church well. The word translated as “direct the affairs” (*proestotes*) is the participial form of the same word used for “managing the household” back in chapter 3, the *proisteimi* word group. And again, the ministry of teaching is brought up here in 1 Timothy 5 in connection with these leaders (we will look below at the problems raised by the phrase “especially those”). Given the similarity between the lists in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1, given the likelihood that the *presbuteroi* of 1 Timothy 5 are the same folk as the *episkopoi* of 1 Timothy 3, and given the repeated emphasis on the ministry of teaching in reference to these leaders, the evidence builds that the overseer of 1 Timothy 3 is a *presbuteros*.

Agreement So Far

Thornwell, Hodge, and Torrance would basically agree that all New Testament *presbuteros* passages refer *at least* to our office of minister or pastor or teaching elder. None of them would doubt that the minister of the word, or pastor, or teaching elder, whatever word is used, is a New Testament *presbuteros*.

Hodge, however, allows for another office in the church which is not a New Testament *presbuteros*, an office he calls “ruling elder.” Torrance denies completely that another such office exists. Thornwell

agrees that there is another type of elder office, but he includes this office within the meaning of *presbuteros*. But we have just looked at all the pertinent *presbuteros* passages and have found no evidence at all of two types of *presbuteros*. Certainly Thornwell cannot be right. There is only one sort of *presbuteros*.

So the question remains, is there another New Testament office which would correspond either to Hodge's "ruling elder" or Westminster's "other church governor?"

A Separate Office?

Several key texts are cited by those who would allow for a separate class of officers, whether called "ruling elders" or something else. These are Romans 12:6-8; 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13; 1 Corinthians 12:28; 1 Timothy 5:17-19; and Ephesians 4:11-12.

We will begin by looking at the passage in Romans 12:

We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach, if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership [*proistamenos*], let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully (Romans 12:6-8).

The traditional interpretation of Romans 12:8 is in line with Calvin, who, in his commentary on Romans, asserts that the ones whose gift is leadership, and who use this gift to "govern," are those to whom the government of the church is committed, and who constitute another office of leader apart from the ministers.¹⁷ These leaders, to Calvin, were "the elders who presided over and ruled others and exercised discipline," who were the "correctors of morals" in the community.¹⁸ The Westminster Divines use Romans 12:8 as a proof text for the office of "other church governors." They just cite the verse, assuming that the verse is straightforward on the issue.¹⁹

The word translated as "leadership" here in Romans 12:8 is equivalent both to that translated as "manage" in 1 Timothy 3:4-5 (where the reference

was to managing a household), and to that translated as "direct the affairs of" in 1 Timothy 5. It has the idea of "taking care of" as well as governing or ruling in an absolute sense.²⁰ Hodge goes into some detail regarding this word in its context. "Here again," concludes Hodge, "the right discharge of ecclesiastical duties is principally intended."²¹ For Hodge, the word is certainly used for official leaders. The real question to Hodge is whether the word is to be taken in reference to rulers in general (civil or ecclesiastical), to church rulers or elders, or to the pastor of a congregation.²² In the context of the somewhat prioritized list of gifts in Romans 12:8, this gift of leadership is placed down among the list of gifts ordinary Christians possess. As Hodge explains, it would be incongruous to read the list of duties as "He that gives, he that acts as pastor, he that shows mercy."²³ Thus, this gift must refer to *anyone* who "exercises authority" in the church, not just the pastor.²⁴ Although Hodge does not specifically state it in his commentary, he is trying to show that these ordinary Christians who have gifts for leadership would (or could) correspond to official lay leaders, to the "ruling elders" or "other church governors,"²⁵ as opposed to ministers or teaching elders.

But there are three problems with Hodge's analysis. First, after noting the incongruity of equating the one gifted with leadership with the pastoral office, Hodge goes on to suggest that the one whose gift is "showing mercy" corresponds to the deacon.²⁶ Would it not be equally incongruous to make the list read, "He that gives, he that rules, he that *acts as a deacon*?"

The second problem with Hodge's argument is his reference to 1 Thessalonians 5:12 as an explanation of his summary position concerning Romans 12:8. 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13a reads as follows:

Now we ask you, brothers, to respect those who work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord and who admonish you. Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work.

The word which is translated by the English phrase "are over you" is of the same word group as was translated as "leadership" in Romans 12:8, as "manage" in 1 Timothy 3:4-5, and as "direct the affairs of" in 1 Timothy 5. Paul does not use the word *presbuteros* here in the 1 Thessalonians passage. Yet

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we know from the passage in Acts 14 that it was already by this time Paul's pattern to appoint *presbiteroi* in the churches. It is striking that these leaders who labor among the Thessalonians have the same two-fold function of the *presbiteroi* in the passages analyzed above, that is, leading and teaching (who are over you and admonish you). These leaders in Thessalonica sound a great deal like the elder-overseer-pastors of Acts 20:17 and 1 Peter 5:1-4. At any rate, Hodge's use of 1 Thessalonians 5:12 actually counters his assertion that the "ruling" of Romans 12:8 does not have reference to the pastoral office. His attempt to equate the one gifted in leadership in Romans 12 with a non-*presbiteroi* type elder just does not hold up to scrutiny.

Third, we cannot assume, despite rather extensive attempts to do so,²⁷ that these gifted ones are necessarily official office holders anyway.

1 Corinthians 12:28

Here the reader finds another enumeration of spiritual gifts:

And in the church God has appointed first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, also those having gifts of healing, those able to help others, those with gifts of administration, and those speaking in different kinds of tongues. (1 Cor. 12:28).

The word translated here as "gifts of administration," *kyberneiseis*, has to do with giving guidance or direction.²⁸ Its cognate in Acts 27:11 and Revelation 18:17 refers to the helmsman or pilot of a boat. Fee comments that our likely modern association of the word "administration" with "administrative skills," or with planning and paper-working skills, is a far cry from what Paul had in mind, and that this administration refers to "acts of guidance," wise counsel given to the community as a whole, to steer it in the right direction as a helmsman would do with a boat.²⁹ So we are dealing with *a kind* of leadership gift, perhaps paralleling that in Romans 12:8. But are we to conclude that this gift is restricted to office holders alone? Or may this be possessed by many people exercising leadership in a variety of ways in the local assembly?

Beyer³⁰ and Barrett³¹ both make note of the fact that here in 1 Corinthians 12:28 the first three gifts,

or gifted persons—the apostles, prophets, and teachers—were clearly involved in the proclamation of the word, whereas the gifts beginning with miracles were not associated with teaching. This loose division of what some call "enabling gifts" and "helping gifts" mirrors the list in Romans 12:8. In addition, the plural nature of "gifts of administration" suggests that this gift is given to several members, and probably not just the same members who are teachers. So this is not likely an exclusive gift of *presbiteroi*.

But does the text warrant restricting those gifted with "administration" to another official class of leaders, perhaps to Westminster's "other church governors" or Hodge's "ruling elders"? The relation between office and gift is tricky at best, and beyond the scope of this paper. The importance of this relation has intensified in the context of the current every-member-ministry movement and the rather passionate responses to it. And generally the letters which speak much of office speak relatively little of gift, and vice versa. The question remains, is there a necessary correlation between these gifts and official offices in the church?

Without going into a lengthy and technical discussion of this issue, I would offer to the readers the following approach. Read through the lists of gifts enumerated in Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12. Try to match an official church "office" with each of these gifts. I don't think you can. But if you can, ask yourself the question, "what is left for everybody else who does not hold one of these offices?" And if there is nothing else, what was the point of Paul's gift enumeration in the first place? And if you cannot match each gift with a specific office, then what warrant is there for attaching *some* gifts to *some* offices, unless correspondence with these offices is clearly delineated?

The upshot is that we just cannot use the gift/office correlation as strong evidence that Paul was intending an "office" of "ruling elder" or "other church governor" when he brought up leadership and administration in his enumeration of gifts. Although we *can say* that the *presbiteroi/episkopoi* must be able to "rule" or "manage" (according to Timothy's list), we *cannot say* with certainty that they have the *spiritual gifts* of leadership or administration. Nor can we say that those who do possess these spiritual gifts must of necessity be office holders of whatever kind. What we *can say* is that there is little evidence at all to warrant following Hodge or

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the Westminster Divines in equating those listed as having these gifts as office holders distinct from ministers.

1 Timothy 5:17

This is a very important passage for those who would make a distinction between the ruling and the teaching elder:

The elders [*presbuteroi*] who direct the affairs [*proestotes*] of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching (1 Tim. 5:17).

Several comments need to be made about this verse. First, the purpose of this passage is not to answer our question as to whether there are meant to be one or two types of leaders in our churches. Paul simply wants to affirm that the *presbuteroi* are worthy of double honor, which possibly means the combined honor of respect and financial support.³² In other words, this verse is about how the churches under Timothy's care should honor their leaders.

Second, the difficult wording of the passage *at least* opens up the door to the possibility that there are two sorts of *presbuteroi*, those whose primary work is preaching and teaching and those whose primary work is ruling. It is also possible that *presbuteroi* refers simply to older men, as it did in 1 Timothy 5:1, and that among these older men, certain ones function as "other church governors" who do not teach, while the others preach and teach and are worthy of double honor. In my judgment the use of *presbuteroi* in this passage more likely refers back to the overseers of the 3rd chapter. If in fact those who rule well are *presbuteroi* in the sense of official leaders of the church (and not older men in general), the passage admits of the possibility of distinction between *presbuteroi*, but says nothing as to the possibility of non-presbyter officers who rule.

But what is the distinction? Is it between those *presbuteroi* who rule well and those *presbuteroi* who don't rule well, the former ruling well by virtue of preaching and teaching? In this case "especially" could carry the sense of "that is" or "in other words." Or, is the distinction between those *presbuteroi* who *merely* rule well on the one hand, and those who both rule well *and* preach and teach on the other hand? In this case, "especially" would carry the sense of "particularly." A quick survey of the twelve New

Testament occurrences of "especially" (*malista*) generally supports the meaning of "particularly." Among those *presbuteroi* who rule well, some in particular have the work of preaching and teaching.

But who is it that gets the double honor? Is it just those *presbuteroi* that work at preaching and teaching? That leaves other *presbuteroi* who rule well but who do not teach and teach, and who thus do not get the double honor. Yet the wording of the passage suggests that *all* the *presbuteroi* who rule well get the double honor.

Obviously, the text is problematic. There seem to be problems with every approach, possibly because we are trying to make the passage answer a question it was not intending to answer. In every other case so far analyzed, the *presbuteroi* have had a teaching function. Now are we to suppose that there are *presbuteroi* that do not have a teaching function? I do not think this is likely.

Possibly the answer lies in there being *two* separate distinctions being drawn out in the passage. As we read in the beginning of the epistle, Paul has left Timothy in Ephesus to deal with an urgent problem of false teachers.

As I urged you when I went into Macedonia, stay there in Ephesus so that you may command certain men not to teach false doctrines any longer... (1 Timothy 1:3).

As Fee notes, it is quite possible that Paul's prophecy to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20 has come true: "Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them" (Acts 20:30).³³ Given that these bearers of false doctrine were teachers, and given the likelihood that the official teachers were *presbuteroi*, it is likely that "the church is being led astray by some of its own elders."³⁴ The problem of false teachers pervades the book of 1 Timothy, even the section just prior to 1 Timothy 5:17, where we find the young widows being led astray by these false teachers. So perhaps Paul is drawing a distinction between good elders and bad elders, elders who are faithfully leading and shepherding the flock on the one hand, and elders who are renegades, who are false teachers, who need reproof on the other. This would fit well into the context of the book as a whole and with the general problem of false teachers in the church in Ephesus. Then, amongst these good elders, all of whom do in fact direct well the affairs of the church,

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Paul is making special mention of those whose special work it is to carry the load of the preaching and teaching ministry. The question of who gets the double honor remains an open one, depending partly on the sense given to “particularly.” Does this mean that only those whose work it is to carry the load of preaching and teaching get the double honor, or does this mean that *all* who rule well are to receive the double honor, with special mention going to those who carry the teaching load? Very tentatively, I think the latter.

In summary, this passage does not justify a distinction between two separate types of generic *presbuteroi* (Thornwell’s view). Nor does it in any way suggest a leadership office distinct from that of the *prebuceroi/episkopoi* (Hodge’s view). Thus, in my tentative judgment, neither Hodge nor Thornwell can find much comfort in 1 Timothy 5.

Ephesians 4:11-12

We turn now to a final text that has been used to distinguish types within the general *presbuteroi*:

It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors [*poimein*] and teachers, to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up (Eph. 4:11-12).

I grant that this conclusion seems to strike at the heart of historic Presbyterianism which, one way or another, has always sought to make room for a kind of elder office distinct from that of the minister of the word.

Most present-day commentators, because of the way the sentence is structured in the Greek, conclude that Paul had one ministry office in mind here—what we would call a pastor-teacher. The noun *poimein*, found only here in the New Testament, and translated as “pastor,” is of the same “shepherding” word group that has been used all along. This suggests some kind of equivalency with the elder-overseer-shepherds of 1 Peter 5 and Acts 20. The question is whether “pastor” and “teacher” refer to two functions of the same person (in which case the person is a *presbuteros* who both teaches and pastors); whether these refer to two groups with differing but overlapping functions (in which case perhaps all pastors may have been teachers but not all teachers pastors, or vice versa); or whether the pastor/teacher refers to a subset of *presbuteroi* (i.e., those *presbuteroi* who do a lot of teaching, as in our construction of 1 Timothy 5). I don’t know if there is any way of

deciding based on the lack of evidence from the verse and its context. At any rate, there is no support whatsoever in this passage for a ruling office in the church other than a *presbuteros*, and little if any conceivable support for two kinds of *presbuteroi*.

A TENTATIVE APPRAISAL

So where does all of this lead? Some tentative judgments are in order at this point, but they are being offered as preliminary conclusions only.

First of all, the question must be addressed as to who was right in the Thornwell-Hodge debate. As to the question of whether or not “ruling elders” should be considered as New Testament *presbuteroi*, this writer would side with Thornwell—yes, they should be, that is, if you insist on calling some *presbuteroi* ruling elders. On the basis of our study of the biblical texts themselves, however, there is no ground for affirming the existence of a generic *presbuteros* which can then be subdivided into two types, a ruling one and a teaching one. That is, there is no basis for affirming the existence of two kinds of *prebuceroi*.

But neither is there any evidence for the existence of a class of leaders (apart from deacons, that is³⁵) separate and distinct from the *presbuteroi*, whether these are called (unfortunately) “ruling elders” as with Hodge, or “other church governors” as with the Westminster Divines. Against Hodge, therefore, I agree profoundly with Torrance, and question the existence of any other leadership group apart from the *presbuteroi* (elders who are also overseers and shepherds) and the *diakonoi*.

I grant that this conclusion seems to strike at the heart of historic Presbyterianism which, one way or another, has always sought to make room for a kind of elder office distinct from that of the minister of the word. When one thinks of “Presbyterian” one immediately thinks of “elders,” usually “lay” elders. However, my conclusion retains what in my judgment seems most necessary to retain, and that is that the leadership of the church is given to a *plurality* of presbyters who are fundamentally equal in calling, rank, and dignity.³⁶

The question naturally arises that if these conclusions are right, is it good to retain use of the word “elder”? In my judgment, there is so much confusing historic tradition and semantic difficulty surrounding the English word “elder” as applied to church leaders, that it may well be best instead to

use the transliterated English form of *presbutteros*, that is, “presbyter,” to refer to the ordained leaders in the local church. However, even if these conclusions are correct, there is much momentum for the traditional language, and I grant the probability that the traditional language will carry the day, that we will retain not only the use of the word “elder” with its semantic confusions, but also, at least in our common language, words which distinguish between *presbutteroi*, such as “pastors” and “elders,” “teaching elders” and “ruling elders” and so on. But even though traditional language will likely be retained, if the above conclusions are correct, we can possibly invest the traditional words with more biblical meanings.

THE PASTOR AND THE ELDER

If this assessment is correct it has rather profound practical implications for how those of us who are currently using the traditional language might invest different meaning into these words. First of all, since we have seen no firm evidence in the New Testament of any other leadership position apart from the *presbutteros-poimein-episkopos* (except of course for the deacon), we must affirm that, as regards to content or meaning, the distinction we make between “teaching elders” (or “pastors” or “ministers”) on the one hand and “ruling elders” (or simply “elders”) on the other hand *is an arbitrary distinction*. This means then that there is no real or biblical distinction in calling, ministry, rank, dignity, or authority between the various *presbutteroi* who serve in a local church. That is, all *presbutteroi*, whatever common word is used to describe them, are fundamentally equivalent as elder-pastor-overseers.³⁷

Second, because of the intense demands of being a presbyter, we have adopted the practice of setting aside some of these elder-pastor-bishops to full-time paid presbytership. Typically, but not necessarily, these are set aside for a special ministry of the word, it being recognized that the ministry of preaching and teaching places such time demands on an elder-pastor-bishop that he needs to be freed up from his responsibility to make a living in a “normal” way; and thus he comes under the support of the body so as to pursue his specialized word ministry. Ideally the ones so set aside have a giftedness from God which is conducive to such a pursuit. The formal education which may be required to help equip him for this role, added to the fact that he, as

a full-time presbyter is continually in touch with a wide range of people in the congregation, should give him an important advisory role in the affairs of the church as a whole. Yet, neither this formal training nor the high profile necessarily give him greater godly wisdom, clearer vision of the big picture, or even keener Biblical acumen than other elder-pastor-bishops. Nor is he endowed with any special official status or authority. Rather when all is said and done, he is merely *one of the group*, set aside, for practical time reasons, for specific presbyter functions—functions also pursued (with less time available) by the other elders.

Often in practice it is difficult for the non-paid presbyter to have a clear sense of his equality with the paid presbyter over the range of general pastor-elder-overseer responsibilities. He may sense his equality as he exercises his role in a meeting of the session, yet he still fails to know that God has placed equally upon his shoulders the responsibility of the health and vitality of the flock. He may have a sense that the ultimate responsibility rests not so much with himself as part of the plurality of the *presbutteroi*, but with the “professional,” seminary trained, full-time presbyter. Thus, he may fail to train himself adequately in the Scriptures; he may fail to pursue his responsibilities (in the time that is available) for shepherding those under his care; he may become lax in his governmental assignments. Unwittingly, he abdicates the fullness of his own responsibility before Christ, and by default transfers that responsibility to others. Many factors contribute to this abdication—the terminology (“pastor” vs. “elder”), the fact that paid presbyters have more time to attend to presbyter matters, the cultural identification of paid presbyters as spiritual professionals, the zeal of the paid elders, the lack of public recognition that he as a non-paid presbyter receives from the flock at large—all of these factors contribute to an ongoing identity crisis for the non-paid presbyter. What *is* his role? How *does* he understand it? How *does* he prepare for it? How *does* he fulfill it? And how *does* he carry out his mandate under Christ?

Third, as we disciple, equip, and prepare men for possible future leadership, we must have in mind the high calling of New Testament *presbutteroi* and not some scaled down (or dumbed down) secondary-level elder office. We are preparing men to be co-pastors, co-overseers, co-presbyters with those to whom we traditionally attribute the title “pastor” or “minister.” We are preparing people to be contem-

We are preparing men to be co-pastors, co-overseers, co-presbyters with those to whom we traditionally attribute the title “pastor” or “minister.”

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porary versions of those *presbuteroi/episkopoi* who met with Paul at Miletus, those *presbuteroi/episkopoi* exhorted by Peter to “shepherd the flock of God,” those *presbuteroi/episkopoi* who are, as in Paul’s words to Titus, “both to exhort in sound doctrine and refute those who contradict.” The calling is a high one, and we must raise the bar, and possibly restructure our seminaries, accordingly.

Fourth, we must beware of the current movement towards the pastor as CEO and elders as board members. The plurality of equal *presbuteroi* must not delegate, intentionally or by default, to one of its members unique authority over the affairs of the church. This authority is Christ’s alone and He has chosen to exercise this authority through *a plurality of presbuteroi*. If this plurality were to delegate its governmental and shepherding authority to one of its members, it would cease to exist as an authoritative body. A session simply cannot transfer its responsibility to a pastor and continue to be a session. Neither a single pastor in a smaller church nor a senior pastor in a multiple-pastor church has special authority as compared with the non-paid elder-pastor-overseers. His role in the plurality (apart from those duties legitimately and specifically assigned to him, and which flow out of his common calling with the other *presbuteroi*, such as preparing and preaching sermons, counseling, visiting the sick, etc.) is advisory and not authoritative. Even in the area of his specific duties he co-labors with the other *presbuteroi*, and is under the authority of the plurality of elder-overseer-pastors, of which he is just one, and is to be held accountable by the plurality as a whole.

Fifth, if in fact the New Testament *presbuteroi* constitute the only New Testament leadership office, and if there are no distinctions among these *presbuteroi*, then we need to re-examine the differing responsibilities presently assigned to ministers on the one hand and elders on the other. If my analysis is correct, then all *presbuteroi* should be able to preach the word, administer the sacraments, pronounce benedictions, moderate sessions, and so on.

Sixth and finally, our *Form of Government* needs to reflect a consistent understanding of who the “elder” is, whether in doing so it would reflect the conclusion that I have reached above, or different conclusions perhaps more in line with either Hodge or Thornwell. As it stands, the ARP *Form of Government* (FOG) is hopelessly confused on the question as to whether our ruling elder is a New Testament

presbuteros.

On the one hand, there are some statements which lean our FOG in the direction of seeing the elder as a non-presbyter. For example, in VIII A. 1., which describes ruling elders, we read, “There were elders of the people for the government of the Old Testament church. Likewise in the New Testament church, besides the apostles and ministers, there were elders who ruled.” This statement suggests three groups—apostles, ministers, and “elders who ruled”—echoing the “other church governor” language of the writers of the Confession. Likewise, the distinction between the two types of elders—ruling and teaching—suggests some basic or fundamental distinction between the types. In addition, the somewhat differing responsibilities assigned to ruling and teaching elders, particularly the exclusion of ruling elders from administering the sacraments, suggests possibly more than a mere practical distinction between these two elders types.

On the other hand, there are statements in our FOG which clearly associate the ruling elder with the New Testament *presbuteroi*, and which assign to the ruling elder a shepherding role quite beyond that of Westminster’s “other church governors.” For example, in Chapter VIII A. 2., just under the quotation cited above in support of the “other church governor” approach, is this statement: “To the office of ruling elder shall be chosen men of wisdom, discretion, sound faith and Godly life who are qualified under the standards recorded in Scripture.” It is assumed that these standards are those in 1 Timothy and Titus which deal with the character traits of *episkopoi* and *presbuteroi* respectively. To what other Scriptural standards might the FOG be referring? Thus, the very basis of who and what the ruling elder is all about is defined in the FOG by the New Testament presbyter. In addition, the individual responsibilities of the ruling elder, although not as complete in the ministry of the word aspect as the minister’s responsibilities, nevertheless cover almost every aspect of the shepherding role of the New Testament *presbuteroi*. And Finally, in Chapter II A. 2., “Concerning the Government of the Church,” it states unambiguously that “the Presbyterian form of church government is government by presbyters (elders) assembled in church courts” (parenthetical comment quoted directly). Thus the correspondence of our ruling elders with New Testament presbyters is made very explicit.

CONCLUSION

I wrote the precursor to this essay as an assignment for an independent study course in Church Polity almost ten years ago now. At that time I had frankly little interest in the subject. I approached it with some naivete and detachment. It was for me pretty theoretical and technical, unconnected to the real work of the local church.

The subsequent ten years have opened my eyes a great deal. I have seen first hand the positive consequences of a strong, biblically grounded eldership, and the negative consequences of a weak and tentative eldership. I have watched as pastors and elders have struggled to understand each other and their respective roles. I have watched as ruling elders have struggled to understand their role and calling in the local church. I have attempted, as a solo “paid presbyter,” to build a collegial ministry of fellow-shepherds in a local assembly, and have experienced the difficulties which the full-time/non-full-time distinction creates for achieving this goal.

In re-researching and rethinking the issues raised in this article I have grown more convinced that how we understand ourselves as elders and pastors will have profound practical consequences for our churches, and for the overall ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ in the world. In this essay I set out to determine whether there existed any Scriptural warrant for an office of ruling elder, whether we understand this ruling elder as a subset of the New Testament *presbuteroi* or as a separate office altogether. I have concluded that no such warrant exists, and that there is only one New Testament office apart from deacon. You may reach a different conclusion. I hope you will agree, however, that what we conclude about this matter will have significant effects upon how we understand ourselves as leaders within our churches. In the least I hope that this essay will stimulate thought and discussion, and will have the practical effect of reinvigorating us all as to our calling as leaders of the New Covenant people of God. To this end I will pray.

ENDNOTES

¹ Joan S. Gray and Joyce C. Tucker, *Presbyterian Polity for Church Officers* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1952), p. 40. See also Mark Ross's article “The Presbyterian Ruling Elder in History” in this issue of *Faith and Practice*.

² Ernest Trice Thompson, *Presbyterians in the*

South Volume 1, 1607-1861 (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1963), p. 512.

³ T. F. Torrance, “The Eldership in the Reformed Church,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* Volume 37 (Edinburgh, 1984), p. 509.

⁴ Torrance pp. 503-518.

⁵ Torrance, p. 508.

⁶ Torrance, p. 508.

⁷ As quoted by Gunther Bornkamm, *presbus* in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament (TDNT)*, Volume III, ed. Gerhard Kittel, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans's 1977), p. 665.

⁸ Bornkamm, p. 665.

⁹ Bornkamm, p. 665.

¹⁰ Bornkamm, p. 665.

¹¹ Bornkamm, p. 665.

¹² Bornkamm, p. 665.

¹³ Gordon D. Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus: New International Biblical Commentary* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1988), p. 172.

¹⁴ Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus*, p. 172. Fee contends that whereas certainly the overseers were also elders, that it is possible that there were elders who were not overseers. This possibility could open a narrow crack allowing for a distinction between *presbuteroi* and *episkopoi*. The only evidence I can imagine for such a contention is the repetition of the admonition to be blameless, which could possibly suggest that Paul had in mind a different group, as if he were saying, “and likewise the overseers too must be blameless.” But in 1 Timothy 3, when he certainly does have in mind a different group (the deacons), he actually uses the word “likewise” to tip us off to that fact.

¹⁵ F. F. Bruce, *1 & 2 Thessalonians, Word Biblical Commentary*, Volume 45 (Waco: Word Books, 1982), p. 119.

¹⁶ Fee, p. 128.

¹⁷ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans*, translated by the Rev. John Owen, 1849, and published in *Calvin's Commentaries*, Volume XIX (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1989), p. 463.

¹⁸ Calvin, p. 463.

¹⁹ The Assembly of Divines at Westminster, *The Confession of Faith* (Edinburgh: Johnstone, Hunter, and Co., 1886), p. 307.

²⁰ Bo Reicke, *proisteimi* in *T.D.N.T.* Volume III, p. 701.

²¹ Charles Hodge, *A Commentary on Romans* (London: Nelson, 1879), p. 392.

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²² Hodge, p. 393.

²³ Hodge, p. 393.

²⁴ Hodge, p. 393.

²⁵ Hodge, p. 393.

²⁶ Hodge, p. 393.

²⁷ See Edmund P. Clowney, "A Brief for Church Governors in Church Government," found in the *Documents of Synod: Study Papers and Actions of the Reformed Presbyterian Church, Evangelical Synod—1965-1982*, Edited by Paul Gilchrist, pp. 233-235.

²⁸ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Erdmans, 1987), p. 622.

²⁹ Fee, *Corinthians*, p. 622.

³⁰ Hermann Beyer, *kuberveisis* in *T.D.N.T.* Volume 3, p. 1036.

³¹ Barrett, p. 295. C.K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (London: Alan Charles, Blant, 1978), pp. 295-296.

³² Fee, *1 & 2 Timothy, Titus*, p. 129.

³³ Fee, *1 & 2 Timothy, Titus*, p. 7.

³⁴ Fee, *1 & 2 Timothy, Titus*, p. 8.

³⁵ Torrance, p. 505ff. Torrance believes, and I concur, that the reformed "elder of the people" came to take on much of what biblically had been attributed to the diaconate, which has had the result of lessening the significance of the office of the deacon and confusing our understanding of the ministry of the *presbiteroi*.

³⁶ To the extent that we have a plurality of *presbiteroi* in what we call a local church or local assembly, these *presbiteroi* should be equal in calling, ministry, rank, and dignity as presbyters. However we cannot know exactly how the *presbiteroi* were distributed amongst the "churches" in the earliest times. Elders were appointed in the churches of each city, but we do not know exactly how. For example, were there multiple elders in each house church in Ephesus? Or was there one elder over each house church? Did the organization of the various congregations look the same in Crete as in Ephesus? We cannot know exactly how things were organized in the various cities and regions, and whether they were organized the same way in each and every city and region. The one thing we do know—that there was some kind of city-wide eldership—is the one practice we do not in any way follow today, as every denomination has its own elders and leaders and "never the twain shall meet." Can we imagine the Lord calling a meeting of all the elders of Greensboro or Charlotte or New York? We talk about being connectional and ignore the one way the early churches

certainly *were* connectional.

³⁷ Of course, there may be differences in wisdom and maturity which will distinguish various *presbiteroi*. And there may different spiritual gifts distributed amongst the various *presbiteroi*. Some presbyters may have the spiritual gift of leadership or that of administration, and thus by the edifying "power" of this Holy Spirit giftedness may be especially able to lead and guide and direct their equals. This gift may fall upon a non-paid presbyter, or it may fall upon a paid presbyter. The authority of this gift is a "charismatic" authority, not an authority which comes by virtue of a separate office or title. The only official authority rests with the plurality of equal partners as a collective, not with any one of the specific partners.

The Shepherding Role of the Elder

Mark E. Ross

Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood (Acts 20:28).

These words were spoken by the apostle Paul to the elders of the church at Ephesus when he called them to meet with him at Miletus (Acts 20:17-38). It was a most moving meeting. For three years, Paul had ministered to that church and now, while journeying to Jerusalem and confident that these elders "would see his face no more" (Acts 20:25), he wanted to bid them farewell and remind them of their obligations and duties as elders "to shepherd the church of God." In brief, his exhortation charges them with looking after the well-being of the flock, the people of their church.

Protecting the Flock

Paul was well aware that the Ephesian church would come upon hard times:

I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them (Acts 20:29-30).

Against assault from without and against destructive threats from within, the elders are to guard themselves and the flock of God. Paul says they are "to shepherd the church of God." What does he mean by this? Just what is involved in "shepherding" the flock of God? The Greek word translated "to shepherd" in Acts 20:28 is *poimanein*, the infinitive form of the verb *poimaino*. The literal meaning of the verb is "to tend a flock." The standard Greek-English lexicon indicates that when this verb is used with respect to the care of people its meaning is "to protect, care for, nourish." As we shall see, all of these shades of meaning are brought out in the biblical

discussion of shepherding.

While the dictionary and lexicon can be of some help to us in understanding Paul's meaning when he urges elders "to shepherd" the church of God, it is the Bible itself which gives us our greatest understanding. We turn first to the example and teaching of the Good Shepherd Himself. Jesus said:

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand is not the shepherd who owns the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. "I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me—just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep (John 10:11-15).

Prominent in this passage is the idea of *protecting* the flock. Unlike the hired hand, who, when he sees the wolf coming, leaves the sheep and flees, the good shepherd stays to protect the sheep. He stays because he is concerned about the sheep, while the hired hand is not. If necessary, and in the case of the Good Shepherd it was necessary, he will lay down his life for the sheep. Most often, the sacrifice required of the shepherd will not be so great; but this extreme supposition helps us to see the basic idea more clearly: the good shepherd looks after the well-being of the sheep, doing all that is necessary for their protection. Clearly Paul had in mind the protection of the flock when he spoke to the Ephesian elders at Miletus. He knew that "savage wolves" would come in among the flock, and even from inside the flock itself there would arise men speaking perverse things. Against such enemies the flock must be protected, and it is the responsibility of *the elders* to protect them. What they must guard the flock against, principally, are corruptions either in doctrine or conduct. So far as they are able, they must see that

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not one lamb strays from the fold; or falls victim to a wolf.

Knowing the Flock

Another idea about shepherding that is important in this passage and closely connected to that of protecting the flock is that the good shepherd *knows* his sheep. “I am the good shepherd, I know my sheep and my sheep know me” (John 10:14). The good shepherd is with his flock, going among them to watch over them. He watches that no enemies enter into the flock. He looks to see if there are any who are in some need, or if any are missing. When an enemy appears, he defends the flock. If he finds that any are in need, he tries to help them. If he finds that any are missing, he will “go after the lost sheep until he finds it.” And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders (Luke 15:4,5). The good shepherd, as we can see, *cares for* the flock. But only the shepherd who knows his flock is in a position truly to care for the flock. If the shepherd is to defend the flock when he sees the wolf coming, he must be in a position *to see* that the wolf is coming. “I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep...”

Not only does the good shepherd know his own; his own know him. “I am the good shepherd, I know my sheep and my sheep know me.” The flock will not know a shepherd who does not go out among them.

The man who enters by the gate is the shepherd of his sheep. The watchman opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger’s voice” (John 10:2-5).

If the elder expects to lead his flock, clearly he must become known to his sheep. A stranger they simply will not follow. Paul shows us how to do it. His ministry in Ephesus was both public and from house to house (Acts 20:20). Each person he admonished with tears (Acts 20:31). Always his aim was to testify solemnly to the gospel of the grace of God. To do so *he went among them* preaching the kingdom (Acts

20:25). This builds trust since the sheep can see that the shepherd does indeed care for them. Without this visible demonstration of the elder’s concern and commitment to the flock of God, leadership among the flock will be severely curtailed.

The apostle Peter, like Paul, was concerned about the shepherding ministry of the elders. He says, “To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder...be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care...” (1 Pet. 5:1,2). Perhaps Peter was especially concerned about this ministry; after all, the Lord Himself three times exhorted Peter to this task. Three times the Lord inquired of Peter, “Simon, son of John, do you love Me?” And after the interrogations He would exhort him, “Tend My lambs...Shepherd My sheep...Tend My sheep” (John 21:15-17). Then after exhorting Peter in this manner, He revealed to Peter that like his Lord before him, he too would have to lay down his life for the sheep. Then once again He called to Peter, “Follow Me!” (John 21:19).

The shepherding ministry is an imitation of the Lord’s ministry. The elder must protect the flock, and care for the flock. To do these things, he must *know* the flock.

Nourishing the Flock

The elder must also nourish the flock. In Peter’s encounter with the risen Christ, the shepherd’s task in feeding and nourishing the flock becomes prominent. “Feed My lambs, tend My sheep.” This is what the Lord Jesus commanded Peter to do. But how does the elder nourish the flock, feed the lambs, and tend the sheep? Certainly it is by nourishing the flock on the word of God, the Holy Scriptures. See how this comes out in Paul’s exhortation to the Ephesian elders. Here Paul brings before them his own example by which they may understand what their ministry is to be as elders and overseers.

You know how I lived the whole time I was with you, from the first day I came into the province of Asia. I served the Lord with great humility and with tears, although I was severely tested by the plots of the Jews. You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house. I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have

But how does the elder nourish the flock, feed the lambs, and tend the sheep? Certainly it is by nourishing the flock on the word of God, the Holy Scriptures.

faith in our Lord Jesus (Acts 20:18b-21).

In Paul's shepherding of the flock at Ephesus, he reminded them that he was *with them*. He served among them with all humility. At times he even suffered for his ministry among them. Like a good shepherd, he laid down his life for the sheep. While he was with them, he taught them, not failing to teach anything that was profitable. Later in the passage (Acts 20:27), he says that he did not shrink from declaring to them the whole purpose or counsel of God. In verse 31, he says that during the three years he was with them, he did not cease to admonish each one with tears; and in verse 20 he indicates that his teaching and admonishment were both public and from house to house.

Paul also gives a prominent place to the teaching role of elders when he writes to Titus concerning the appointment of elders in each of the cities of Crete. He writes to Titus saying that the overseer must "hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it (Titus 1:9). Because the elder must nourish the flock in this manner, Paul insists that "the overseer *must be...able to teach*" (1 Tim. 3:2).

As we have seen above, from the example and teaching of Jesus Christ Himself and from the example and teaching of the apostles Peter and Paul, elders are to be *shepherds* to the church of God. In this capacity they are *to protect, to care for, and to nourish* the flock of God. They must *know* the flock; and they must *exhort* them, both publicly and from house to house. Those in need, they must *care for*; those who are lost, they must *seek out and find*. They must *exhort* in sound doctrine, and they must *refute* those who contradict. The well-being of the church depends on their doing so.

Elders and Pastors as Shepherds

The discussion above will perhaps seem to confuse the duties of elders with those of pastors, or ministers of the word, as they are sometimes called. It must be remembered, however, that it is the *elders* which Peter and Paul exhort "to shepherd the church of God (Acts 20:17,28; 1 Pet. 5:2)." Pastors share in these duties, to be sure; that is because they too are elders. Peter exhorted the elders as a "fellow-elder" (1 Pet. 5:1). By insisting that it is the responsibility of elders to shepherd the church of

God, we have not meant to deny that pastors are to do this. Yet we must be clear that this task of shepherding does belong to the elders. Pastors share in the task because they too are elders.

It is perhaps useful to point out here that the role of elders in shepherding the church of God as derived from the Bible is in fact that the role of elders described in the Form of Government of the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church. Chapter VIII, B., 2., of the Form of Government states:

It is the responsibility of ruling elders, both individually and jointly, to guard and promote the spiritual welfare of the congregation. They are required by their office to visit the people, especially the sick, and pray with them, to comfort the sorrowing, encourage the weak, guide the wayward, and the careless, and, in general, to discharge all other duties in Christian love.

In this paragraph are all the basic ideas of shepherding: protecting, caring for, and nourishing the flock. If such a conception of the elders' role in the church seems to blur the distinction between pastors and elders, this is only because we have failed to see the *Biblical* emphasis upon the *pastoral duties of elders*.

It is most unfortunate that this emphasis has been so little understood or appreciated in the contemporary church. Presbyterians, who really should know better, seem to have been particularly guilty of this. What we have on paper in our Forms of Government has been much better than our practice. In practice at least, we have regarded the session as something akin to a board of directors for a corporation, as principally a *decision-making body*, with the pastor as the chief executive officer, the one who carries out the decisions of the board. Such a structure may be an effective way of running a corporation, but it is a distinctly *unbiblical* way of running a church. For it is unto *the elders* that Peter and Paul say, "Shepherd the church of God"! Shepherding involves much more than decision-making; it involves getting to know the flock, watching over them, protecting them, caring for them, visiting them, instructing them, comforting them, and so on. Such things require time. But such is the nature of the elder's office. He who has not the time for these things, simply has not the time to be an elder.

It is also important to note how they carry out these duties. Peter says to the elders:

In practice at least, we have regarded the session as something akin to a board of directors for a corporation, as principally a decision-making body, with the pastor as the chief executive officer, the one who carries out the decisions of the board.

And if the elders are careful to do these things, he says they may be confident that “when the Chief Shepherd appears, they will receive the unfading crown of glory.”

Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock (1 Pet. 5:2-3).

And if the elders are careful to do these things, he says they may be confident that “when the Chief Shepherd appears, they will receive the unfading crown of glory” (1 Pet. 5:4).

PRACTICAL WAYS OF SHEPHERDING

The shepherding ministry of elders in a local church may be organized in various ways. The most common approach to this is to divide the congregation into various sub-groups, with elders assigned to each group. Sometimes these groups are organized on the basis of geographical zones, e.g. a ZIP-code zone, neighborhood or housing development. Other groups may be organized on the basis of existing or “natural” groupings within the church, e.g. Sunday School classes, fellowship groups (e.g. young singles), the choir, Bible study groups, etc. Building on the existing groups within the church is often a more efficient way of shepherding than shepherding the whole church by geographical zones. This is because when natural groupings are used a great deal of shepherding can be done while we are at the church for worship, Sunday School, fellowship meetings, etc., since the people for whom we are responsible are those with whom we are naturally interacting while meeting with these groups.

Each shepherding group should contain a manageable number of family units for which the assigned elders (and perhaps deacons) can be responsible. A “family unit” is defined as one or more church members, and their children, if any, residing at a given address. What is “manageable” will vary from group to group and elder to elder.

Being Among the Flock

What is chiefly required of you as a shepherd overseeing the flock is to know your people, to stay current with their needs, and to respond appropriately to them concerning their needs. This can

largely be done by spending time with your people while at church, or at other times when they are gathered. Be sure to greet them while at church. Be on the look out for them, to be sure that they are there. When they are absent, tell them that you missed them. When they are present, rejoice that they are there. Inquire into their well-being, their spiritual life, their family situation, and so on, showing interest in them. Initially such inquiries will be at a superficial level, but as the relationship grows more depth will come in your discussions.

Your first priority as a shepherd is to get to know your people. The good shepherd knows his sheep and calls each one by name (John 10:3,14). When you have come to know them, your visits will have other objectives. One of these will be to keep your relationship with them fresh and growing. People do change, as do their circumstances. Only by staying current with them will you be in a position to help if a specific need arises. Also, if your ministry with them is to be fruitful, they must learn to trust you. Trust does not grow overnight; it must be built up over time. Home visitations, telephone contacts and casual contacts (in church, at work, while shopping, etc.) will help in this too.

As needs are uncovered in the lives of your people, respond as best you can to assist them. It may simply involve giving them a little more attention and encouragement, perhaps meeting them for lunch or having the family over to Sunday dinner. It may also involve referring them to others who can give specific types of help, and then following up on them to facilitate progress and provide encouragement.

Home Visitations

Home visitations are an important and meaningful way of showing concern and interest in your people. These visits need not be lengthy and normally should be brief, yet they should not be conducted in a hasty or rushed manner. About fifteen to twenty minutes is usual, and thirty minutes should be maximum, unless there is a special need in the home requiring more time, or the family shows special interest in having you stay longer. Making appointments for home visitation can prevent useless travel, and avoid interruptions of families at inconvenient times; but it is not necessary to make appointments, and dropping in can have its advantages, too. Home visits made to members of the

opposite sex who are at home alone should be made in pairs, with a spouse or other church officer being present.

While you are making a home visit, remember that your purpose there goes beyond just being friendly and sociable, even if this is only your first visit. You come to the home as ministers of Jesus Christ, commissioned by Him for a spiritual work. You are to build a *pastoral* relationship with your people, and you should conduct each visit with this in mind. Take your Bible with you when you are visiting and share a short passage. Offer a brief comment on the passage, indicating what you think is important in it; telling how it has helped you or how you think it might be appropriate to some circumstances, perhaps one you have been discussing during your visit. Always have prayer with the people before you leave. Stay informed about church activities, and remember to invite them to the activities of the church: Sunday Worship, Sunday School, Sunday night activities, various association meetings, Bible studies, etc. Explain the importance of active participation in the church (perhaps using Romans 12:3-8 as a guide). Your own example in this will be crucial. Take note of any comments they may make concerning the church. Consider them, and pray about them. It may be that there is something in their comments you should bring to the notice of the pastor, the session, the board of deacons, or to others in the church. God may well speak to us as church leaders through such comments, and we may be led to change and improve our ministry. Always be thinking of ways to help your people grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Telephone Contacts

Given the size of a congregation or a shepherding group, and the limitations we have upon the time available to us, it is not reasonable to expect that each family can be visited by a shepherd on a frequent basis. Yet unless we are in contact with our people on a frequent basis, we shall not be able to fulfill our spiritual duties towards them. Telephone contacts enable us to stay in touch with our people much more frequently than we can by home visits alone. You may, for instance, find it helpful to contact each family unit prior to each communion; or you may choose to telephone only those you haven't spoken to at church recently. Although telephone contacts seem more informal and casual

than home visits, they too can be spiritual in nature. No dishonor is done to God if the scriptures be read or prayer be offered while on the telephone with a church member.

E-mail offers another way to stay in touch with members of a shepherding group, and a simple way for the flock to keep you informed of prayer needs. If possible, we should avail ourselves of all such means of communicating with our people.

Casual Contacts

It often happens (or can be made to happen) that we meet group members at work, while shopping, or in other ways and places. A friendly greeting and a brief but warm conversation at such times may be just the thing needed to strengthen your relationship with them. Going out of your way to greet someone will indicate to him or her that you care. It may be just the encouragement needed for someone to trust you with a matter which concerns him or her. Casual contacts can be very important building blocks in a relationship; make the best use of them you can.

Greeting Duties

Another way to know the sheep is to greet the membership and visitors at the doors of the sanctuary prior to and following the regular worship services. This not only provides a way to build relationships, it is also an opportunity for people to see you faithfully performing your duties as an shepherd. If the people respect you as an elder, your leadership among them will be enhanced. Also, being there to greet people makes you available to them. There may be people in your shepherding group who desire to speak to you about something, but who have been hesitating to contact you. Being at the door to greet and speak to them can encourage them to tell you of the matter which is on their heart. Greetings at the door may seem to be an insignificant duty, but it could prove to be a very important one. You may be surprised at what can come of it when you focus on it as an opportunity.

Special Group Events

Hosting or organizing a special gathering for your group may be very helpful. Such gatherings can facilitate relationships in the church, helping people

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to get acquainted with others they do not know very well, or perhaps do not know at all. Such events may have other purposes in view, too. For example, you may organize a special project of mercy or evangelism in which your group participates. In this way they grow in ministry together.

Special Needs

Occasionally a special need or problem may arise in your group. Perhaps someone has become seriously ill, or has had an accident. Perhaps a financial crisis has come up for some family. Perhaps a marriage has broken down, or is near to it. Perhaps someone has stopped coming to church. Whatever the situation, special care may be necessary. Visits may have to be made to the home or to the hospital. There may be material needs to be met. Perhaps the pastor should be called in to help. The elder (and/or deacon) for each group should lead the way in helping those in need. When appropriate, enlist the aid of other members in the congregation to provide aid or comfort in a needy situation. Inform the pastor when there is a special need or situation requiring his attention. Consult with your pastor or other elders if you are perplexed about what to do.

When you are involved in helping in a crisis situation, always honor your people with the strictest confidentiality concerning what you know about the situation. Violations of trust are the surest way possible to aggravate a problem, and by this act, you could well end your relationship with the persons involved, and perhaps cause them to leave the church. Such violations do great harm to the cause of Christ, and must always be avoided. Even telling one's spouse can be out of order in certain circumstances, so be very careful with what you know about your people.

There are, however, limits to the confidentiality that can be given when sinful conduct is in view. When church members fall into sin it is the responsibility of other Christians to seek to restore them. This is especially (but not exclusively) the duty of elders (cf. Gal. 6:1; I Thess. 5:12-15). At such times, the procedure to be followed is Matthew 18:15-17. Notice the strong emphasis on confidentiality in this passage. If the matter can be handled privately, it should be. But when the person being confronted refuses to stop sinning, it is necessary to bring one or two others into the matter. If even this fails, it then becomes necessary to inform the church of the

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matter, i.e. to tell the rulers (the elders) of the church about it. Even here, however, the first step in telling the church is not to tell all the elders of the church, still less all the members of the church. We always seek to involve as few people as necessary to handle the matter while faithfully observing the process outlined by Jesus. One cannot, therefore, guarantee absolute confidentiality to others about what you know since there are circumstances when Jesus requires you to inform others of what is happening.

Where to Turn for Help?

There is no denying that the shepherding ministry of the elder is a demanding and difficult one. We all need supernatural assistance if we are to carry it out effectively. It is comforting to know that we have been promised just such help. Jesus has said, "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations....And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matthew 28:19,20). Clearly, the Apostle Paul was aware of this help when he wrote, "We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ. To this end I labor, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me" (Col. 1:28-29). We can be confident of that same help. What Christ demands of us, He will enable us to perform. He is with us always, and we can turn to Him for help.

He has also given us one another, to support and assist each other in many ways. If you run into a problem, or become discouraged, or just find the going too difficult, consult with your pastor or fellow-shepherds. Whatever you do, don't just give up, or try to "gut it out" and "go it alone." Christ has meant us to be together, so let us learn to help and encourage one another in our ministries.

Raising Shepherds

Jonathan E. Taylor

According to one ARP minister, these were the words of a ruling elder referring to *The Standards of the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church*.¹ “It’s not my fault if I don’t know what’s in that book!” What a shocking statement for an elder to make! If he indeed did not know “what’s in that book,” then on what basis had that elder said “I do” as he affirmed his ordination vows?² How could he accept the doctrines contained in *The Standards* as the expression of his own faith, much less promise to adhere to them, if he had not even read them?

In his vows he had among other things accepted the government, discipline and worship of the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church. He had accepted the office of ruling elder and promised to perform all the duties of his office faithfully, promising to submit in the spirit of love to the authority of the session and to the higher courts of the church. By saying that he did not know what was in “that book,” the elder essentially admitted his vows to be meaningless. If he could vow to accept doctrines he had never read, is it a far leap to wonder about his familiarity with the Scriptures—“the Word of the living God, the only perfect rule of faith and practice”?

Some may protest that this example of ignorance is an exception, that the elders they know are wise men who love God and tenderly care for His flock. Indeed, what a joy it is to know and serve alongside many wonderfully gifted and deeply spiritual men whom God has called to serve the Church as ruling elders. The purpose of this article is not to cast doubt on individual elders or on the God-ordained institution of the eldership. Still, the situation cited above may be more common than we think, and the church would be naïve therefore to ignore its implications.

Wise and seasoned elders themselves often acknowledge the need for careful, deliberate and systematic officer training. They often express a desire for preparation that goes deeper than a perfunctory orientation preceding ordination, yet such is all the *Form of Government* requires in its vaguely worded call for “instruction and examination” of officers-elect.³

The purpose of this article, then, is to present a

biblical rationale and some practical suggestions for an organic ministry of officer cultivation and training, one that is rooted in grace and that maintains a vision of what the Church is called to be.

IS THERE A NEED?

Consider briefly some of the scriptural duties for elders: They are to be shepherds of God’s flock, serving as overseers (Acts 20:28; 1 Pet. 5:1ff). They are to be men of high moral character and excellent repute, who by their example and wisdom are able to teach others (1 Tim. 3:1ff; 1 Pet. 5:3). They are to lead with zeal, vision and sensitivity to the Holy Spirit in advancing the missionary cause of the church (Acts 13:1-3). They are to guard the church from false teachings and divisive influences (Acts 20:28-31). They are to be active in caring for the sick (James 5:14). The list could continue, but this brief overview alone points out how important the ruling elder’s ministry is. No wonder Paul warned Timothy, “Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands” (1 Tim. 5:22).

The Bible shows the office of elder to be one of honor as well as authority. It is “a noble task” (1 Tim. 3:1), which the ARP Church places on par with that of “ministers” or “teaching elders.”⁴ If there is parity in office, though, there is also great disparity between the preparation required of ministers and that required of ruling elders. Lawrence Eyres, a minister of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, notes “...we ought not to concentrate on a trained and competent ministry that, by default, we are content to accept an ignorant and untried ruling eldership”⁵ (original italics).

The *Form of Government* spends some ten or more pages describing the training and procedures required of a man who is called to serve as a minister.⁶ By comparison, while the standards call for “instruction and examination” of elders-elect,⁷ it offers no guidelines. Further, except for assuming the “standards recorded in Scripture,” the *Form of Government* offers only a scant 28-word summary of an elder’s qualifications⁸ and two brief, general paragraphs as to his responsibilities.⁹

Obviously, this is not a call for adding to scriptural standards; it is a call, however, to take those

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standards seriously in the equipping of men called to govern the Church. Ministries which for us have a high “spiritual sheen”—worship, evangelism, missions, mercy, Sunday School, fellowship, youth ministry, etc.—often eclipse the seemingly mundane elder training. But whom does God call in the local church to set the pace and to oversee the church in these ministries which excite us? Elders! A “dead” church can ultimately trace its condition as much to the level of piety, spiritual maturity, vision and preparation of those who sit on the session as to the one who occupies the pulpit. Training ruling elders is necessary because the glory and care of the Church require godly, servant-hearted leadership. It is necessary also because ruling elders share in the ministry on a par with teaching elders. All this is “to prepare God’s people for works of service” (Eph. 4:11-13).

One further reason for investing time and energy in the preparation of ruling elders merits mention: the duty owed to them. Because elders are men who will give account, the church has a duty to obey and honor them (Acts 16:4; Heb. 13:17). In view of the demands required of elders, the church owes it to them to see they receive adequate equipping for their ministry (1 Tim. 4:11; 2 Tim. 2:2).

WHAT SHOULD ELDER PREPARATION LOOK LIKE?

Should the preparation of elders take place before or after their election? The very question begs the larger question of how we identify and nurture those who may one day serve as elders. If the preceding discussion has convinced anyone of the need for elder training, perhaps what follows is obvious. A man does not become an elder and then require training simply because he was voted into office. Such logic is backward and unbiblical, and yet it seems to be what our *Form of Government* affirms. To the contrary, we should view the congregation’s vote as the ratification or affirmation of a man’s gifts and ministry which have been observed over the long term.

Samuel Miller notes in his classic study of the ruling elder’s office: “An elder...ought, first of all, to be a man of unfeigned and *approved* piety”¹⁰ (italics added). We do no favors for the church or for the officer elect when we ignore the state of his spiritual devotion. Miller’s thoughts deserve more consideration:

What is to be expected, when “watchmen on the walls of Zion,”—for such Ruling Elders are undoubtedly to be regarded—appear as beacons, to warn private Christians of what ought to be avoided, rather than as models, to guide, to attract, and to cheer them on to all that is spiritual, and holy, and becoming the gospel? Can he who is either destitute of piety, or who has but a small portion of it, engage in the arduous and deeply spiritual duties of the Ruling Elder with comfort to himself, or with any reasonable hope of success?¹¹

When a congregation votes to elect elders, the nominees should have been put forward precisely because they have already exhibited the wisdom, spiritual maturity, moral character and ministry giftedness which the office requires. The act of ordination, then, does not “make” men elders, it solemnly sets apart for this vital office men already approved (to use Miller’s term) according to scriptural standards.

And so, what should training involve? The best answer is probably three-fold: Elder preparation involves 1) discipleship of men, especially younger men, to develop their spiritual character and piety, 2) ongoing and systematic instruction in biblical doctrine, and 3) practical instruction for officer nominees as to the pastoral and ecclesiastical duties of the office and the provisions of the *Form of Government*.

PERSONAL PIETY

First, it would be wise for the discipleship of men in the church to be rooted in the realization that God may someday call any man to serve as a minister or ruling elder. At this point the examples of Jesus and Paul are instructive. Elder preparation is not simply a matter of formal course work taken in a classroom setting. Indeed, when Paul says an elder must be “able to teach” (1 Tim. 3:2; 2 Tim. 2:24), he does so in the context of discussing a man’s character and lifestyle. The process of developing Christian character bears as much (if not more) upon an elder’s ability to teach as does what he learns through formal instruction. Therefore, ruling and teaching elders on a session would be wise to consider making a deliberate and ongoing investment in the personal lives of young men in the congregation. In this manner they teach character and piety as they model it.

When does this happen? Long before any indi-

vidual is nominated for office! It happens one-on-one or in small groups. It happens between two people at early-morning breakfast meetings for prayer and sharing, or it can happen in larger groups where ministers or ruling elders testify to God's work in their lives or present some scriptural teaching. It happens at church dinners or other social functions. It happens when more mature men invite younger men into their lives. It may happen formally, informally and sometimes on the spur of the moment, but let it be a deliberate priority of the session! This is the non-technical training no classroom can ever provide. It is the iron that sharpens iron (Prov. 27:17). Most young Christian men crave the active interest of older, godly men, but few receive it.

One of the most moving and poignant of Jesus' teachings was his washing of the disciples' feet, of which he himself said, "I have *set you an example* that you should do as I have done for you" (John 13:15, italics added). Young men will best learn to be servant-leaders if they are shown how. Paul encouraged both Timothy and Titus to set an example in their lifestyle and in their teaching (1 Tim. 4:12, Titus 2:7). Likewise, Peter's instruction to elders underscores the power of leading and teaching by example (1 Pet. 5:1-3). A number of good books exist to help guide the way¹² though nothing can substitute for genuine personal concern and involvement.

BIBLICAL DOCTRINE

Second, there is also a formal aspect to this idea of elder preparation. While the church should not underestimate the need for what has just been discussed, neither should it underestimate the need for solid, biblical—yes, doctrinal—instruction. The word "doctrine" has fallen on hard times in the current generation. It is said to be stifling or divisive. Yet, urging the Ephesian elders to be shepherds over the flock of God, Paul warned them that "savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard" (Acts 20:28-31ff). Ultimately Paul's concern for the protection of truth—doctrine—has in view the eternal, spiritual well-being of believers and the unity and effectiveness of the church to the glory of God.

The Holy Spirit ignited the Reformation by the rediscovery of the doctrine of justification by faith alone. For centuries before, a dark cloud of supersti-

tion had hung over the church because it had failed to guard the purity of its doctrine. This concern is at the heart of Paul's instruction to Titus that an overseer (or elder) "must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it" (Titus 1:9).

The need for elders to be sound in their doctrine is indisputable. The methods for providing training in this regard may take various forms. Fundamentally, ruling elders need to be well acquainted with the Bible itself, not merely in a scholastic sense but in a rich, devotional sense. This is what, in part, Samuel Miller was affirming in the earlier citations of his work. Nevertheless, whatever form it may take, systematic doctrinal training is vital. In his excellent survey of biblical doctrine, Bruce Milne insists "every Christian *is* a theologian! Theology literally means 'the science of God'....we all have a theology of sorts, whether or not we have ever sat down and pieced it together."¹³ Says Samuel Miller:

The Elder who is not orthodox in his creed, instead of contributing as he ought, to build up the Church in the knowledge and love of the truth, will, of course, be the means of scattering error, as far as his influence extends. And he who is not well informed on the subject of Christian doctrine, will not know whether he is promoting the one or the other.¹⁴

As mentioned earlier, the exact form of this theological preparation may vary. The ideal is for the doctrines of the Bible to be systematically presented in the overall teaching ministry of the church. However, small special study groups or individual mentoring would be especially well-suited for the kind of interaction which promotes keen understanding. Some books which may offer a starting place for study include *Know the Truth* by Bruce Milne (cited above); Louis Berkhof's *Manual of Christian Doctrine* or his more comprehensive *Systematic Theology*; a very practical new book by Daniel M. Doriani, *Getting the Message: A Plan for Interpreting and Applying the Bible*;¹⁵ and, of course, the *Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms* which can be found in *The Standards of the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church*. A number of good books exist which deal directly with the *Westminster Confession*.

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ECCLESIASTICAL DUTIES

Finally, the practical work of an elder deserves special attention. In their service as shepherds over the flock of God, ruling elders not only guard and protect from error, they also are called upon to feed and nurture, to bind up and heal, to discipline and correct. In addition, they are called upon to perform particular functions or serve in special roles within the local congregation, presbytery and synod. Depending on a new elder's age and experience, many of these duties may come easily and naturally. Nevertheless, for the sake of unity and harmony in the body, it is important that elders understand and are willing to fulfill their call to be shepherds.

In reality, men who become elders based on biblical standards are likely already performing most of the duties outlined in the Form of Government.

As shepherds, elders have a pastoral role. The *Form of Government*, deriving principles from Scripture, requires an elder "to visit the people, especially the sick, and pray with them, to comfort the sorrowing, encourage the weak, guide the wayward and careless, and, in general, to discharge all other duties in Christian love."¹⁶ These are not tasks for the fainthearted! The list as well points up the necessity of having men who are equipped.

In their ecclesiastical role, elders are the congregation's "immediate representatives. Together with the ministers, they exercise government and discipline. They oversee the spiritual interests both of the particular congregation and of the Church generally when appointed to represent the congregation in the higher courts."¹⁷ Issues of government, discipline and parliamentary procedure all figure into the mix of an elder's concerns. Elders serve on congregational and presbytery committees and synod boards. They are vital to the work of church planting in providing encouragement and oversight to young churches by serving on their provisional sessions. And, of course, the highest court of the ARP Church, the General Synod, meets annually to consider issues which can have sweeping implications for the direction of the entire denomination. Again, the task is not for the fainthearted, but neither ought it to be overwhelming. In reality, men who become elders based on biblical standards are likely already performing most of the duties outlined in the *Form of Government*. Even so, a program of instruction and mentoring not only would lessen the apprehension of newly-elected elders, it would also provide them latitude to assume these roles confidently and efficiently.

There are a number of resources, both old and

new, which are available for elders to understand their biblical role. Some of these include:

The Ruling Elder(1832) by Samuel Miller (Selections extracted from his larger work cited above and reprinted by Presbyterian Heritage Publications, P.O. Box 180922, Dallas, TX 75218).

The Elder and His Work(1883) by David Dickson (Another extraction reprint by Presbyterian Heritage Publications).

Biblical Eldership: An Urgent Call to Restore Biblical Church Leadership by Alexander Strauch (Littleton, CO: Lewis and Roth Publishers, second edition 1988).

The Elders of the Church by Lawrence R. Eyres (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1975).

The Elders Handbook: A Practical Guide for Church Leaders by Gerard Berghoef and Lester De Koster (Grand Rapids: Christian's Library Press, 1979; also available are a user's companion and study guide).

A "homegrown" ARP resource to consider is the officer training course developed by the late J. B. Hendrick who served the denomination as Director of the Office of Christian Education from 1980 until his retirement in 1994. The course is available in notebook format in both leader and student editions.¹⁸

CONCLUSION

Hopefully the point has been made, tacitly if not expressly, that knowing "what's in that book" is not the purpose of an elder preparation ministry. A pedantic adherence to rules will not suddenly fulfill the Great Commission or magically transform an ailing congregation. Anyone can memorize rules and facts. Likewise, anyone can fail to apply them. Such an approach is to officer training what works are to justification or legalism is to sanctification.

Preparing rulers in the church should be an organic process, immersed in grace with the end always in view. What is that end? *The Westminster Confession* says "the ministry, oracles, and ordinances of God [have been given to the Church] for the gathering and perfecting of the saints, in this life, to the end of the world...."¹⁹ The objects in view here include the glory of Christ and of his radiant bride,

the communication of the transforming power of the gospel, the deposit of the truth which we are charged to pass along to our children and their children after them, and the redemption of lost and broken people. May God help us as we seek to be faithful to his call.

ENDNOTES

¹ *The Standards of the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church* is one volume which contains the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, *Westminster Larger Catechism*, *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, *Form of Government*, *Book of Discipline*, and *Book of Worship*. Chapters VIII and IX of the *Form of Government* (*FOG*) deal immediately with the subject of ruling elders, their election, ordination and installation. Other chapters particularly relevant to the office and duties of ruling elders include *FOG* II, XI, XII. Copies are available from the ARP Center, One Cleveland Street, Suite 110, Greenville, SC 29601-3696. For ordering information, call (864) 232-8297.

² The formula of questions for ordination and installation, for both ruling elders and deacons, is found in *FOG* IX.D.3 as follows: 1) Do you believe in one God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—and do you confess anew the Lord Jesus Christ as your Saviour and Lord, and acknowledge Him Head over all things for the Church, which is His Body? 2) Do you reaffirm your belief in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the Word of the living God, the only perfect rule of faith and practice, to which nothing is to be added and from which nothing is to be taken at any time or upon any pretext? 3) Do you accept the doctrines of this Church, contained in the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms, as founded on the Word of God and as the expression of your own faith and do you resolve to adhere thereto? 4) Do you accept the government, discipline, and worship of the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church? 5) Do you accept the office of ruling elder in this congregation; and do you promise to perform faithfully all the duties of the office; and do you promise to endeavor by the grace of God to live your life in Christian witness before the church and in the world? 6) Do you promise to submit in the spirit of love to the authority of the session and to the higher courts of the Church? 7) Do you promise in all things to promote the unity, peace, purity, and prosperity of the church?

³ *FOG* IX.C.5. The instruction is ordered only after one's election to office. Although the *FOG* provides for an examination of officers-elect by the session (IX.D.1), it gives no guidance as to what action is to be taken by the session should a man—who has already been elected by the congregation—be found at any scriptural point unqualified for service as an elder.

⁴ *FOG* VIII.B.1 affirms: "In all the courts of the Church ruling elders possess the same authority and the same eligibility to office as ministers." Likewise, *FOG* X.A.5. indicates "the office of minister includes the office and authority of ruling elder. For this reason the minister is sometimes referred to as a teaching elder."

⁵ Lawrence R. Eyres, *The Elders of the Church* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Co., 1975), p. 55.

⁶ *FOG* X.A-D.

⁷ *FOG* IX.C.5.

⁸ *FOG* VIII.A.2.

⁹ *FOG* VIII.B.1&2. Certain individual responsibilities can also be deduced from those which the *FOG* identifies for sessions in XI.B.

¹⁰ Samuel Miller, *An Essay on the Warrant, Nature, and Duties of the Office of The Ruling Elder in the Presbyterian Church* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1832), pp. 253-254.

¹¹ Miller, p. 254.

¹² Some examples include *Spiritual Leadership* by J. Oswald Sanders, *As Iron Sharpens Iron: Building Character In a Mentoring Relationship* by Howard and William Hendricks, *A Passion for Faithfulness: Wisdom from the Book of Nehemiah* by J.I. Packer.

¹³ Bruce Milne, *Know the Truth: A Handbook of Christian Belief* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1982), p. 11. Milne is a Reformed Baptist.

¹⁴ Miller, p. 257.

¹⁵ Doriani's book does not deal specifically or extensively with individual doctrines but equips readers with tools for interpreting the Scriptures and making application in their lives.

¹⁶ *FOG*, VIII.B.2.

¹⁷ *FOG*, VIII.B.1.

¹⁸ Notebooks cost \$4.00 each, regardless of edition. For more information or to order, contact the Office of Christian Education at One Cleveland Street, Suite 110, Greenville, SC 29601-3696 or (864) 232-8297, ext. 233.

¹⁹ Westminster Confession of Faith XXV.iii.

Elders Standing in the Gap

Mark B. Tankersley

I shall never forget the feeling. There I was, preaching during a morning worship service, oblivious to any sounds or movements in the assembly. I was startled when suddenly a man stepped out of the back pew and started walking down the aisle toward me. One arm was behind his back. As he came toward me, he pulled out a rifle and began firing directly at me in the pulpit.

What a nightmare! My heart races even as I recount it. I had that dream during my first year of ministry and I awoke in a cold sweat. You may have guessed what precipitated that restless night: church discipline. Earlier that evening, an elder and I had gone to confront a church member about a sinful behavior. The apprehension I had felt on the way to the house and the hostile attitude we had encountered upon arrival contributed directly to that restless sleep; for the man pulling the trigger in my nightmare was the man we had visited.

I tell you this story to let you know at the outset that I have a love-hate relationship with the concept of church discipline. I love it because its high purposes include both restoring those who have wandered from the Lord and reverencing the holy name of Jesus Christ. I hate it because I don't like confrontation, and I don't like fear waking me up in the middle of the night.

Nevertheless, part of our calling as Christians, and particularly as elders, is to approach one another in love with the truth. Church discipline is the God-given means by which Christians deal with other professing Christians who have strayed from the Lord in some way.

We as elders have a calling from the Lord to guard the congregation which we have been ordained to serve. Church discipline in its various forms is one of the spiritual tools at our disposal to promote both the purity and unity of a congregation. Unfortunately, the blessings that could come from church discipline are not forthcoming, primarily because we have virtually abandoned its practice. The results of our negligence are two-fold. First, the thinking and subsequent behavior of church-going Christians do not look much different from that of the world. Second, our congregations do not understand the purposes of church discipline; so when

we do pull the biblical tools of church discipline out of the dusty closet, people accuse the pastors and elders of being judgmental, legalistic or hypocritical. These problems can be overcome. I write this paper to encourage fellow elders and pastors to rediscover the biblical teaching about church discipline, and recommit ourselves to its practice. Toward this end, I will emphasize the following:

- 1) that Jesus Christ, the great Head of the Church, intends to govern His people today through the ministry of elders as they exercise church discipline;
- 2) that there are five major purposes of church discipline;
- 3) that the specific steps of church discipline are outlined in the Bible;
- 4) that there are significant social and legal issues which we must be prepared to face; and
- 5) that there is hope for the reformation of our churches and our society as pastors and elders stand in the gap between godlessness and godliness.

AN URGENT NEED

Every time I consider the issue of church discipline I think of the book of Judges. One of the major themes in that book is: "In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit" (Judges 17:6; 21:25). Or as another translation puts it, "every man did what was right in his own eyes" (NAS).

Is it not apparent that in America, and to a large extent in the evangelical church, everyone wants to do what is right in his own eyes? The attitude of many is summed up by the words, "Just because it is right for you does not mean it is right for me." With that approach to life, people proceed to do as they please, wrongly assuming there is no objective authority to define the parameters of thought and behavior. It is not surprising to find this view of life in our culture. What is distressing is to realize how much this philosophy has permeated the church. Sometimes church members will say things like, "Well that's just one man's opinion," questioning the elder's God-given authority to expound

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Scripture. Or worse, church members and even church leaders often comment, "Well, Paul wrote that, and his teaching is culturally dated," questioning the very authority of Scripture. How is it possible that the evangelical church has fallen so far from its commitment to the absolute authority of the Bible in faith and practice? A major reason is our leniency in accountability at the three levels of our church government: session, presbytery and synod. By the neglect of church discipline, we have condoned the modern mantra: "You do what is right for you, and I'll do what is right for me." We live in a time all too similar to the days of the Judges.

To correct those problems, God "raised up judges" in the days after Joshua.¹ Those judges were called to lead people back to the Lord after He had disciplined them for violating His covenant. One correlation between the judges and the elders is in this role of deliverer of the people. In the context of church discipline, the elder is the one who seeks to deliver people from a sinful condition that will harm and possibly destroy themselves and others. If we see our role as a rescuer of the people, perhaps we will be more willing to confront people humbly yet courageously, realizing that their lives and souls are at stake.

THE ELDERS HOLD THE KEYS

Discussion on the difficult doctrine of church discipline should begin with the issue of authority: "What gives elders the right to make judgment calls regarding a member of the church?" The answer is in the Bible: Jesus Christ gives them the right. Jesus gives authority over the kingdom of God on earth to Peter and the Apostles when He says, "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven" (Matt. 16:19). The power of "the keys of the kingdom" is here explained as the power "to bind and to loose" in the name of Jesus. Jesus gives these keys to His apostles. In John 20:23 Jesus tells His disciples: "If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven." Thus, the power "to bind and to loose" includes the power to forgive or to retain sins. Jesus also saw this same power vested in the church generally, not just in His apostles. In Matt. 18:18 he says, "I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and what-

ever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." Here the power to bind and to loose is resident in the church as it exercises discipline, even when removing a member from the church to be treated as "a Gentile or a tax collector" (Matt. 18:17).

Our *Confession of Faith* (Ch. XXX) understands the power of the keys in just this way:

I. The Lord Jesus, as king and head of his church, hath therein appointed a government in the hand of church-officers, distinct from the civil magistrate.

II. To these officers the keys of the kingdom of heaven are committed, by virtue whereof they have power respectively to retain and remit sins, to shut that kingdom against the impenitent, both by the word and by censures; and to open it unto penitent sinners, by the ministry of the gospel, and by absolution from censures, as occasion shall require.

In short, the power of the keys is the power to act in the name of Christ, declaring under what conditions sins may be forgiven or not forgiven, who may be admitted to the church and who not, who may be removed from the church, etc. The power is declaratory in nature. Only Jesus can actually forgive sins, but elders are to represent Jesus before the church in declaring, based on what is taught in the Bible, whose sins are forgiven.

These are tasks of the teaching and ruling elders of the church today. Perhaps the beginning point for the recovery of church discipline will come as elders begin to grasp more fully the God-given authority invested in them as a part of their ordination. Our *Form of Government* (Chapter I.A.2) puts it this way:

From his throne of glory, He rules the Church through His Word and Spirit by the ministry of men, and the benefits of all His functions as prophet, priest, and king are effectually applied by His Holy Spirit.

Jesus shepherds his flock through the shepherding of elders, those whom He has appointed to oversee His flock (Acts 20:28). In the exercise of church discipline, two of the offices of Christ are quite prominent in the work of the elders.

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The Elder as “Prophet”

The prophet was called to proclaim the word of the Lord, which included confronting the sins of the people (Deut. 18:18-20). Jesus was that prophet preeminently (Acts 3:22-26). One of the classic examples of a Prophet confronting a sinner was the encounter between Nathan and David. I sometimes wonder if Nathan had a nightmare either before or after he got the word from God to confront King David about his sins of adultery and murder. Perhaps he envisioned David walking down the aisle toward him with a sling and a handful of stones as he was preaching a sermon. Perhaps Nathan woke up one night in a cold sweat. Of course, we don't know what went through Nathan's mind, except that he knew he had to do what God said.

A prophet was a person called by God and given authority to speak on His behalf.² Often involved in the calling was the responsibility to warn God's people when they were violating God's covenant. David was certainly in rebellion against the will of God and it was Nathan's task to go to David and rebuke him saying, “You are the man!” (2 Samuel 12:7). *Elders* are called by God and are granted authority to speak on His behalf. Sometimes that means warning the sinner of the error of his ways (I Cor. 16:15f., I Thess. 5:12ff., Heb. 13:17).

The Elder as “King”

The word “king” might suggest an undue exercise of authority on the part of elders. But the meaning here is not that of totalitarian rule or dictatorship. Remember what our *Shorter Catechism* teaches about the role of Christ as our king:

Q. 26. How doth Christ execute the office of a king? A. Christ executeth the office of a king, in subduing us to himself, in ruling and defending us, and in restraining and conquering all his and our enemies.

This is loving kingship, intended for our good and well-being. Christ Himself is the only king and head of the church. But as we have seen, He carries out His offices today through His word and Spirit, by the ministry of men, among whom are the elders. Elders represent the kingship of Christ in seeking to bring the people of God into submission to that way of life commanded by the King Himself, and in

defending the people against their enemies, corruption of doctrine or of morals. Perhaps an illustration will help.

We have a plaque in our church designed to honor elders who have reached a point in their life where physical disability has limited their ability to serve. This Elder Emeritus plaque has portions of the words of 1 Peter 5:1-3 engraved upon it:

To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder, a witness of Christ's sufferings and one who also will share in the glory to be revealed: Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock.

In this passage the Apostle Peter, to whom the original “keys of the kingdom” were handed by Jesus (Matthew 16:19), is passing on to the elders the role of shepherd of the people, giving them authority to govern God's people. It is an awesome task with which we have been entrusted. Until we come to grips with the fact that the elders are commissioned by God with the authority to “bind” and to “loose” (Matthew 16:19), we will have a difficult time asserting ourselves biblically in terms of disciplining members of the church.

Just a few generations ago, church discipline was a common practice in America. Elders understood that this was part of their God-ordained responsibility. I discovered in the archives of our county library “A History of the Sugaw Creek Presbyterian Church” which includes a chapter on church discipline.³ The Sessional records of this Mecklenburg County, North Carolina church reveal that the elders took disciplinary action against various kinds of sinful behavior. For example, in 1840 a woman was charged with “fornication”. She later confessed her sin, was required to make public confession before the congregation, and was restored to church membership. In another case occurring in 1885 a man was accused of adultery and of absenteeism from church worship services. He refused to appear before the Sessional Tribunal after two warnings and was expelled from the church. These are just two of many cases cited over a one hundred year period. The man who compiled the church history noted that the practice of church discipline began in 1827, and by the

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1920's its use had all but disappeared. He concluded the chapter with these words,

...as more emphasis has been laid on the 'love of God' and on toleration and patience rather than on the 'holiness of God' and on immediate and severe punishment for the infraction of His law, discipline has been less frequently used, not merely in Sugaw Creek, but throughout all major denominations in our country.⁴

Church discipline is not a new doctrine, but an old one that has been largely out of practice for most of this century. We have neglected this aspect of leadership to the detriment of the church, and unless we restore it, our evangelical churches will continue to slide toward theological bankruptcy and moral ruin. To restore biblical governing of the church we need to rediscover the foundational purposes of church discipline. *The Westminster Confession of Faith* will be of great help to us.

THE FIVE PURPOSES OF CHURCH DISCIPLINE

The *Westminster Confession of Faith* states:

Church censures are necessary for the reclaiming and gaining of offending brethren: for deterring others from the like offenses; for purging out of that leaven which might infect the whole lump; for vindicating the honour of Christ, and the holy profession of the gospel; and for preventing the wrath of God, which might justly fall upon the church, if they should suffer his covenant, and the seals thereof, to be profaned by notorious and obstinate offenders (Chapter 30.3).⁵

We note that the *Confession* here lists five kinds of church censure whereby brothers who have fallen into sinful conduct might be dealt with in hopes of restoring them to faithfulness in their walk with Christ. Each of these five purposes are derived from Scriptural passages that define for us the proper motivation for church discipline. We will follow this outline.

To Reclaim and Regain

If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over (Matt. 18:15).

Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted (Gal. 6:1).

These texts teach that a primary goal of church discipline is restoration. God also encourages us "that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death, and will cover a multitude of sins" (James 5:19-20). These are good verses to have in mind when confronting fellow Christians. They remind us, and relay to the people, that we are not attempting to drive them away from the church, but rather that we are trying to reel them back in. The offending party needs to know that we have come to them out of genuine love for them. They need to see that we love them too much to let them continue on a course of self-destruction. Perhaps church discipline is so seldom practiced today because we do not really love our people as much as we think.

To Deter

When Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he was clearly in the wrong....The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray (Gal. 2:11,13).

Those who sin are to be rebuked publicly, so that the others may take warning...(1 Timothy 5:20).

I once heard the question posed: What is the justification for developing weapons that can cause enormous devastation? The answer: "So that we never have to use them." That is the power of deterrence, and it has proven successful militarily for over fifty years. To have a weapon with devastating potential is to insure that it is not used randomly, if it is used at all.

Church discipline has the power to deter people from sinning. As the above references show, Paul

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confronted Peter in front of all so that others would be deterred from hypocrisy. Paul told Timothy to do the same so that others would be warned. The best thing elders can do is to get involved in the early stages of discipline so that we seldom ever have to resort to the final step of excommunication. The threat of excommunication should inspire elders to seek early resolution, and it should also spur warring members to settle differences before the church government gets involved. The church needs to hear that the elders will step in and take action when necessary. If church members know that church discipline is a continuing aspect of church government and not something that is used randomly, they will gain respect for the leadership and will work harder to keep their own lives in order.

When a Session tolerates blatant impurity for the sake of preserving unity, it will eventually witness a breakdown in the unity it sought so desperately to keep..

To Purge

And you are proud! Shouldn't you rather have been filled with grief and have put out of your fellowship the man who did this?...hand this man over to Satan, so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord....Get rid of the old yeast that you may be a new batch without yeast—as you really are... Expel the wicked man from among you (from 1 Cor. 5:1-13, especially v. 2, 5, 7, 13).

This third purpose of church discipline is similar to the previous one, but has an important distinctive. Whereas "deterrence" seeks to prevent further sin, "purging" seeks to get rid of existing sin which affects us corporately. Excommunication is a threatened consequence in the former, and an actual consequence in the latter. Using a medical analogy, chemotherapy can be used to deter the further spread of cancer. But in more extreme cases malignant tumors have to be surgically extracted to purge the cancer from the body. Similarly, sins that reach beyond private consequences and into public, widespread implications must be excised from the body of Christ. When a Session tolerates blatant impurity for the sake of preserving unity, it will eventually witness a breakdown in the unity it sought so desperately to keep.

I just learned of a church that recently took disciplinary action to remove a contentious family from its membership. The pastor had personally confronted this family when they began to stir conten-

tion in the church. He later took a deacon with him after the family would not desist from creating problems, but that did not resolve the conflict. The matter was finally brought to the congregation. Letters were sent by certified mail to the offending parties. A security guard was hired for the congregational meeting because of threats by the family. The conclusion of the matter was that the people were expelled from church membership. The church and its leaders received some bad press from one of the local newspapers, but they had done the right thing. By taking action, both the purity and the unity of the church were preserved and even enhanced. It was especially encouraging for me to learn that this particular Baptist Church is still united. It was in that church that I heard the Gospel and came to know Jesus Christ twenty-seven years ago. Because of the right use of church discipline, the gates of hell have not prevailed against that church.

To Vindicate

You who brag about the law, do you dishonor God by your transgression of the law? As it is written, "Because of you the name of God is being blasphemed among the Gentiles" (Rom. 2:23,24).

Among them are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan to be taught not to blaspheme (1 Tim. 1:20).

Both of these passages demonstrate Paul's passion to preserve the purity of the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ against blasphemy. Oh that we had the same fervor for the honor of Christ and the pure preaching of the word of God. Oh that we could say with Paul, "Am I now trying to win the approval of men, or of God? Or am I trying to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Christ" (Gal.1:10). Herein lies one of the greatest detractions to the right exercise of church discipline: the fear of offending someone.

Some time ago I preached a sermon entitled, "Is Anyone Concerned When God Is Offended?" The sermon was an exposition of John 2:12-25 where we find Jesus in the Temple scourging people with whips for turning the house of God into a marketplace. The concept of a user-friendly Temple had reached ungodly extremes. Jesus was not con-

cerned that the people were offended by His action. He was angry because the practices of the people had become so offensive to God.

In the evangelical church today, we sometimes seem more concerned about what offends church members than about what offends God. That is why church discipline is so difficult to exercise. If our desire is to seek the honor of Christ and to protect the proclamation of the gospel from blasphemy, then we will use church discipline out of a right zeal for the honor of God. When Jesus purged the Temple, the disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me" (John 2:17). May we as elders have a renewed zeal for the Lord and His glorious gospel.

To Avoid Wrath

When I say to the wicked, 'O wicked man, you will surely die,' and you do not speak out to dissuade him from his ways, that wicked man will die for his sin, and I will hold you accountable for his blood (Eze. 33:8)

On one occasion an elder in the church went with me to confront someone. I learned that the reason he had volunteered was that his devotional readings in Ezekiel 33 had convinced him that he should. Ezekiel 33:8 is a wake up call for all of us. God has given elders the keys of the kingdom, and our failure to use them properly will have consequences. Ezekiel reminds us that God is loving, but He is also holy. We cannot separate these two characteristics in church discipline either. The Book of Discipline of the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church has a very helpful statement:

The exercise of discipline is made necessary by the need more fully to reconcile Christian individuals or groups to God and one another, *to prevent mercy from becoming a soft and finally cruel indulgence*, and to control those whose words and actions may seriously hinder the witness of the whole body of Christ [*emphasis mine*.⁶]

Mercy outside the parameters of justice becomes meaningless. Church membership without accountability has no meaning either. Love and holiness are inseparable in God and in His Church. Religion and relationships would become "a soft and finally cruel

indulgence." How many people in our churches have suffered in some way because we have failed to warn them of sin? How many church Session meetings have become battlefields of disunity because individual and corporate sins have been allowed to spread unrestrained? How many church members are "weak and sick, and a number sleep" (1 Cor. 11:30) because they have not been temporarily suspended from partaking the sacrament of communion?⁷ I suspect the framers of the *Westminster Confession of Faith* put this aspect of church discipline last because they knew that if the love of virtue would not motivate us to obedience, perhaps the fear of God's wrath would.

In summary, we have seen from the *Confession of Faith* five good reasons to exercise church discipline. We should purpose to reclaim sinners; deter others from sinning; purge unrepentant sinners; vindicate the honor of Christ; and finally, avoid the wrath of God. We have covered the "whys" of church discipline and will proceed now briefly consider to the steps of church discipline.

THE STEPS OF CHURCH DISCIPLINE

The primary text on the steps of church discipline is Matthew 18:15-17:

If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.

Church discipline has both a preventive and corrective purpose. Perhaps one reason people are afraid of the concept of disciplining others is because of a neglect of the preventative purpose. We too readily forget that a word of warning spoken early can prevent the need of corrective discipline. Dr. Jay Adams' *Handbook of Church Discipline* devotes a chapter to the subject of preventive discipline.⁸ He suggests that the restoration of the practice of church discipline will not be effective if we omit the preventive measures.

If our desire is to seek the honor of Christ and to protect the proclamation of the gospel from blasphemy, then we will use church discipline out of a right zeal for the honor of God.

We can be encouraged that ecclesiastical courts and their decisions are considered valid by our legal system.

"An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure." This proverb is certainly true in church discipline. I wonder how many Christian marriages might have been saved if some elder had lovingly confronted a young brother in Christ about the possible dangers of certain destructive attitudes and actions developing in his life? I wonder how many family members in our churches would still be speaking to one another if a pastor had taken the time in the early stages of a contentious squabble to seek the peace, purity and prosperity of that family? I wonder how many inactive members would be fruit-bearing Christians today if an elder or pastor had sought out these "missing in action?" I am certain that the best way to win in church discipline is to negotiate peace before the spiritual war begins. We simply wait too long, usually out of a fear of getting involved, or out of fear of offending someone. We fail to pursue prevention and end up with the difficult task of correction.

Rather than spending a great deal of time on the steps of discipline, I refer you again to Jay Adams' book, which is also an excellent resource for officer training. He examines the four steps of church discipline defined by Jesus in Matthew 18. He also discusses a preliminary step, "self-discipline."⁹ Also beneficial for the local Session is Adams' helpful discussion on Jesus' difficult commands to "tell it to the church"¹⁰ and to remove people from the church.¹¹

I would like to conclude with a brief glance at the legal climate on this subject, followed by a few suggestions on how to reinstate preventative and corrective church discipline into the overall ministry of the church.

LEGAL ISSUES

One of the intimidating aspects of church discipline, and particularly of excommunication, is the possibility of a church being sued even if it takes action prescribed by the Bible. The Bible-believing Church has fallen on hard times in America. Fortunately, a church that operates according to procedures outlined by its ecclesiastical form of government is generally left alone by the secular courts. A helpful legal brief can be obtained from The Rutherford Institute that gives summaries of court cases regarding intra-church disputes.¹²

A couple of specific cases and analysis of those cases by the Rutherford Institute are helpful for our

discussion. The seminal case in intra-church disputes is *Watson v. Jones* where the courts established "judicial aloofness" in church disputes unless there were matters involving general health and safety (such as violation of fire safety codes, thwarting criminal behavior, etc.). The *Watson* court recognized the right of an internal government to rule itself without intrusion by secular courts:

All who unite themselves to such a body do so with an implied consent to this government, and are bound to submit to it. But it would be a vain consent and would lead to the total subversion of such religious bodies, if anyone aggrieved by one of the decisions could appeal to the secular courts and have them reversed. It is of the essence of these religious unions, and of their right to establish tribunals for the decisions of questions arising among themselves, that those decisions should be binding in all cases of ecclesiastical cognizance, subject only to such appeals as the organization itself provides for.¹⁴

Further, regarding disciplinary expulsion, the court case *Grunwald v. Bronfreund* "forthrightly declares" that:

...excommunication is a harm without a recognizable legal remedy. Even a church's threat to excommunicate has been excluded as inadmissible evidence. Even if a church resorts to means contrary to its own rules, an Oklahoma court has held that membership in a religious community is not a legally valuable right, so that no remedy of laws exists for excommunication.¹⁵

However, it should be noted that the protection from litigation churches enjoyed under the doctrine of "charitable immunity" is no longer a guarantee. This doctrine generally gave charitable organizations immunity from litigation unless there were extreme cases. According to the Rutherford brief, though some states have retained the doctrine, many have "severely limited" or "abolished it altogether."¹⁶ This simply means that churches do not enjoy these protective privileges outright. The outcome of a case will depend on whether or not the church has operated according to its constitution.

We can be encouraged that ecclesiastical courts and their decisions are considered valid by our legal

system. Therefore, the threat of being sued, though real, is not as likely as we might fear. We should be cautioned that church discipline that reaches the point of excommunication must be done 'by the book' (and that means the church by-laws, not simply the Bible). As a lawyer and elder in an ARP church has told me, churches must be diligent to act according to the specific judicial procedures outlined in their church constitutions. Actual trial proceedings with the Session, for example, must be carried out if discipline has reached the level of excommunication.

A CHALLENGE TO ELDERS

As I conclude this paper, I wish to express sincere appreciation to the elders of my church. We have faced some tough issues, and the elders have been willing to move forward, even in this difficult area of church discipline. We have had good experiences seeking to be obedient to the Lord's commands to seek to win our brother and sisters back to fellowship with Him and with His church. We have also had some unsettling experiences. But, we know at the very least, that doing nothing can be worse than allowing sinful behavior to continue unrestrained.

What can be done? Here are some practical things elders and pastors can consider:

1. Commit yourself to study the Scriptural texts on this subject of church discipline and reaffirm your commitment to the authority of Scripture and the Lordship of Jesus Christ in this area.

2. Reaffirm your vow to adhere to the *Westminster Confession of Faith*. The vows taken by elders in the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church include this one: "Do you accept the doctrines of this Church, contained in the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms, as founded on the Word of God and as the expression of your own faith and do you resolve to adhere thereto?"¹⁸

3. Be discerning when ordaining officers (1 Tim. 5:22). If it is true that everything rises and falls on leadership, then we need to recommit ourselves to selecting men who conform to the Biblical standard. A good way to

begin is to train men prior to ordination, not afterwards.

4. Avoid emphasizing the number of officers over the qualification of officers. A church forced to meet a quota of 12 men when only 11 are divinely-called and spiritually-gifted will have continual dissension in the Session and contentious problems in the church.

5. Prepare the congregation. Teach church discipline to the congregation, including new members. Most people who join an ARP church probably do not know what question #7 means when it says: "Do you submit yourself in the spirit of love to the government and discipline of this Church...?"¹⁹ Establish a date when you will begin exercising church discipline. Then, inform the congregation that from that point on church discipline will be one continuing aspect of the overall ministry of the church.

6. Avoid self-righteousness. The Pharisees were too eager to exclude people and were themselves constantly castigated by the Lord Jesus. Their pride was a continual stumbling-block. They were not really interested in restoring sinners or even in honoring God. They just wanted to protect their religious system. Pastors and elders in Reformed churches, let us watch ourselves lest we fall into the same temptation.

7. Finally, as pastors and elders currently holding office we should humble ourselves and, relying upon God's grace, "make every effort to live in peace with all men" and to pursue holiness without which "no one will see the Lord" (Hebrews 12:14). Revival can begin with the church leaders. As the often quoted passage on revival says: "...if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land (2 Chron. 7:14)."

I must admit that I do at times find myself asking, "Are we too late in repairing the breech that has been caused by generations of neglect regarding preven-

Commit yourself to study the Scriptural texts on this subject of church discipline and reaffirm your commitment to the authority of Scripture and the Lordship of Jesus Christ in this area.

Let us stand in the gap for the glory of the Lord and for the good of His church! God's former shepherds—Judges and Prophets and Apostles—are gone. Elders are the new shepherds. It is up to us to make a difference.

tative and corrective discipline?" What is one man, or one Session, or one church going to be able to accomplish in a culture deluged with moral relativism, and a church that is succumbing to the flood? When I saw news reports of recent flooding in the Midwest, I thought of the overwhelming problems facing the godly in an ungodly world. It was an awful sight seeing farms flooded, and homes literally lifted off their foundations. In most cases, when the flooding waters broke through the levee, homes and property were destroyed.

So it is with church discipline. The levee between a godly church and a godless world is broken in many places. The wall of protection afforded by biblical discipline has been pierced by the church's accommodation of secular philosophy and its toleration of immoral behavior. It is the task of elders to repair the breech in their own congregations.

We live in a time strikingly similar to that of the prophet Ezekiel. In Ezekiel chapter twenty, we read that the foreigner, the widow and the orphan were oppressed and mistreated. The Sabbath was desecrated. People were bent on shedding blood. Detestable forms of immorality were epidemic. Bribery was commonplace. Usury and interest rates were excessive. Ethical standards were pathetically low. Political conspiracy was rampant. The priests could not discern between the holy and the profane. The prophets gave false visions. In sum, the people had done the unimaginable: they had forsaken God and set their hearts to do whatever was right in their own eyes. It sounds as if we are reading one of our national newspapers.

We live in a society that is as degenerate as the kingdom of Judah was in Ezekiel's day. Unfortunately, even evangelical churches seem almost powerless to stand against the flood waters of confusion and corruption. One major reason is we have neglected for several generations the accountability offered by church discipline and have gradually lost our ability to be the light and the salt that a spiritually darkened and a morally decadent world desperately needs.

I believe the word of the Lord from Ezekiel applies to elders today:

I looked for a man among them who would build up the wall and stand before me in the gap on behalf of the land so I would not have to destroy it, but I found none. So I will

pour out my wrath on them and consume them with my fiery anger, bringing down on their own heads all they have done, declares the Sovereign Lord" (Eze. 22:30-31).

Let us stand in the gap for the glory of the Lord and for the good of His church! God's former shepherds—Judges and Prophets and Apostles—are gone. Elders are the new shepherds. It is up to us to make a difference. God has called us to rebuild the protective wall of church discipline and to stand in the gap, even if the waters beat against us. Some of the most vocal enemies we will face are on church membership roles across all denominations. But the positive side of standing firm is that the honor of Christ will be vindicated, the wrath of God will be averted, straying sinners may be restored, families may be reconciled, and the world may actually turn its head to see the church raising itself to God's standard of righteousness.

We must face the challenges and take the risks. God told Ezekiel He was looking for just one man to stand in the gap, but He found none. May that not be said of us.

ENDNOTES

¹ For a discussion of the role of the Judges, see R.K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1969), pp. 680-682.

² See Harrison, pp.711-712, where he discusses the role of the prophetic guild. See also his insightful discussion of the Hebrew prophets. Harrison relies heavily on W. F. Albright's *Samuel and the Beginnings of the Prophetic Movement* (1961).

³ Neill Roderick McGeachy, *A History of the Sugaw Creek Presbyterian Church* (Rock Hill, SC: Record Printing Co., 1954), Chapter 8: "The Session and Discipline", pp.100-121.

⁴ McGeachy, pp. 120-121.

⁵ Chapter XXX. Hereafter, in outlining the five purposes of church discipline, I shall rely on the modern English version of *Westminster Confession of Faith* by John H. Ball, III, and Philip Rollinson, *The Westminster Confession of Faith: A Modern Study Edition* (Signal Mountain, Tennessee: Summertown Texts, 1979; Revised ARP Edition, 1991), p. 47.

⁶ *The Book Of Discipline* of the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church, Chapter 1, "Theology of Church Discipline", Paragraph 3.

⁷ The Book of Discipline, Chapter 2.B.1.(c).

⁸ Jay E. Adams, *Handbook of Church Discipline* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1986), Chapter 2: "Preventive Discipline", pp. 21-26.

⁹ Adams, pp. 39-44.

¹⁰ Adams, pp. 67-75. Several of my elders have wondered if the congregation needs to be notified if the person who committed a public sin has verbally repented before the elders prior to any action by the Session. Adams deals with this on pages 33 and 34. This procedure would be necessary only if a sin has had public consequences. The advantages of notifying the congregation are three-fold: (1) The church members know the officers are not neglecting their responsibility to deal with openly sinful behavior; (2) The church members know that the officers are being consistent and not showing favoritism; and perhaps most importantly, (3) The repentant person is freed from malicious gossip and from a sense of guilt when in the presence of the public assembly.

¹¹ Adams, pp. 77-89.

¹² "Briefs: Intra-Church Disputes and the Law [REF. #A-11; 7/29/95]." The Rutherford Institute, John Whitehead, Founder and President. International Headquarters, P.O. Box 7482; Charlottesville, VA 22906-7482. Telephone: (804)978-3888; FAX:

(804)978-1789; E-mail: rutherford@fni.com; Internet: <http://rutherford.org>

¹³ Footnoted in the Rutherford document as *Watson v. Jones*, 80 U.S.(13 Wall.) 679, 722(1871).

¹⁴ Quoted in the legal brief from the *Watson* decision.

¹⁵ Summary in the legal brief of the *Grunwald* decision. The case is listed as *Grunwald v. Bronfreund*, 696 F. Supp. 838,840 (E.D.N.Y. 1988).

¹⁶ "Briefs: Intra-Church Disputes and the Law", p.

1.

¹⁷ In the ARP *Form of Government*, a church member can be removed from membership without trial only if he has been inactive for 3 years (Form of Government, Chap.V.e.3) or he has chosen to remove or renounce his membership. A member under discipline by the Session must be properly summoned, appear in a trial proceeding, and be formally charged and tried before he can be removed from the roles of membership (Book of Discipline, Chapter V.b., "Trial Procedure").

¹⁸ *The Form of Government* of the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church, (Chapter IX.D. "Ordination and Installation", question #2).

¹⁹ *The Form of Government*, (Chapter V.C.1.a., question #7).

The American Theological Library Association

Faith and Practice recently received some good news from the American Theological Library Association. After reviewing the last several issues of *Faith and Practice*, the ATLA has accepted us for full indexing in the *Index of Religious Periodicals* and *ATLA Database on CD-ROM*. This means that at every theological library (or at any library with a significant theological and biblical studies section), researchers will find our articles included in the *Index of Religious Periodicals*.

This inclusion in the *Index* makes our journal much more attractive for use and purchase by libraries. In addition, for those libraries that do not subscribe to *Faith and Practice*, the text of the articles will also be available through a new Document Delivery

Service, which means that researchers will be able to order copies of articles cited in the indexes. This inclusion significantly contributes in a positive way to the influence of ARP scholars, pastors, and teachers in North America.

More specifically, *Faith and Practice* will be indexed in the following: *Religion Index One: Periodicals*, the *Index to Book Reviews in Religion*, *Religion Indexes: RIO/RIT/IBRR 1975- on CD-ROM*, and the *ATLA Religion Database on CD-ROM*. These are all published by the American Theological Library Association, 820 Church Street, Evanston, IL, 60201-5613, E-mail: atla@atla.com. Find ATLA on the Internet at <http://atla.library.vanderbilt.edu/atla/home.html>.

Choosing Your Elders

James R. Augustine

The well-being of the church crucially depends upon placing into church office only those called and equipped by God for that service. The ARP Form of Government provides two ways in which congregations may select new officers for the church (see FOG Ch. IX.C.2). In one of them, the session may appoint a nominating committee which shall present to the congregation a list of names containing at least one name for each office. Additional nominations may also be made by the members at the congregational meeting. In the other, a congregational meeting may be held to elect officers from a list of all persons eligible for office. The list is to contain at least twice the number of nominations as there are offices available, and the session is to confer with all the nominees to insure their qualifications and willingness to serve. Whichever method is used, the church must insure that those nominated to the congregation are indeed qualified according to the Biblical criteria. The following article is written by an elder who has previously served as the chairman of a nominating committee, in consultation with several others who have served in that capacity. It is offered with the hope that churches might find help for improving their own procedures for electing new church officers.

One of the most important tasks that a member of any congregation will be asked to undertake is that of serving on a committee charged with the task choosing a pastor or a group of ruling elders.

The Editors

One of the most important tasks that a member of any congregation will be asked to undertake is that of serving on a committee charged with the task choosing a pastor or a group of ruling elders. Serving on such a committee is a great honor and privilege, and also a matter of great responsibility. What follows are Biblical principles and practical guidelines to those who find themselves in this humbling position.

We are not the first to struggle with the issue of choosing leaders of the church. Such was one of the first matters to be faced by the early church:

In those days Peter stood up among the believers (a group numbering about a hundred and twenty) and said, "Brothers, the Scripture had to be fulfilled which the Holy Spirit spoke

long ago through the mouth of David concerning Judas, who served as guide for those who arrested Jesus—he was one of our number and shared in this ministry." (With the reward he got for his wickedness, Judas bought a field; there he fell headlong, his body burst open and all his intestines spilled out. Everyone in Jerusalem heard about this, so they called that field in their language Akeldama, that is, Field of Blood.) "For," said Peter, "it is written in the book of Psalms, 'May his place be deserted; let there be no one to dwell in it,' and, 'May another take his place of leadership.' Therefore it is necessary to choose one of the men who have been with us the whole time the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from John's baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up from us. For one of these must become a witness with us of his resurrection." So they proposed two men: Joseph called Barsabbas (also known as Justus) and Matthias. Then they prayed, "Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us which of these two you have chosen to take over this apostolic ministry, which Judas left to go where he belongs." Then they cast lots, and the lot fell to Matthias; so he was added to the eleven apostles (Acts 1:15-26).

In this passage, Luke describes the manner in which Matthias was chosen to replace Judas. Commenting on these verses in his book, *The Message of Acts*, John Stott notes that, in the matter of choosing Matthias, the apostles sought to discern God's will using the following cluster of factors: (1) the general leading of Scripture that a replacement be made (vv. 16-21), (2) the use of common sense (vv. 21-23) (Stott notes that if Judas' substitute was to have the same apostolic ministry he must also have the same qualifications), (3) prayer (v. 24), and (4) the drawing of lots (v. 26) by which Stott suggests they trusted Jesus to make his choice known.¹ Stott concludes that three of these factors—Scripture, common sense, and prayer, "constitute a wholesome combination through which God may be trusted to

guide us today.”² The wisdom of God as revealed in this passage provides essential advice to any officer nominating committee faced with the task of choosing those godly men who will serve to “shepherd the flock.” Let us look at these essential principles in turn.

Prayer

No one should underestimate the importance of prayer in the process of selecting future church leaders. Such prayer should be fervent and frequent and be made for the committee members, for peace and unity within the committee, for the nominees, and for the committee meetings. Each member of the committee should recruit several faithful prayer warriors in the congregation asking them to undergird their service on the officer nominating committee with prayer. The prayers of the congregation, individually and corporately, should be sought for the work of the committee by means of newsletters, bulletins, and requests from the pulpit. The entire process should be bathed in prayer!

Scripture

The Scriptural standards for the office of elder are found in 1 Tim 3:1-7, 1 Tim 5:22, and Titus 1:5-9. A pastor or ruling elder should provide the officer nominating committee with a careful review of these Scriptural standards to be applied to those who would serve as members of the Session. With Bibles at hand, these Scriptural standards should be read frequently, studied earnestly, and meditated upon intently. It is helpful to begin each meeting with a careful review of one of the Scriptural standards - with a time for prayer that these standards not be forgotten nor that the wisdom of man replace the wisdom of God in the selection process. Everyone on the committee should make it their task to understand what God requires in His word for those He has called into His service. As time goes on and the meetings seem either to become routine or perhaps get intense, it is often easy to lose sight of these Scriptural standards.

In addition to these Scriptural qualifications, the *Standards of the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church* (1976), under the section entitled *Form of Government*, give additional qualifications and individual responsibilities of a ruling elder (Chapter VIII) as well as guidance concerning the election, ordination,

and installation of ruling elders and deacons (Chapter IX). Members of the officer nominating committee would do well to familiarize themselves with these qualifications and responsibilities. It should be noted that at the time of the ordination and installation service the officers-elect present themselves before the congregation and solemnly promise to maintain the doctrine, government, discipline and worship of the Church. With regard to the doctrine of the Church, officers-elect are asked to accept and resolve to adhere to the doctrines contained in the *Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms*, as founded on the Word of God. The officer nominating committee's responsibility is to confirm the willingness of each nominee to accept and adhere to these doctrines before placing the name of a nominee before the congregation.

Common Sense

While the list of topics under this heading is perhaps the longest, they are certainly secondary in importance to prayer and adherence to God's word on this matter of elder selection.

At the onset, the officer nominating committee should have a clear sense of its duties and responsibilities and a sense of the time frame in which it is to accomplish its work. The Session is responsible for providing the committee with a written call or charge. Consultation with the chairmen of previous officer nominating committees should provide the committee with a time line of when things need to get done. For example, an official notice should be made to the congregation requesting submission of names of nominees for officers. Several weeks of time should be given for thoughtful and prayerful consideration of nominees and the gathering of names by the committee. Following the initial gathering of names, weeks of work remain in prioritizing these names, choosing a final slate of nominees, and securing their consent to be nominated prior to the calling of an election by the congregation. In a larger congregation where all nominees may not be known to all members, biographical sketches and pictures may need to be secured several weeks prior to the congregational meeting. Such data is often time-consuming to assemble, requiring patience and perseverance. Also, if a written ballot is to be prepared, additional time will be needed to make such arrangements.

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Discussions of the qualifications and character of those being considered for service should be kept absolutely confidential. To this end members of the officer nominating committee should refrain from discussing the proceedings of the nominating committee with anyone outside the committee, including their spouses.

If the biblical guidelines for church officers are carefully adhered to and the committee undergirds its thoughts and actions with prayer, it is likely that the Holy Spirit would lead all members of the committee to the same conclusion regarding a man's fitness to serve as an officer. Hence, unanimity of decision making should be the standard adopted by the committee. This matter should be thoroughly aired before the full committee and unanimously agreed upon. While the Lord is working in the hearts of the committee members, He is also equipping, inclining and calling men to serve as His shepherds.

Once names have begun to come to the officer nominating committee's attention, a schedule for weekly meetings should be established. It is essential that every member of the committee commit to attend all meetings. The schedule of meetings should be prepared to make attendance as convenient as possible for the full committee. Because of summer vacations and other plans, it is often necessary for the committee to conclude its work before other summer activities begin to intrude on committee members' schedules. With planning and foresight, such absences by members of the committee can be overcome. The advent of telephone conferencing provides an opportunity for someone unavoidably out of town to still participate in the deliberations of the committee. Those who serve on the officer nominating committee should seriously consider not taking on any other new responsibilities during the time of this responsibility.

If your congregation has a pictorial directory, each member of the committee should be provided with one to help identify those who have been nominated as officers by members of the congregation.

Once all names have been received by the officer nominating committee, it is the committee's task to then formulate a pool of qualified candidates. This might involve paring down the list of names to double that of available vacancies. For example, if ten elders are to be nominated then a list of twenty names should be developed. With such a list in hand, additional information can then be sought by the committee on such matters as attendance at

meetings of the Session if the nominee has previously served, attendance at worship, teaching duties, matters related to tithing, and other issues of importance to the committee and its work. Having an ample list of names of those who are qualified to serve is always helpful, particularly if some who are asked to serve respectfully decline to do so or are temporarily unavailable to serve (or even in the unlikely case that the committee has to withdraw a nomination). Once the deadline has passed for the congregation to submit names to the officer nominating committee, nominations should be closed including nominations from within the committee.

The *Form of Government* provides that ruling elders be elected to active service for life or for a limited term (rotation system). If a rotation system is used, the names of those currently serving on the session are often submitted by members of the congregation to the nominating committee. In such cases, the chairman of the committee should be given the authority to remove the names of those presently serving from the list of potential nominees. The same may also be true for those who serve as full or part-time staff members and those in the congregation who are ordained pastors. In any case, the authority given to the chairman to delete names from the master list regardless of the criteria, should be with the unanimous consent of the committee. The committee should obtain additional information on those ordained in other congregations and denominations. This will be particularly helpful to those new to the congregation but who have previously and faithfully served the Lord as officers. Regardless of the size of a congregation, it is inevitable that the names of relatives of officer nominating committee members will be brought forward by the congregation. In order to maintain the unity of the committee and forestall any future negative impact on its deliberations, it is perhaps the better part of wisdom for the committee to not consider nominating members of their own family.

Once the officer nominating committee has formulated its final list of names with potential alternates, it would seem appropriate to share those names with the pastor before asking the nominees for permission to place their name before the congregation. Such a list should be presented in alphabetical order with all candidates (including alternates) on a single list. The intent here is not to give the pastor veto power over the work of the committee but to allow legitimate pastoral concerns to come to

the attention of the nominating committee.

Those who provide letters of nomination to the officer nominating committee do a great service in behalf of the committee and the nominees. If such letters are thorough and address how the candidate fulfills the Scriptural guidelines for spiritual leadership, they can go a long way toward making the committee's task easier. Such letters of nomination should always receive a written acknowledgment from the nominating committee.

As the officer nominating committee moves into the later stages of its work—asking potential nominees to allow their names to be placed before the congregation—the personal approach is probably in order. Several members of the committee should go together and personally visit each potential nominee. It is essential that each nominee be given sufficient time carefully to consider what it means to serve as an officer, prayerfully to consider the task before them, the time involved, and the possible impact on their marriage and family.

Hopefully by following these Scriptural and practical guidelines, the slate of officer nominees will be a blend and balance of backgrounds and personalities, with the necessary spiritual gifts and spiritual maturity to “shepherd the flock.”

Conclusion

In closing, let me remind those who have been called to serve on an officer nominating committee of Paul's words in 1 Timothy 5:22: “Do not lay hands upon anyone too hastily and thereby share responsibility for the sins of others; keep yourself free from sin.” It is often the case that we choose officers in haste. Paul warns us against this. To choose those to serve as elders in our congregations who may be unqualified is to share in their sins! It is a serious matter to choose a pastor or ruling elder. We should go about this task with patience, humility, and a thorough knowledge of the constitutional and Scriptural standards. All this activity must be undergirded with fervent and frequent prayer and the use of our God-given common sense. The result of this process should be the choosing of men of God who are themselves men of prayer, men who know the Scriptures, and men of common sense enabled by the Holy Spirit to “shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood” (Acts 20:28). May God guide us today as He did the apostles (Acts 1:15-26) as we seek to choose

godly pastors and elders who faithfully follow Christ's example of servanthood.

Acknowledgements:

The writer appreciates the helpful comments and suggestions provided by Dr. Mark Ross and ruling elders Charlie Cate, Marion Davis, Joe Taber, Jim Turner, and Ken Wingate.

ENDNOTES

¹ John R. W. Stott, *The Spirit, the Church, and the World: The Message of Acts* (Downers Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 1990), pp. 58-59.

² Stott, p. 59.

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The Offices of the Church

Lee Irons and John Muether

Welcome to the Next Church was the title of Charles Trueheart's lengthy article on American megachurches in the August 1996 issue of *Atlantic Monthly*. Trueheart describes the popularity of these huge churches that offer a full menu of customized, seven-day-a-week ministries led by lay people. "One of the basic elements of large-church management," he writes, "is identifying the 'gifts' of people in order to fit them to the church's various ministries." In other words, the Next Church minister is no longer the shepherd of the flock, but the CEO of the organization; he manages the shepherds who actually do the work of ministry. The language often employed in defense of this "philosophy of ministry" is the "priesthood of believers," and the implication is that these churches are redefining church office in the spirit of that Reformation insight.

But students of Presbyterianism, however much they may be tempted by the big buildings, budgets, and programs of the Next Church, will recognize that the lay revolution that insists that every member is a minister threatens the very fabric of Presbyterian faith and practice. As J. Frederick Holper has pointed out, construals of ordination are closely related to denominational identity; the ways in which denominations understand their offices shape the way they define their mission.¹

TWO OFFICE OR THREE OFFICE

In Presbyterian history, this debate has focused on the number of offices in the church. Does the Bible sanction three offices (minister, elder, deacon) or just two (elder and deacon)? What is the nature of the eldership? Is it a distinct office from that of the ministry of the word and sacraments? Or are there two orders within the office of elder: a teaching eldership and a ruling eldership?

Historically, Presbyterian ecclesiology has been three-office, beginning with Calvin's *Ecclesiastical Ordinances* (1541), and continuing with the *Belgic Confession* (1561), in its Article 31, and the Westminster Assembly in its *Form of Presbyterian Church-Government* (1645). The defining characteristic of the three-office position is the identification of the first and

primary officer Christ has ordained in his church not as a "teaching elder," as is common today, but a "minister of the word," who is called by Christ to preach the word of God and to administer the sacraments as visible seals of that word. Three-office ecclesiology insists that the office of minister of the word is to be differentiated from the other two offices (elder and deacon); no other office in the church participates in the ministry of the word and sacraments. From Calvin on, only those properly called and ordained to be ministers of the word and sacraments were allowed to publicly read and expound the Scriptures and to administer the Sacraments. To the elders, Calvin and others assigned the function of the eldership as primarily "the exercise of discipline" in the church.²

Contemporary ecclesiologist Edmund Clowney argues similarly in distinguishing between the ministry of the word (given only to ministers) and the ministry of order (given to elders). The Bible speaks of those having gifts for rule or government, and these gifts are distinguished from teaching. "The gift of teaching," writes Clowney, "distinguishes pastors and teachers from other church elders with whom they share ruling authority in the church."³

In the middle of the last century, the three office view was challenged in a vigorous debate on the status of elders that took place among Old School Presbyterians. In an effort to clarify Presbyterian polity in the marketplace of 19th century American Protestantism, especially amid the religious confusion along the rapidly expanding American frontier, Presbyterians sought to distinguish themselves from competing polities of a hierarchical or a congregational sort. The debate divided roughly along the Mason-Dixon line, with northerner Presbyterians (Princeton's Samuel Miller and Charles Hodge) squaring off against James Thornwell and R. L. Dabney of the south. Thornwell argued for one office of elder with a diversity of gifts in the office. By denying the parity of ruling and teaching elders, Hodge's three-office view, Thornwell claimed, was establishing a "sacred hierarchy." Southern Presbyterian Benjamin M. Palmer added that Hodge was guilty of "high churchism and Popery," whereas Samuel Miller, who had written extensively on the duties

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and privileges of the ruling elder, labeled the Southern perspective an innovation in Presbyterian history toward the direction of congregationalism.

The Northern Presbyterian church would follow Princeton's teaching on church polity and the eldership, but, following the division of the church that the civil war provoked, the view of Breckinridge, Thornwell and Dabney became the position of the Southern Presbyterian Church. In the years following, the southern two-office position has gained strong ascendancy in the north, and it would be fair to generalize that in American Presbyterianism has been a "journey to achieve parity between elders and ministers." In distinction from other Reformed churches, "It has been a significant contribution of Presbyterianism in the United States to emphasize that the office of elder must be accorded the same dignity and respect which is given to the office of minister of the Word."⁴ Three-office spokesman Robert S. Rayburn concedes that the two-office view represents today "the preponderance of opinion of conservative American Presbyterianism."⁵

The consistent two-office view removes the prohibition against ruling elders administering the sacraments and preaching. Where any difference might be acknowledged between ruling and teaching elders, it is nothing more than a division of labor. All elders are shepherds and overseers of the flock. Yet on any given session of elders, one of them normally has undergone special training qualifying him to be a stated "public instructor." According to Douglas Bannerman, "A difference of gifts and training is recognized among those who belonged to the one order of the eldership."⁶ That is, a *functional* distinction between ruling and teaching elders is allowed. This distinction is based on the assumption that some elders may be more qualified to teach and preach than others, rather than on a biblically-mandated demarcation of two separated offices. It thus becomes a pragmatic distinction that preserves the fundamental parity that obtains among all elders.

In the minds of many, a consistent two-office position is a betrayal of the essence of Presbyterianism, which has always stressed the ministry of the word and sacraments as a unique function distinct from that of ruling and governing. Because the gift of rule and the gift of preaching are not the same, neither are the *office* of rule and the *office* of preaching. To reduce the difference in the two functions as nothing more than a division of labor is to render the preaching of the word little

more than one of the tasks which certain elders may happen to be better at by virtue of eloquence, training, or interest.

For this reason, many two-office proponents qualify their position in what is often awkwardly labeled the "two-and-a-half-office" view. In an effort to do greater justice to the difference in gifts, the "two-and-a-half" position affirms that the office of elder is to be further divided into two orders within the same office: the ruling elder and the teaching elder. This is the official position of the Presbyterian Church in America:

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. The elders jointly have the government and spiritual oversight of the church, including teaching. Only those elders who are especially gifted, called and trained by God to preach may serve as teaching elders.⁷

BIBLICAL TEACHING ON OFFICE

It is not possible in the space of this essay to do full justice to the exegetical case for each position. We will instead restrict ourselves to observing how each position approaches the relevant texts. Looking first at what most consider the single most important passage that deals with the permanent offices in the church, 1 Timothy 3, we see that the two-office view has an appeal that the three office view lacks. Because the chapter mentions only overseers and deacons, it is sometimes regarded as establishing two offices: the elder-bishop and the deacon. But by itself this passage proves too much, and the consistent two-office hermeneutic it suggests does not appear to have gained unqualified acceptance in any of the major Presbyterian forms of government. And so the interpretation of this passage must be supplemented by other biblical-theological considerations.

As Rayburn notes, the case for the three office view depends largely on the office of elder as it is found in the Old Testament.⁸ The collective entity of leaders known as the *elders* is referred to more than one hundred times in the Old Testament. According to Numbers 11, the Israelite eldership was an institution of divine sanction that had ecclesiastical power as well. In response to Moses's complaint that the burden of single-handedly hearing

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all the judicial cases of the people was becoming unmanageable, the Lord said, “Gather for me seventy men from the elders of Israel, whom you know to be the elders of the people and their officers and bring them to the tent of meeting” (Num. 11:16). The implications of this narrative are twofold. First, the eldership of Israel is of divine right; that is, it was sanctioned and authorized by divine revelation. Second, “the elders of the people” were clearly distinguished from the priests and Levites who ministered in the temple and who were set apart by a special ordination and anointing with oil (Exod. 29; Lev. 8). Often we read of the priests *and* the elders, where it is clear that the two groups are distinct (Deut. 31:9; Josh. 8:33; I Kings 8:3; Jer. 19:7; 29:1; Lam. 1:19).

By New Testament times, “the elders of the people” have become formalized as part of a body known as the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin was composed of two main groups: the elders of the people, and the clerical leaders known collectively as “the chief priests and scribes.” The elders, then, are distinct from the chief priests and scribes, and together they comprise the Sanhedrin.

Notice the parallel: just as the elders of Israel “joined with the priests and Levites” to govern the church, so the New Testament ruling elders are to “join with the minister.”

Priest and Elder

A three-office interpretation would consider the distinction between priest and elder as evidence of a distinction of *office* between the minister of the word and sacraments (who is viewed as the New Covenant fulfillment of the Old Covenant priest/scribe) and the ruling elder. The Westminster Assembly reasoned accordingly:

As there were in the Jewish church elders of the people joined with the priests and Levites in the government of the church; so Christ, who hath instituted government, and governors ecclesiastical in the church, hath furnished some in his church, beside the ministers of the word, 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. Which officers reformed churches commonly called Elders.⁹

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A two-office hermeneutic, however, could regard the Old Testament priesthood as a unique institution which has found its complete fulfillment in Christ our great High Priest, or it could apply any continuing notion of priesthood to all believers, thus eliminating any distinct “priesthood” for the New Testament minister. But these approaches break down the distinction between the minister and the general office of believer. If all believers are *equally* priests, then why has Presbyterianism historically denied the administration of the sacraments to unordained laymen?

A second major area where exegetical differences arise is that connected with the Greek word *episkopos*, translated as “bishop” or “overseer.” Debate arises over the question of the semantic relationship of *episkopos* and *presbyteros*. Are they two different titles for the same office? Two texts are directly relevant to this question, and they appear to connect the presbyter and the bishop in a way that implies something close to an equivalence. Acts 20:28 is addressed to the *presbiteroi* of the church of Ephesus (Acts 20:17). These elders are exhorted by Paul to take heed to themselves and to all the flock “of which the Holy Spirit has made you an overseer” to feed or shepherd the church of God. The implication is that presbyters could also be called “bishops.” Titus 1:5-7 is likewise illuminating. Here Paul identifies his subject as the appointment of qualified *presbyters* (Tit. 1:5). In the subsequent exposition of this topic, he says, “For the *episkopos* must be above reproach as God’s steward” (Tit. 1:7). The only way Paul can make this statement is if the *presbyter* is an *episkopos*.

Two options are available to interpreters. In the two-office position, bishop and presbyter are totally interchangeable and are nothing more than two different names for the one generic office of elder. Every occurrence of either term in the New Testament refers to the generic elder, whether teaching or ruling. From a three-office perspective, bishop and presbyter are two different names for the one ministerial office of pastor, or minister of the word and sacraments. However, *presbiteros* is ambiguous in the New Testament and occasionally refers to the ruling elder. *Episkopos*, by contrast, is not ambiguous and always refers to the minister or pastor. Calvin, for example, argues that the two titles denote one office: “Bishop and presbyter are one and the same.” In his commentary on 1 Timothy 3 he states: “The term *bishop* belongs alike to all presbyters.”¹⁰ But

Calvin did not think that Paul had in view a generic elder when he defined these qualifications in Timothy and Titus, but rather the minister of the word and sacraments only. Regarding Titus 1:5-7 Calvin argues:

Those whom he formerly called presbyters he now calls bishops (which means overseers or superintendents), and he gives this name to all whose duty it is to preach the word of God.¹¹

....although we may conclude from 1 Timothy 5:17, that there are two classes of presbyters, the context will immediately show, that here none other than teachers are meant, that is, those who were ordained to teach; for immediately afterwards, he will call the same persons "bishops."¹²

Each side, therefore, has a different approach for handling the exegetical evidence. The three-office view begins with 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and takes the "apt to teach" requirement as definitive proof that the bishop is a minister. With this definition of bishop in hand, it then goes to Titus and concludes that the presbyter mentioned there must be a minister. But the two-office view begins with the assumption that a presbyter is a generic elder. It then reads Titus and concludes that presbyter and bishop are interchangeable titles for the same office of generic elder. With this definition of bishop in hand, it then goes to 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and concludes that the bishop mentioned there must be a generic elder.

These different approaches inform the way each position interprets another key text in the debate, 1 Timothy 5:17. The two-office view uses 1 Timothy 5:17 to establish different functions or orders within the one generic office of elder. Thomas Witherow points out that "there is nothing in the language used to indicate that a [ruling] elder had no right to take part in any other department of the work if he pleased. [Paul's] words rather seem to imply that if an elder wrought in both departments of the work, and did well in both [ruling and preaching], he was especially deserving of double honour."¹³

1 Timothy 3:1-7

The three-office position approaches this text

again with the distinction between elders and ministers taught in 1 Timothy 3:1-7. So this text speaks of two kinds of rulers: rulers who labor in teaching (ministers) and those do not (ruling elders).¹⁴ (Some interpreters argue that the word "presbyter" simply means "older man", as it does in 5:1.) This passage, then, reestablishes the Old Testament principle that "pastor-teachers share with the elders the rule of the church but as an adjunct to their proper ministry."¹⁵

What is important to conclude from this survey is that the debate cannot be resolved simply by appealing to a single passage but only through careful synthesis of the entire range of biblical evidence dealing with the nature and warrant for the offices, including the Old Testament background for the eldership and the New Testament passages dealing with the bishop and the presbyter.

THE PROBLEMS OF THE "MEDIATING VIEW": THE OPC AS A CASE STUDY

It is often in the interests of "synthesizing" this data that the two-and-a-half office position prevails in contemporary discussions of polity. This view is sometimes championed as best achieving a consensus or balance on the apparently contradictory evidence of Scripture. G. I. Williamson, for example, writes that "I do not believe that there is necessarily a wide difference—practically speaking—between the two and three office views."¹⁶

However, it is our contention that what appears to be a consensus is rather a step toward greater ambiguity and incoherence in Presbyterian polity. Since its underlying theory of the nature and powers of the ruling elder is not entirely consistent with itself, it is impossible to determine, from a purely theoretical standpoint, where the line will be drawn with respect to granting the ruling elder certain ministerial functions. Is it plausible, for example, to allow the elder to read Scripture publicly or to lead worship? Could he not also pronounce the benediction? These questions are not easily resolved, since the theoretical foundation is itself a mixture of three-office and two-office principles. In most Presbyterian polities, a conservative impulse forbids the ruling elder from administering the sacraments. But this prohibition seems to be an arbitrary vestige from the earlier three-office view and not an obvious im-

The difficulty of synthesizing all of the biblical teaching is evident when we look at the standard of government and worship in contemporary Presbyterian denominations.

plication of any underlying principle or biblical text.

The difficulty of synthesizing all of the biblical teaching is evident when we look at the standard of government and worship in contemporary Presbyterian denominations. Using the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC) as a case study, it would be helpful to see what position it takes with respect to the nature and warrant of the eldership and its relationship to the ministers of the word. The relevant portions of the OPC *Form of Government* read as follows:

The ordinary and perpetual offices in the church are those given for the ministry of the word of God, of rule, and of mercy. Those who share in the rule of the church may be called elders (presbyters), bishops, or church governors. Those who minister in mercy and service are called deacons. Those elders who have been endowed and called of Christ to labor also in the word and teaching are called ministers.¹⁷

Christ who has instituted government in his church has furnished some men, beside the ministers of the word, with gifts for government, and with commission to execute the same when called thereto. Such officers, chosen by the people from among their number, are to join with the ministers in the government of the church, and are properly called ruling elders.¹⁸

From these passages the OPC would seem to be clearly three-office, distinguishing between the ministry of the word, government and rule, and mercy. However, the OPC also contains the seeds of a two-office hermeneutic. Consider, for example the church's *Directory for Worship*, which gives guidelines for the language to be used at a service for the ordination and installation of ruling elders:

In this passage [I Tim. 5:17] the Scriptures distinguish between elders who labor particularly in the word and in doctrine—usually called ministers or pastors—and elders who join with the minister in the government and discipline of the church—generally called ruling elders.¹⁹

Thus, both ministers and ruling elders are included

in the New Testament designation *presbuteros*—at least in this passage. As we have seen, Calvin and other three-office advocates did not have a problem using I Timothy 5:17 in this manner—as long as it was not made the constitutive basis for the relation between the minister and the elder. But the *Form of Government* seems to make I Tim. 5:17 paradigmatic when it states that “those elders who have been endowed and called of Christ to labor also in the word and teaching are called ministers.” In other words, some elders may be called to rule only; others may be “endued and called” to the additional task of preaching. This seems close to the “two and a half” position with its two orders of elders.

This suspicion finds confirmation in the *Directory for Worship* when it cites Acts 20:28 in its description of the duties of the “ruling” elder:

It is the duty and privilege of ruling elders, in the name and by the authority of our ascended king, to rule over particular churches, and, as servants of our great shepherd, to care for his flock. Holy Scripture enjoins them: “Take heed unto yourselves, and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit hath made you bishops, to feed the church of God, which he purchased with his own blood.” As a consequence, ruling elders must be zealous in maintaining the purity of the ministration of the Word and sacraments.²⁰

A Dangerous Confusion

Here we find a dangerous confusion. Acts 20:28, as we have seen, is one of two texts which demonstrates the interchangeability of *episkopos* and *presbyteros* in the New Testament. If we take this text as addressed to and defining the office of ruling elder (rather than of the minister of the word—the traditional Reformed interpretation), then we are required to admit that the ruling elder is not only a presbyter but a bishop. Indeed, the OPC *Form of Government* admits as much: “Those who share in the rule of the church may be called elders (presbyters), bishops, or church governors.” Of necessity, therefore, the qualifications of the bishop (I Tim. 3:2ff) must apply to both ruling elders and ministers. All ruling elders must therefore be “apt to teach.” What, then, distinguishes the ruling elder from a minister of the word?

On the one hand, the *Directory for Worship* uses Acts 20:28 as a passage describing the function of the ruling elder (because they incorrectly assume that *episkopos* denotes a ruling elder). But on the other hand, it hesitates to affirm what Acts 20:28 in fact teaches: whoever the *episkopoi* are, they are to feed the flock of God. Thus, the *Directory* subtly transforms Paul's words. Rather than saying that ruling elders are to feed the flock through preaching the word and administering the sacraments, the *Directory* hedges: "As a consequence, ruling elders must be zealous in maintaining the purity of the ministration of the word and sacraments."²¹

The OPC Form of Government rightly states that ruling elders may not administer the sacraments. They are not regarded as "ministers," nor are they "in the ministry." They do not earn their living by laboring in the word and doctrine. They are under the jurisdiction and discipline of the session not of the presbytery. Ruling elders and ministers have distinct ordinations. The problem is that these three-office distinctions cannot be justified upon a two-office interpretation of the biblical data. If the New Testament titles *episkopos* and *presbuteros* uniformly and consistently embrace both the minister and the ruling elder, then I Timothy 5:17 becomes the only text upon which one can establish a biblical conceptual distinction between them. But this text only makes a functional distinction not a distinction of office: some elders rule, others in that same office labor in the word and doctrine (but both classes must be apt to teach). If this is the only exegetical basis for making a distinction at all, how can we justify the specific distinctions found in our church orders? On what biblical basis could we continue to refuse ruling elders to administer the sacraments or to pronounce the benediction?

In sum, the OPC is in a precarious position. Although the Form of Government employs the language of a three-office view, it betrays inconsistency in its underlying theory when it supplies a two-office hermeneutic in the *Directory for Worship*. This schizophrenia is graphically exposed in Chapter 3 of the *Directory*, where, after a series of instructions on how the minister is to conduct public worship, it concludes with a two-office disclaimer: "Nothing in the preceding sections shall be understood so as to prohibit ruling elders from leading in public prayer, reading the Scriptures, leading responsive readings,

or, on occasion, exhorting the congregation as part of public worship."²²

This unstable situation has created much confusion in the church. When two-office principles are at work, the ruling elder is given the sense that his authority is identical to that of the minister—he is allowed to participate in the laying on of hands; his presence is necessary at all deliberative assemblies; he may lead worship, read Scriptures publicly. But as soon as he wishes to preach and administer the sacraments, then the three-office principle forbids him from intruding on such a sacred and holy office.

A three-office practice cannot be grounded upon a two-office foundation. Sooner or later Presbyterians will inquire as to the biblical basis for these three-office practices. It is therefore imperative that we develop a consistent Presbyterian polity. Presbyterians who operate from either "inconsistent three-office" or "two-and-a-half office" position must face the schizophrenia of their practice.

CONCLUSION

To be sure, the three-office and two-office positions are attempting to safeguard similar concerns. Spokesmen for both views recognize the dangers inherent in the "single-office" position that sees every member as a minister, thus compromising any notion of special office whatsoever. It would be unjust to caricature the two-office view, as some have, as sanctioning the mischievous expansion of the lay ministry. After all, Dabney wrote eloquently about the danger of lay ministry and the need for a learned clergy. And Mark Brown, a three-office view-holder, has argued that Dabney and Thornwell themselves are essentially three-office in their ecclesiology.²³

Still it is fair to ask whether the two-office view contributes to the corruption of the notion of special office by conflating the ministry of the word with the ministry of rule. In contrast, the three-office position refuses to set the bar too low for ministers nor too high for elders, thus avoiding both hierarchical and congregational impulses. Here the uniqueness of both the minister and elder are highlighted, whereas the two-office view tends to obscure the ways in which each office serves the church of Christ. The three-office view refuses to see the minister as merely a seminary-trained elder. As Rayburn writes:

In contrast, the three-office position refuses to set the bar too low for ministers nor too high for elders, thus avoiding both hierarchical and congregational impulses.

...the two office view, in my judgment, lies in its unwitting diminishing of the special calling of the minister, viewing him as it does first and fundamentally as an elder, albeit one who has been given the additional responsibility of teaching, rather than as a minister of the word who additionally but incidentally shares the rule of the church with the elders.²³

But does the three office view elevate the minister at the expense of the elder? Not at all, but quite the contrary, argued Thomas Smythe, because it recognizes the ruling elder for nothing more or less than what he is, a ruler in the church:

... ought not ruling elders to be very thankful to us for defending them from the imposition upon them of clerical titles, clerical office, clerical duties, and clerical responsibilities? We think so for who among them could endure to be clothed with the pastoral office without education, fitness, desire or opportunity for it—without, in short, a call to the ministry.²⁵

ENDNOTES

¹ J. Frederick Holper, "Presbyterian Ordination Practice as a Case Study in the Transmission of Denominational Identity" in *Beyond Establishment: Protestant Identity in a Post-Protestant Age*, ed. by Jackson Carroll and Wade Roof Clark (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), pp. 205-224.

² Calvin also strongly distinguished between pastors and teachers, and thus his position is often (rightly) identified as four-office. However, for our purposes, we will include him as a representative of the three-office view, since his understanding of the distinct offices of minister and lay elder is practically a three-office position with a fourth office added on.

³ Edmund P. Clowney, *The Church* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press, 1995), p. 212.

⁴ Joan S. Gray and Joyce C. Tucker, *Presbyterian Polity for Church Officers* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1986), p. 43.

⁵ Robert S. Rayburn, "Three Offices: Minister, Elder, Deacon" *Presbyterian* 12 (1986) p. 105.

⁶ D. Douglas Bannerman, *The Scriptural Doctrine of the Church Historically and Exegetically Considered* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1976 [1887]), p. 546.

⁷ PCA Book of Church Order, VII, 2..

⁸ Rayburn, "Three Offices," p. 108.

⁹ "The Form of Government" in *The Westminster Confession of Faith* (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland, 1958 [1646]), p. 406.

¹⁰ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistles of Paul to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, translated by the Rev. William Pringle, and published in *Calvin's Commentaries*, Volume XXI (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), p. 85.

¹¹ Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistles of Paul to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, p. 294, footnote 2.

¹² Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistles of Paul to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, p. 290.

¹³ Quoted in Iain Murray, "Ruling Elders—A Sketch of a Controversy" in Brown, ed., *Order in the Offices*, p. 164.

¹⁴ Edmund P. Clowney, "A Brief for Church Officers," in *Order in the Offices: Essays Defining the Roles of Church Officers*, ed. by Mark R. Brown (Duncansville, PA: Classic Presbyterian Government Resources, 1993), p. 62.

¹⁵ Rayburn, "Three Offices," p. 112.

¹⁶ G. I. Williamson, "A Look at the Biblical Offices" *Ordained Servant* 1:2 (April 1992) p. 34.

¹⁷ OPC Form of Government, V.3.

¹⁸ OPC Form of Government, X.1.

¹⁹ OPC Directory for Worship, VI:B-2.

²⁰ OPC Directory for Worship, VI:B-2.

²¹ OPC Directory for Worship, VI:B-2.

²² OPC Directory for Worship, III:8.

²³ Mark R. Brown, ed. *Order in the Offices*, pp. 285, 298.

²⁴ Rayburn, "Three Offices," p. 113.

²⁵ Quoted in Mark R. Brown, ed. *Order in the Offices*, p. 116.