

Serving as Elder

SESSION 1

What is a Presbyterian elder?

Introduction

This three-part study is an introduction to the role and responsibilities of elders in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). It is written primarily for those who have been chosen to be elders, although all church members may find it useful. It is not a comprehensive review of Presbyterian theology or church government. Those who would like to know more about the topics mentioned here are encouraged to consult the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), which consists of two parts. Part 1 is the *Book of Confessions*, which contains eleven documents that guide our theology. Part 2 is the *Book of Order*, which consists of the Form of Government, the Directory for Worship, and the Rules of Discipline. References that begin with “G-” refer to the Form of Government. References that begin with “W-” refer to the Directory for Worship. The Rules of Discipline are used infrequently in the local church and are not discussed here.

Ordained to Serve

An elder is elected by the members of a congregation to serve on the session and to exercise leadership in other governing bodies of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). An elder is elected to serve on the session of a church for a specific amount of time, usually three years, but she or he is ordained to the office of elder for life.

When a congregation elects one of its members to the office of elder, it means they see that person as someone of “faith, dedication, and good judgment” whose manner of life is “a demonstration of the Christian Gospel, both within the church and in the world” (G-6.0303). Ordination does not mean that those who are ordained are closer to God than other members of the church or that their service to Christ is somehow more important to the work of God’s reign. Every Christian is called to serve Christ, but those who are chosen for ordination have particular gifts that the Holy Spirit has given them to lead the church.

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) ordains people to three offices:



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- Deacons lead the church in its ministry of sympathy and service.
- Ministers of the Word and Sacrament teach, preach, and administer the sacraments.

Of course, the work of elders, deacons, and ministers overlaps. Elders and ministers have a ministry of sympathy and service, just as deacons do. Elders should be able to teach and may be called on to preach in certain circumstances. Deacons make important decisions that affect the welfare of the church and the spread of the gospel. Nevertheless, each office has a particular focus.

The authority that the church bestows on its officers at ordination is symbolized in the laying on of hands. Laying on of hands by other elders and ministers, accompanied by prayer, is a ritual that can be traced back to the apostles and signifies the continuity of leadership Christ has given the church.

The example of Jesus is what guides all those who lead the church. In Matthew 20:28, Jesus says, “The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve.” Ordination does not bestow power in the way we usually think of power. Elders cannot coerce church members by virtue of their position. There is no hierarchy of authority among church officers. Whatever authority elders have comes from serving in the name of Christ.

Leading by Example

“Those duties which all Christians are bound to perform by the law of love are especially incumbent upon elders because of their calling to office and are to be fulfilled by them as official responsibilities” (G-6.0304a).

People both inside and outside the church look to elders as examples of faithful discipleship. That does not mean elders live perfect lives. No one does. In fact, the closer we grow to Christ, the more we realize how far short we fall and how much we rely on his grace. However, elders take seriously the fact that as officers of the church, what they do reflects on the body of Christ.

What Elders Believe

To become a member of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the only statement of belief one has to affirm is that Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior. At ordination, elders are asked to reaffirm that belief, and they are also asked to make more specific affirmations. Elders do not give up their freedom of conscience when they are ordained, but they do exercise their conscience within certain bounds. The theological parameters of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) are broad. Nevertheless, we do have certain things that we consider essential to our identity as Christians and as Presbyterians. Most elders do not find those bounds restrictive. In fact, most new elders are excited to discover the guidance and insight our confessions give. They remind us that we are part of a great cloud of witnesses who have been discovering the riches of God for many centuries.

Presbyterians do not think that the way we understand God is the only option for faithful Christians, but we do believe that we have been entrusted with a certain way of understanding God and how God works in the world. God is so far beyond our human understanding that no part of Christ’s church can completely comprehend God. Each branch of Christ’s church—Roman Catholic, Orthodox, or Protestant—brings a particular perspective. Each branch learns from the others. You might compare Christ’s church to an extended family. Within that large family are smaller families, each with its own way of being a family. Each individual family has its own customs that in some ways resemble and in some ways differ from the other individual families. Just because one household does certain things differently from our household does not necessarily mean their way is wrong; it just means it is different. Every individual family has certain values and assumptions that guide it. If you are part of a particular family, it is important to know what your family values and how it works. When that family is a branch of Christ’s church, it is important to know what you contribute to the larger family of faith. Presbyterians have much in common with the way other

Christians interpret the faith. Some things about our perspective are distinctive.

Through an open and deliberative process Presbyterians have agreed on certain theological beliefs. Those beliefs are not infallible. They are open to revision based on Scripture and guided by the Holy Spirit. These perspectives on the faith contribute to our unique identity within the larger body of Christ, and they guide us as we serve the Lord. Elders, who are entrusted with leading the Presbyterian branch of the family of faith, need to have a fuller and deeper understanding of what it is that makes us distinctive.

Let’s take a quick look at what Presbyterians believe and how that shapes the way elders lead.

Trust in Jesus Christ

The first question elders are asked at ordination and again every time they are installed for a term of service on the session is to reaffirm their faith in Jesus Christ. (See W-4.4003 for the questions elders are asked when they are ordained or installed.) In addition to reaffirming that Jesus Christ is their Savior, elders are asked to acknowledge that he is Lord of all and head of the church. This has a powerful impact on the way elders make decisions. To affirm that Jesus is Lord of all recognizes that he rules more than just his church. His work is not confined to the community of faith. There is no aspect of human life that does not concern him. Those who serve Christ serve the whole world. That means that elders do not lead a church that is isolated and withdrawn from the suffering of the poor, the plight of the persecuted, or the health of the environment. Jesus Christ is Lord of all, and therefore all is of concern to his people.

Elders also acknowledge that Jesus Christ is the head of the church. That means they will always try to discern his will for the church. There are many voices that influence elders as they make decisions. Since they are elected by the members of their congregation, the opinions of fellow church members matter to them. It matters what the community outside the church thinks; we want to be held in esteem by our neighbors. Ultimately, however, elders are responsible to Jesus Christ, the head of the church. Christ often speaks to us through church members, consultants, neighbors, and our own consciences, so we need to listen carefully to all those voices, but when all is said and done, Jesus is the one to whom elders are responsible.

The Role of Scripture

Scripture is “the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ . . .” (W-4.4003b). Through Scripture the Holy Spirit shows us who Jesus is. As we read about God’s dealings with Israel in the Old Testament, the life and work of Jesus in the



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tion of Barmen was written when external pressure from the Nazis threatened to destroy the witness of the German church. Each confession deals with issues that were dominant when it was written. The Scots Confession reflects the sixteenth-century Scottish church's struggle over its differences with the Roman Catholic Church. The main theme of the Confession of 1967 is reconciliation, which was especially pertinent in that decade when we were divided over civil rights and the Vietnam War. The Brief Statement of Faith reflects the late twentieth-century church's concern with ecology and the role of women in ministry. In other words, no one confession stands for all time. Each one is a product of its age and is expressed in the language of its day.

Gospels, and the church's growing understanding of him in the other books of the New Testament, we strengthen our relationship with the Lord and we understand him more fully.

We are prone to assume that Jesus values what we value and wants his church to be the way we want it to be. Through our careful reading of the Old and New Testaments, the Holy Spirit often challenges our preconceptions of who Jesus is and what he desires. As we read the Bible, we see new things in familiar passages that we thought we had mastered. Sometimes verses that we never understood become clear to us. The Bible will not give us specific answers to questions like "Should we put a new roof on the church?" or "Is it time to start a new worship service?" But when elders study Scripture, they gain deeper insight into the mind of Christ. Through Scripture, Christ equips us to align the church's ministry with his will.

The Confessions

The confessions are a gift from those who have gone before us in the faith. Our *Book of Confessions* contains eleven documents that have been written over the centuries. They make statements about God that guide our interpretation of the Bible so our generation does not have to start from scratch when we try to understand God and how God acts. The confessions help us clarify the assumptions that influence the way we read Scripture. No one reads the Bible without certain assumptions and preconceptions. We are all influenced by what we have been taught, and those who taught us were shaped by traditions and customs. Often we are unaware of those influences. We may assume that we understand God's Word unaffected by anything other than the witness of the Holy Spirit in our hearts, and sometimes that happens. But the way we understand Scripture has been influenced strongly by those who went before us, whether we are aware of it or not.

Most of the confessions were written when the church was under pressure. For example, the Nicene Creed was written at a time when internal pressure over the identity of Christ was threatening the church's unity. The Theological Declara-

Elders do not have to agree with every word that is in the *Book of Confessions*. No one does. At ordination and installation elders are asked, "Do you sincerely receive and adopt the essential tenets of the Reformed faith as expressed in the confessions of our church as authentic and reliable expositions of what Scripture leads us to believe and do, and will you be instructed and led by those confessions as you lead the people of God?" (W-4.003c).

The Reformed faith is that branch of the church family that traces its origins back to the sixteenth-century theologian John Calvin. Many people have tried to get the church to adopt an official list of the "essential tenets" of that faith, a checklist that could be used to verify that church officers adhere to our doctrines. Such a checklist has been resisted. We affirm that the confessions are standards that are not to be taken lightly. At the same time, we believe that the church is always being reformed according to the Word of God and guided by the Holy Spirit.

It is possible, however, to summarize what the confessions lead us to believe and do.

- The earliest confessions, the Nicene and Apostles' Creeds, affirm the belief we share with all Christians that God is revealed to us in the mystery of the Trinity and that the eternal Word of God has come to us in Jesus Christ.
- The confessions that come from the time of the Reformation (the Scots Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Second Helvetic Confession) affirm the beliefs we share with other Protestants that we are saved by grace alone through faith and that Scripture is our only rule of faith and practice.
- Other confessions affirm specific themes of our Reformed tradition. Among these are
 - an emphasis on the sovereignty and majesty of God;
 - the fact that God chooses us not only for salvation but also for service;

- a disciplined concern for how we order our life as a church;
- and recognition of our human sinfulness, from which no one is immune.

It is not that Presbyterians are the only ones who believe these things. These are the aspects of Christian faith that we tend to emphasize as we seek to be obedient to God.

You can see the theological perspective of the confessions lived out in the way Presbyterians do things. The earliest creeds remind us that we have much in common with other Christians, so we value ecumenical cooperation that is grounded in our shared understanding of the Trinity and the person of Christ. The high regard for Scripture that we share with other Protestants can be seen in the fact that we put so much emphasis on Bible study and the place of Scripture in our services of worship. The Reformed awareness of our sinful nature can be seen in our church government, which shares authority among clergy and laity and is spread among various governing bodies. The belief that we are blessed with salvation in order to serve helps explain our deep involvement in the affairs of the world and our heritage of mission outreach. Our disciplined concern for order can be seen in how seriously we

take Paul's admonition in 1 Corinthians 14:40 that "all things should be done decently and in order."

Conclusion

Ordination is not a graduation. It does not mean that an elder has mastered a block of knowledge and is therefore qualified to lead the church. However, ordination does mean that an elder leads God's people within a particular tradition and based on some shared understandings. A faithful elder will make a life-long endeavor to learn more about God in any way possible and from people of every part of the church family. One does not have to be a scholar to be an elder, but one should love to learn. It is important to know who we are as Presbyterians, what makes us distinctive, and what we have to contribute to the rest of the church. It matters what we believe. We live our theology.

About the Writer

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