

Presbyterians and Their Elders

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Abstract

Biblical elders are spiritually mature disciples of Jesus who exercise authority over a congregation of God's people in the manner of shepherds who exemplify the chief shepherd, Jesus Christ. The leadership of elders, as described in Scripture, is essential to the life of the church. Teaching and ruling elders are to be carefully selected based on their discipleship. Rather than providing a list of duties, the Bible describes the character of elders because who they are will determine what they do and how they do it. Elders must also be fully trained to fulfill their noble task. Given the qualities of their discipleship, elders would provide an effective voice for the church in the public square.

Keywords

Biblical elders, elder training, elders in public square, elders' character, elders' importance

There was a time in America when serving as an elder in the Presbyterian Church was held in the highest esteem, at least in the hearts of some. Of President Benjamin Harrison it is said that “he had many honors which he held dear and to which he tried to be true, but of them all none could be rated higher than his position as a ruling elder in the Presbyterian Church.”¹ President

¹ Cleland Boyd McAfee, *The Ruling Elder* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Christian Education, 1951), 2.

Harrison made this same remark at one time in the presence of the great merchant, John Wanamaker. Mr. Wanamaker replied to President Harrison, “And you feel that too? I have felt and said the same thing for years.”²

Presbyterian churches are part of a historic movement known as the Reformed tradition that came out of the Protestant Reformation and that can be traced back to the church in Geneva led by John Calvin. Queen Elizabeth I of England is given credit for coining the name Reformed when she reportedly remarked that the Swiss were “more Reformed” than the Lutherans.³ Presbyterian theology is known as Reformed theology, but, as the name implies, the organizational structure is that of a church governed by elders. This is to be distinguished from an episcopal model that utilizes bishops. In the episcopal model, authority comes down to the local church from higher authorities, whereas in the Presbyterian model, authority begins at the local church level. The congregation elects its ruling and teaching elders, who in turn represent the church in the higher judicatories in Presbyterian and Reformed denominations, such as presbytery, synod (whenever they exist), and General Assembly.

The Bible describes the significance of serving as an elder or overseer. The apostle Paul declares, “The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task” (1 Tim 3:1 ESV). Paul goes on to say, “Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching” (1 Tim 5:17). This passage also reveals two types of elders: those who rule and those who preach and teach. Reformed churches include both ruling and teaching elders.

In 1 Timothy 3:1–7, the apostle Paul describes the kind of person an overseer should be, and in Titus 1:5–9, he describes the kind of people Titus should have been looking for in choosing elders. These verses describe leaders whose character clearly shows that they have grown to such a mature level in their discipleship to Jesus Christ that they are tailor-made to represent their Savior not only in the church but also in the world. Paul states in Romans 8:28–29 that God uses all things for good. He does not say that all things *are* good but that God *uses* all things “for good.” God uses things we consider bad, as well as things we consider good, for good. In verse 29, Paul reveals what that good is: “to be conformed to the image of his Son.” This is the goal of discipleship: to be more and more in the likeness of Jesus. As Paul describes overseers, or elders, they are the ones who have reached that exemplary level and so can be entrusted with leadership.

² Ibid.

³ Jack Rogers, *Presbyterian Creeds: A Guide to the Book of Confessions* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1991), 20.

This leadership does not have to be confined to the church. As Jesus calls us to be in the world though not of it (John 17:13–19) and to be “salt and light” (Matt 5:13–16), it is clear that the mission of the Christian leader is not limited to working in a given church congregation, working only behind church walls; rather, it includes being engaged in the world all around us. There seems to be a growing consensus in America that due to the principle of separation of church and state, the faith community should not engage in public discourse or address public issues. However, not only is there a precedent in American history for the participation of elder leadership in public matters, but there is also ample biblical evidence of God’s people being engaged in the public arena. At the same time, public discourse can often become very contentious and divisive, so a Christlike voice would be most helpful.

Abraham Kuyper writes, “Oh, no single piece of our mental world is to be hermetically sealed off from the rest, and there is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence of which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry: ‘Mine!’”⁴ This is to say that if we believe that Jesus Christ is Lord of all, if all authority on heaven and earth has been given to him (Matt 28:18), then nothing exists outside the realm of his sovereignty or is exempt from the authority of his word. The church then has a responsibility to bring that truth to the public arena just as much as it has the call to bring the authority of the word to church congregations. The following is a helpful definition of what we might call “public theology”:

[Public theology is the] application of a Christian community’s theological commitments to the cultural issues that confront the Public Square, and the culture itself as well as the church. It is not politics or partisan activity. Rather, it is the attempt to apply the fruits of biblical thinking to the heartfelt concerns that shape the watching world as well as the life of those who walk with Christ so that both communities might be challenged, shaped, and blessed by the wisdom of God.⁵

The church must be careful and intentional in how it engages secular culture. The question is: How has Jesus taught us to participate in that public conversation and activity? The church ensures that the people who would presume to enter that public arena are mature enough in their faith and discipleship that they can represent the faith community’s witness in a Christlike manner. The faith community’s participation in expressing

⁴ Abraham Kuyper, “Sphere Sovereignty,” in Abraham Kuyper, *A Centennial Reader*, ed. James D. Bratt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 488.

⁵ Peter Lillback, *The Public Theology Initiative* (Glenside, PA: Westminster Theological Seminary, 2015), 2–3.

public theology, and expressing that theology publicly, must be done in a manner that conforms to Jesus's likeness. The character of the leadership of the faith community must be consistent with the character of a disciple of Jesus Christ. The first clue that elders would be good candidates for this is Paul's requirement that they "must be well thought of by outsiders" (1 Tim 3:7). This presents the possibility of an easier entry point into the conversation because the elder already has a good reputation and the respect of the community. All of this is to say that elders, carefully chosen and properly trained, are the people most fit not only for church leadership but also for representing the church in the public arena.

A hymn often used during ordination services is "Here I Am, Lord."⁶ At the end of each stanza, a line leads into the refrain with the question, "Whom shall I send?" Then, the refrain declares, "Here I am, Lord." This answer is based on Isaiah 6:8, "And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?' Then I said, 'Here I am! Send me.'" It is my contention that elders, ruling as well as teaching elders, are the perfect candidates to send into this public discourse if, first, and foremost, they exemplify the character of the elders that Paul describes to Timothy and are properly educated in the history of their specific national context as well as the current issues that impact that context. If elders truly are of the character described by Paul in 1 Timothy 3:1–7, they are the best ones to engage the secular culture in a reasonable conversation about public issues from the faith perspective. Serving in the public arena is not something we should consider mandatory for ruling elders, nor would it be a ministry exclusively reserved for elders, as there are certainly others in the faith community not serving the church as elders who possess the character described in 1 Timothy 3:1–7; however, I would advocate that those character traits are essential to those who do speak for the church and that the pool of "First Timothy elders" is a vital source of faithful servants suited and needed for work in public theology.

It may come as a surprise to some that John Jay, the first Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court, said, "Providence has given to our people the choice of their rulers, and it is the duty, as well as the privilege and interest, of our Christian nation to select and prefer Christians as their leaders."⁷ This statement may seem to contradict the principle of

⁶ Daniel L. Schutte, "Here I Am, Lord," in *Worship & Rejoice* (Carol Stream, IL: Hope Publishing, 2001), 559.

⁷ John Jay, *The Correspondence and Public Papers of John Jay*, ed. Henry P. Johnson, (New York: Burt Johnson, 1970), 393, as quoted in Benjamin F. Morris, *The Christian Life and Character of the Civil Institutions of the United States* (1864; repr., Powder Springs, GA: American Vision, 2007), 186.

separation of church and state. However, Mr. Jay was not advocating the creation of a theocracy, nor did he envision the church governing the nation. Rather, he knew that this country needed leaders with a solid moral foundation. Leaders are not limited to those who hold public office, though it includes them, and perhaps that is what Mr. Jay had in mind. However, a person can be a leader in a community in a variety of ways, even if he or she does not hold an elected position. I advocate that among those involved in the public discourse there be included those with a faith foundation and the character of an elder described in 1 Timothy 3. Also, there is ample precedent in American history for clergy participation in the public arena, especially in New England, and there is biblical support as well.

I. Elders in the Bible

Presbyterians believe that church government by elders is biblical. There is ample evidence in the New Testament that Paul organized churches in this way. Paul instructed Titus, “This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you” (Titus 1:5). While Paul and Barnabas traveled through Asia Minor, they appointed elders as well. “And when they had appointed elders in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed” (Acts 14:23). In 1 Timothy 5, Paul gives very specific qualifications for who should serve as elders. Several times in Acts, elders are mentioned as a given in church leadership (Acts 11:30; 15:2, 4, 6, 22–23; 16:4; 20:17–38; 21:18). In the Old Testament, there were elders. They are mentioned mainly in the Pentateuch (excluding Genesis), Joshua, Judges, both books of Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles. In the broadest sense, the Old Testament reveals elders as giving leadership at the subtribal, tribal, territorial, and settlement levels.⁸ The role of elders was deeply rooted in the patriarchal and tribal Israelite society.⁹ Some have argued that the apostle Paul modeled the organization of the churches he helped plant on the role of elders he knew from the synagogue.¹⁰ The New Testament describes elders of the church in much greater detail, which suggests that the New Testament elder is unique and to be distinguished to some degree from his Old Testament predecessors.

⁸ Hanoch Reviv, *The Elders in Ancient Israel* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1989), 8.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁰ Samuel Miller, *The Ruling Elder* (1832; repr., Dallas: Presbyterian Heritage Publications, 1987), 49.

Three terms in the New Testament describe elders. The first is *presbyteros*, which is most often translated in our English Bibles as “elder.” The second term used to describe this office is *episkopos*, translated as “overseer” and sometimes “bishop.” The third is *poimēn* which is translated as “shepherd.” Luke, Paul, and Peter use these three terms to describe elders. In Acts 20, as the apostle Paul was taking his leave of the Ephesian church after two years of ministering there, Luke records in verse 17 that Paul met with the *presbyterous*. During his final encouragements and exhortations, Paul indicated to these men in verse 28 that the Holy Spirit had made them *episkopous*. These leaders have been given oversight of the local church. Based on Titus 1:5–7, we see that Paul uses both terms to refer to the same people. Paul reminds Titus that the reason he left Titus in Crete was to appoint elders (*presbyterous*). Paul then goes on to explain that these overseers (*episkopoi*) must have certain qualities. I submit that the two words are used to convey a richer understanding of the character of the person chosen for this great responsibility. *Presbyteros* refers to a person’s spiritual maturity; *episkopos* affirms authority.¹¹ The third word, *poimēn* becomes relevant when Peter as an apostle uses both a verb (*poimainō*, to act as a shepherd to) and a noun (*poimnion*, flock) to exhort his fellow elders (*presbyterous*): “Shepherd [*poimanate*] God’s flock [*poimnion*]” (1 Pet 5:1–3).

It would appear, then, that elders are spiritually mature Christians who exercise authority over a congregation of God’s people in the manner of shepherds who exemplify our chief Shepherd, Jesus Christ. Clearly, this is a much greater calling than merely serving on a church board.

In 1 Timothy and Titus, the apostle Paul describes the characteristics of these overseers. In 1 Timothy, Paul lists fifteen qualities Timothy should look for when choosing overseers. Thirteen of these requirements have to do with character; only two refer to what an overseer is to do. This suggests that, for Paul, the character of an overseer is of more importance than a list of tasks. The examination of a person’s character is indeed the best place to begin in searching for potential elders because character will determine what the overseer does and how he does it. This should have a significant impact on how a church goes about selecting its elders. The selection process should be much more comprehensive than merely finding people willing to serve on a church board to fulfill certain tasks. The church should be looking for committed disciples of Jesus who possess the level of spiritual maturity that reflects Paul’s description because that will determine how a person goes about shepherding the people of God.

¹¹ W. E. Vine, *Vine’s Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*, ed. Merrill F. Unger and William White Jr. (Nashville: Nelson, 1996), 67, 195.

Paul does not include a detailed description of the tasks to be done in his exhortation to find people to fulfill the tasks. Rather, he describes the character and qualities of the people needed to lead the church, who will then, based on their spiritual maturity and Christian character, be trusted to discern God's leading in what to do and where to lead God's people. This is not dependent on any vocation, status in society, or area of expertise but rather on who the prospective elder is in Christ.

Since the ministry of elders is biblical, it is essential for the church to fully embrace the biblical vision of eldership; this will maximize the effectiveness of church leadership to further the mission of the church in the world. One can only imagine what spiritual power would be unleashed if Peter's and Paul's requirements were truly taken to heart.

Leadership in the Presbyterian church, the office of overseer, elder, and shepherd, is a calling that is distinctly different from any other in the church. Not only is the church called to lift up the full extent of this office, but the church also desperately needs elders to function as the Bible describes. For example, I firmly believe that the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), my own denomination, is declining in part due to the failure of the shepherds of the church, both teaching and ruling elders. The church must regain a sense of urgency to recapture for the church what God has called us to be and to do.

II. *Crisis in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)*

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is in turmoil. Debates over biblical authority, absolute truth, moral and ethical issues, the sovereignty of God in the church and the public square, mission and evangelism, sexual identity and the nature of marriage and family, and even the question of whether Jesus is *one* way to salvation or *the* way to salvation are dividing the body of Christ. I should say that the church is *again* in turmoil, as the history of Presbyterianism in America has been marred by division on several occasions. The formation of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC), the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), and the Evangelical Presbyterian Church (EPC), to name a few, are dramatic examples of how the body of Christ has been rent asunder in the twentieth century alone. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, there were divisions also; however, those have been, in part, the result of cataclysmic events that transformed the landscape of America, namely, the two Great Awakenings and the American Civil War.

In more recent times, the cause of division has been subtler but no less cataclysmic, perhaps even more so. For over a hundred years there has been

a gradual erosion of biblical authority in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), and in my lifetime the office of elder has been compromised and is thus unable to assist the resistance against this trend away from biblical standards. This trend is even more puzzling, given the focus of the Presbyterian form of government on elders. Elders, as spiritual shepherds of the church, are called to protect the purity of the church. Teaching elders (or pastors) have the responsibility to feed God’s people his word, and the ruling elders are to see that this is fulfilled faithfully and that church discipline is maintained.

The Presbyterian approach to church government is the form of church government I believe in and the context within which I have committed to exercising my ministry. I further contend that those serving as elders are the people best suited to represent the church in the public arena. An unswerving commitment to God’s word is essential if one is going to be an effective instrument of God to communicate both redeeming and common grace. If an elder’s witness is not firmly grounded in God’s word, then anything he advocates is undercut by sinking sand. As Thabiti Anyabwile observed, “A man may have a gift [of teaching] but the gift must be informed by appropriate content.”¹² I pray that churches around the world will observe and learn from our struggles here in the United States.

III. *Elders as Shepherds*

The apostle Peter exhorts elders in his first letter to shepherd the flock of God. Timothy Witmer identifies the character of shepherd leadership in terms of *knowing, feeding, leading, and protecting* the sheep. He describes a comprehensive matrix on shepherding¹³ and makes the case that effective ministry flows first from the ministry of the word, then to prayer, then to a “micro” or personal ministry to individuals, and finally to a “macro” or corporate congregational ministry. A session that sees itself as a board of directors will do this in reverse order, concentrating mostly on “macro” level ministry.

Knowing: In a large church, it is not reasonable to expect that all elders are going to know all the people associated with that church. However, there needs to be a structure in which elders are expected to intentionally know even a portion of the congregation beyond the small number of friends

¹² Thabiti M. Anyabwile, *Finding Faithful Elders and Deacons* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 81.

¹³ Timothy Witmer, “Shepherding: A Comprehensive Matrix for the Work of the Elder” (lecture, Westminster Theological Seminary, Glenside, PA, August 16, 2011), 107–87.

and acquaintances they would get to know anyway by being a member of the church. While personal contact is essential for getting to know a person, the visitation of members or some form of regular contact must be lifted up as part of the elders' shepherding duties. It would be wise to devise an effective plan for systematic contact. At the very least, everyone in the congregation must know who their elders are. In addition, elders are the ones to be called first in times of need. James wrote, "Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord" (Jas 5:14).

Feeding: Elders are to provide and be involved in various ministries of the church that intentionally nurture discipleship. The session provides for worship, trusts the pastors to preach and teach, makes sure Christian education and other meaningful programs are happening, and provides a schedule for the celebration of the sacraments.

Leading: Together with the pastors, elders discern God's calling for mission, purpose, and vision for the ministry of their churches and continue to develop strategies for carrying it out. Leading also includes elders' roles as examples (cf. Acts 20:17–35; 1 Pet 5:3). Elders must hold themselves accountable regarding worship attendance, participation in new member classes, prayer life, devotion to the study of God's word, and their manner of living outside the church walls. They should be those to whom church members should be looking for their examples. As Paul exhorts the Philippians 3:17, "Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us."

Protecting: Though there is an awareness of cultural trends that are upsetting, it is still left to the pastors to address these things publicly, and this is where elders involved with public theology will be of help (cf. Acts 20:29). More immediate, though, is the elders' call to nurture the congregation in maintaining a biblical worldview, Christlike behavior, and life choices. This is when exercising church discipline is vital.

No one wants to be accused of being judgmental. As a result, I have observed a great reticence to confront, hold accountable, or give personal admonishments or warnings within the church. Ezekiel chapters 33 and 34 give us a very compelling description of the responsibility of the leadership of God's people in being "watchmen" to give warnings when the enemy is approaching and the consequences of failing. By contrast, in our own day, there is a desire not to be "holier than thou," and some leaders do not have an answer when asked, "Who are you to tell me?" If they understood the role of an elder and had already established a relationship with members who thus questioned them, they would know who they were. Unless the

elders understand that the Christian lives of their sheep are their responsibility, they will not make it their business to become personally involved. This is why it is essential that nominating committees look for people who have a passion for God's people as potential elders.

Of all the characteristics of a faithful shepherd of God's people—all of them, that is, except for having a saving faith of one's own—one aspect that must be established first. He must have such a clear understanding of Christ's love for him that he will be able to relate to his sheep with the *agapē* love Jesus commands us to have for each other (cf. John 10:11; 21:15–19). Elders must have a Christlike, biblical worldview. Jesus said, “A new commandment I give to you, that you love [*agapate*] one another: just as I have loved [*ēgapēsa*] you, you also are to love [*agapate*] one another” (John 13:34). *Agapē* love is that unconditional, self-sacrificing love that Jesus has for us. The sheep do not always make themselves lovable, but we must remember how God first loved us. “While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom 5:8). If the shepherd does not fully embrace the truth of the cross and constantly remind himself of Jesus's sacrificial love for him, it will be too easy for him to lose touch with his dedication to the needs of the sheep. We are to be not only recipients of grace but also conduits of grace. To possess true *agapē* love is a work of the Spirit, but we will more likely avail ourselves of the power of the Spirit if we regularly meditate and rediscover Jesus's amazing love for us. In so doing, we will be better equipped to share that same love with others. This has been my experience, and I believe that everything we do as shepherds must be done in *agapē* love. Jesus said, “By this all people will know you are my disciples, if you have love [*agapēn*] for one another” (John 13:35).

I believe that when Jesus told Peter, “Tend my sheep” (John 21:16) and “Feed my sheep” (John 21:17), the tending and feeding included feeding them the word of life. When Jesus gave the Great Commission in Matthew 28:19–20, he included “teaching them all that I have commanded you.” Likewise, it would be difficult to “make disciples of all nations” and to baptize unless the people heard God's truth. Paul, in his review of his ministry among the Ephesians, reminded the Ephesian elders that he “did not shrink from declaring to [them] the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27). The Shema, Deuteronomy 6:4–9, specifies that God's commands were to be on the people's hearts, that they should be taught to the children, discussed in their homes and throughout the day, and even affixing them on their bodies and their doorposts. It is as if sharing the word of God is one of the greatest gifts one could give to another and a significant means of fulfilling God's call to care for others. Through Bible studies, preaching,

worship, the administration of the sacraments, classroom sessions and small group meetings, counseling sessions, and discipleship programs, the word of God is fed to the people. The Bible is the infallible rule of faith and practice, so all the activities in the life of the church must be done under the authority of the word. Church leadership must never miss an opportunity to teach the word.

The first order of business to fulfill the call for a biblical worldview is to put all of life in the context of the sovereignty of God. As Paul declares, “Therefore we also have as our ambition, whether at home or absent, to be pleasing to him” (2 Cor 5:9). When did God actually say that he was pleased? It was at Jesus’s baptism, when God said, “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased” (Matt 3:17). It would seem that the most direct way to please God is to be as much like Jesus as we can! But that would require us to make Jesus the Lord of our lives. To be willing to acknowledge him as Lord of our lives and to devote ourselves to him to that extent, we must have a saving faith in Christ. A shepherd’s first duty is to be sure his sheep have a saving faith. Paul defines what saving faith means in Romans 10:9: “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” Only God knows for sure what is in a person’s heart, but the shepherd should make it his greatest concern to ensure that all those under his care have that faith. Otherwise, he should faithfully labor to rectify that deficiency.

It is essential that the would-be shepherds of the sheep must also have experienced this transformation in their own spiritual lives. The shepherds must first have embraced a biblical worldview, been shaped by the Holy Spirit into the likeness of Christ, and be sure they have a saving faith that they can explain and testify to from their own experience. If they are to be the examples to the flock (1 Tim 4:12), this transformation must be readily apparent, not as an act or facade, but as an authentic result of new life in Jesus Christ. David Dickson reports a comment made by one person about another: “He’s a good man, but somehow he never reminds me of Jesus.”¹⁴ This is not the kind of person one would consider a potential elder. By contrast, in more ancient times, Polycarp wrote to the church at Philippi,

Also the presbyters must be compassionate, merciful to all, turning back those who have gone astray, looking after the sick, not neglecting widow or orphan or one that is poor; but always taking thought for what is honorable in the sight of God and of

¹⁴ David Dickson, *The Elder and His Work* (1883), ed. George Kennedy McFarland and Philip Graham Ryken (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2004), 34.

men, refraining from all anger, partiality, unjust judgment, keeping far from all love of money, not hastily believing evil of anyone, nor being severe in judgment, knowing that we all owe the debt of sin. (Polycarp, *Phil.* 6.1)¹⁵

This ministry includes seeking out those who at first seemed to be a committed part of the flock. Life in a fallen world, however, can cause all kinds of circumstances that may lead a person to wander away, not only by their lack of presence with the faith community but also by their lifestyle habits and the weakening of their confidence in the truth of the Christian faith. This can happen even while they are attending worship and other church activities. Whether they are absenting themselves from the fellowship or still attending, at the first signs of this, the shepherd must give attention to it. Luke 15 gives parables of a lost sheep and a lost coin, followed by the story of a lost son. In each case, something greatly valued was lost (cf. Luke 19:10). In the cases of the sheep and the coin, all-out searches for them were conducted until they were found. In all three stories, a great celebration was held when what was lost was found. Lost people matter to God; they should matter to us. It is a tremendously exciting ministry because God will bring his elect to faith, and he gives us the privilege of being a part of what he is accomplishing. An elder may or may not be the one fortunate enough to be in prayer with a person at the moment that person gives his life to Christ, but regardless, we can trust that God uses the ministry of the elders to plant seeds along the path of a person's journey or to water the seeds planted by others so that God can reap his harvest.

“The office and work being spiritual, it is necessary that elders be spiritual men.”¹⁶ This principle certainly includes that elders must be people of prayer. People with a significant prayer life are more likely to engage in prayer readily when in the company of others.

Churches today often need to be educated on these matters. There must be a significant cultural shift in how elders relate to congregations. More and more churches today consist of people from a wide variety of denominational backgrounds or no background at all. With this wide spectrum of faith communities represented in churches, from Roman Catholicism to the most independent of Protestant groups, many of our people have little or no experience with Presbyterian denominations, history, or way of doing things. If there is little experience with Presbyterianism, there is no

¹⁵ “Letter of Polycarp,” in *Early Church Fathers*, ed. Cyril C. Richardson (New York: Macmillan, 1970), 133–34.

¹⁶ McAfee, *The Ruling Elder*, 7.

expectation that new members will look to their ruling elders for shepherding or even know who they are. They are naturally drawn to the teaching elders for this, but the role of the ruling elders in their spiritual lives might remain ambiguous. The role of the ruling elder may even be unclear to candidates when they are asked to accept nomination, other than that they will be required to attend meetings and serve on committees.

It should be noted that the Bible does not give any directive as to the optimum number of elders for a given church at any given time, only that there be a plurality. For example, 1 Timothy 4:14 refers to the “council of elders.” Witmer writes, “In the inspired writings of both Paul and Peter it is clear that the work of the elder is shepherding and that the work is to be shared by a plurality of elders in a particular location.”¹⁷ So, given this absence of a particular number, each church must decide for itself what that optimum number should be. We should resist a process of simply filling seats rather than discerning those whom God has called. What we should be striving for is quality, not mere quantity.

Nor does the Bible prescribe a specific length of term. In churches where there are specified terms designated for service on the session, we say, “Once an elder, always an elder.” This little phrase means more than the fact that an ordained person is eligible to serve again without needing to be ordained a second time. It is a matter of identity and calling. While there may be circumstances that warrant an elder being removed from this office or the necessity of his resignation, elders are ordained with the intent of permanent tenure and exercise of office. This means that no matter where elders are or what they are doing, they are still elders of the church. They are not elders at church events only, nor are they restricted to a certain length of time for service. Even as elders rotate off the session at the completion of their specified terms, if their church has such a process, they are still elders of the church and are an invaluable resource of leadership that can and hopefully will be utilized in some way.

IV. Training Elders

The office of elder is so unique and critical to the life of the church that a comprehensive training program is essential. Such a program would also help identify those who are truly called to serve as elders, because only those with that sense of call would be willing to submit to such training.

¹⁷ Timothy Z. Witmer, *The Shepherd Leader: Achieving Effective Shepherding in Your Church* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2010), 46.

Those who do not feel that they have time for such spiritual focus reveal the difference between *being* an elder and merely serving on a board. The level of commitment it takes to be a shepherd of the flock makes a training program necessary. Those with a true sense of call would welcome the opportunity to grow in the Lord at such a deep level, while those who are merely willing to serve on the session but do not have the sense of call may find the time commitment an obstacle. This is a good thing because we should not be looking for many people to serve; we should be looking for those God has called to serve, however few. D. Martin Lloyd Jones, in his writings concerning preachers, makes an observation about deacons that can easily be applied to elders as well:

What do you look for? Well, you remember how in Acts 6, even in the matter of appointing deacons, who were simply to handle a financial problem, a charitable matter of feeding widows, it was insisted upon that they should be men “filled with the Spirit.” That is the first and the greatest qualification. You are entitled to look for an unusual degree of spirituality, and this must come first because of the nature of the task.¹⁸

I propose that if a person discerns a call to serve as an elder, either from his own awareness of the Spirit’s prompting or by the encouragement of others, and at best a combination of both, such a person would participate in a comprehensive Christian leadership training program *before* he is considered for the office and certainly before he is elected by the congregation. This training program would be taught by the pastoral staff and others so designated and would include basic foundational teaching in Bible content and basic Reformed theology, discipleship, polity, and church discipline with case study examples; mission, worship, and the sacraments; and Presbyterian church history, prayer, and congregational shepherding. In addition, for the sake of raising up people who may sense a call to be the church’s witnesses in matters of public theology, further training in issues of national concern, national history, and historic precedents, particularly regarding the role of the church in our national life and how to engage the culture, would be included in the training. In the future, such a leadership program would not necessarily need to be offered exclusively to people considering eldership. Anyone interested in a Christian leadership program could be invited. People who wish to participate in the life of the church in ways other than eldership could find it helpful for their sphere of ministry. In any case, this program should take place before prospective elder candidates

¹⁸ D. Martin Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971), 109.

are presented to the session for examination and certainly before they are presented to the congregation for election. In my own church, we have begun to implement a more comprehensive elder training program, and while this is still a work in progress, we are already seeing growth in our elders' biblical sense of call and effectiveness.

While this list of topics may seem like a great deal of ground to cover, the training program does not have to be a theological seminary-level program. It can provide, at a basic level, what would equip a person to determine whether being an elder is God's calling. And yes, it would take time. The office of elder is important enough to require such time.

After the person completes the program and still senses a call to be an elder, then and only then is the person recommended to the session for examination and to the congregation for election. Once the session is satisfied and the person is nominated to the congregation for their vote, a forum would be arranged for each candidate to give his personal testimony, perhaps even at the congregational meeting at which the vote will take place. Having heard the testimony and knowing that the candidate has submitted to sufficient training, the congregation would then be able to vote with confidence and assurance that the person nominated is suited to be an elder. The nominated candidates would have a much higher standing since the congregation would have the opportunity to hear the candidates, to know that they participated in training that took a significant level of commitment, and that they have taken spiritual growth seriously.

The apostle Paul begins his description of overseers in 1 Timothy 3:1 with the words, "If anyone aspires to the office of overseer." This implies that it is acceptable to aspire to this office. In my experience, it has been discouraged to consider people who have expressed a desire to be an elder for fear that such a person might have an agenda and an undue desire for power and influence. While this is a valid concern, it is also contradictory to our requirements for teaching elders. We expect candidates for the Ministry of Word and Sacrament to discern a call from God, which is then confirmed by the community of believers. It would seem that we would have the same expectations for those who would serve as ruling elders, especially given Paul's statement and the true nature of being an elder.

Do members of our congregation even know they can aspire to this office? I do not believe that many have even thought about it. Do we provide a means for people to explore this sense of calling? I believe it is essential that elders participate in a comprehensive training and discipleship program before they are considered for ordination to allow them to discern this potential or lack thereof. The future of the church depends on it.

I believe that given the crucial role that elders are to play both in the life of the church and in the public arena, such an approach is warranted and greatly needed, especially in Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) churches. Elders who have gone through a process such as this would be better prepared not only for their own ministry but also to impact the church. They could better prevent the church from drifting away from her biblical and Reformed roots, and they could contribute the faith community's voice to debates that shape our national life. Elders need to be able to tell the difference between orthodoxy and heresy, between truth and untruth. They need to be able to hold pastors accountable when they err in preaching. Titus 1:9 says,

[An elder] must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and *also rebuke those who contradict it*. (Emphasis added)

This includes teaching elders when they preach and teach unbiblically! Elders need to be able to hold up to a higher standard the candidates coming out of seminary, thus communicating to the seminaries that the church will not tolerate unbelief in their pulpits. Elders need to ably represent their churches at presbytery and at the general assembly sessions more faithfully to prevent the church from reflecting the culture rather than affirming God's revelation to the world. Elders need to be informed about the world around them and possess the grace to communicate God's truth in a way that impacts the larger community for good. Most importantly, elders must be equipped to know, lead, feed, and protect God's flock.