

The Office of Elder
in the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America

by J. Renwick Wright



Published by the Board of Education and Publication at the direction of the
1981 Synod of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America.

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Digital Edition, 2018



7408 Penn Avenue
Pittsburgh, PA 15208

www.crownandcovenant.com

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As Understood by the Reformed Presbyterian Church

The *Testimony of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America*¹ states that “Christ has appointed in his Word a particular form of government for the visible church.” It is government by elders (Greek: presbyters) and is therefore called presbyterian. Each congregation should be ruled by a session of ordained elders elected by the membership of the congregation.²

“The responsibility of the elders is in teaching and ruling. Although all elders are to be able to teach, the Scripture recognizes a distinction in these functions. All elders are equal in the government of the church. This office is referred to in Scripture by two terms used synonymously: elder and bishop, or overseer.”³

Thus the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America views the eldership as one office with differing functions.

Those functions are explained in the following statement adopted by the 1981 Synod:⁴

The Word of God clearly teaches that the government of the post-apostolic church is entrusted to those qualified by God to hold the office of elder. There is now no higher office in the church appointed by God.

No indication is given in Scripture of separation of office as regards the teaching and ruling that is to be carried on in Christ’s church. According to their gifts and circumstances some elders will be more qualified to engage in the study and public proclamation of the Scriptures, while others will exhibit other gifts that qualify them to discern and meet the needs of the flock through oversight (ruling) and exhorting persons privately. This distinction of function warrants the continuance of the terms ‘teaching elder’ and ‘ruling elder’ when understood as above-stated.

The church is also to exercise ‘Christian prudence’ ordered by the ‘general rules of the Word’ regarding what qualification and training are necessary to test the fitness of an individual to exercise public teaching within the church.

Likewise, the present practice of paying the public teaching elder a salary is keeping with the Pauline injunction to free such an individual from other callings which pay salaries that he may give himself to the study of the Word and prayer (1 Cor. 9:3-15; 1 Tim. 5:18). Even our Lord implies this strongly in Luke 10:7.

God governs His church by means of a plurality of elders who function in a system of higher courts and lower courts known as presbyterianism (Acts 15). All elders should be spiritually fit to serve in any church court (Num. 11:16, 17). In order to preserve the unity and integrity of a church court, God permits a form of representation that does not require all elders to be present at each meeting. (Note Acts 15:2 where only certain believers are sent to Jerusalem with

¹Adopted August, 1980.

²*Testimony*, p. 71. References: “Acts 15:22; 14:23; 13:1-4; Eph. 5:23; Col. 1:18; 2 Cor. 8:19; 1 Tim. 3:1-7.”

³*Ibid.* “1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:9; 1 Tim. 5:17; Acts 20:28; Rom. 12:6-8; 1 Cor. 12:28; Titus 1:7.”

⁴*1981 Minutes of Synod*, pp. 17-18.

Paul and Barnabas for the council with all the apostles and elders present in Jerusalem. See also Acts 21:16 where only ‘some of the disciples of Caesarea’ accompanied Paul to Jerusalem.)

This position on the eldership departs from the historic Reformed Presbyterian view. *The Book of Church Government* (adopted 1945) states: “The permanent officers to be set apart by ordination are elders and deacons. The elders exercise the spiritual authority. They are distinguished as teaching elders, commonly called ministers, and ruling elders.”⁵

Elsewhere it states: “The ordination and installation of ministers belong to the presbytery alone.”⁶ Those who wrote these statements understood the church to be administered through three officers: (1) the minister, pastor, teaching elder, (2) the ruling elder, and (3) the deacon.

As Understood by John Calvin

John Calvin, apparently holding to the two-office view of the eldership, wrote: “In calling those who govern in the church indiscriminately bishops, presbyters, pastors and ministers, I follow the example of the Scriptures—which view these terms without distinction—for they give the title of bishop to all who are invested with the ministry of the Word.”⁷

And, having established from the Scriptures that elders and bishops are one, he goes on: “It is to be observed that we have hitherto spoken only of those officers which are concerned in the ministry of the Word, nor does Paul mention any other in the 4th chapter of the Ephesians which we have cited.”

Calvin enumerates other offices, “as powers, gifts of healing, etc. Two of these are permanent offices, government and care of the poor. Governors I suppose to have been elders chosen from the people who presided with the bishops over the correction of manners and the exercise of discipline.”⁸ Thus, Calvin understood the Scriptures to prescribe two classes of church officers: (1) those who both ruled and preached, which in the Scriptures are given the titles “bishops, presbyters, pastors, ministers,” and (2) the “governors,” who were elders chosen from the people to join with those from the first group in governing the church.

As Understood by the Westminster Assembly

In addition to Calvin, the Westminster Assembly held this two-office view of the eldership. The *Form of Church Government* states: “The officers which Christ hath appointed for the edification of His church and the perfecting of the saints are some extraordinary—as apostles, evangelists, and prophets—which are ceased. Others ordinary and perpetual—as pastors, teachers, and other church governors and deacons.”⁹ That is, the Westminster Assembly believed in the separate offices of pastor, of teacher, and of other church governors. And to

⁵*Book of Church Government*, chap. 4, par. 3.

⁶*Ibid*, chap. 8, par. 1.

⁷John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. H. Beveridge (Edinburgh, 1845), bk. 4, chap. 3, pars. 8, 9.

⁸Calvin is commenting on Rom. 12:7; 1 Cor. 12:28.

⁹*Westminster Confession of Faith: “The Form of Church-Government.”* (Free Presbyterian Publications, Glasgow. Reprinted, 1976) p. 398.

establish the separate office of pastor, the Assembly cited Romans 12:7, 8 and 1 Corinthians 12:28, as did Calvin.

Why the One Office view?

Why then did the Reformed Presbyterian Synod adopt the view that there is one office of the eldership with two different functions? To answer this question we need to see that there is a clear distinction in Scripture where Paul writes this greeting: “Paul and Timothy, bond-servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, including the overseers and deacons” (Philippians 1:1). Only two sets of officers are mentioned—overseers (whose function is a part of the eldership)—and deacons.

Paul develops his argument in 1 Timothy 3:1, saying: “It is a trustworthy statement; if any man aspires to the office of overseer, it is a fine work he desires to do.” Then, in verses 2–7, he lists the qualifications needed for that office, and in verses 8–11, those needed for the office of deacon. (It is additionally interesting, but by no means authoritative, that the earliest church fathers, such as Clement of Rome, Ignatius and Irenaeus, all write of two offices and only two: (1) overseer-elder-bishop, and (2) deacon.)

Office and Gift: A Difference

We need to see that there are no clear distinctions within the office of elder, but there are differences between Scripture passages that speak of “office” and those that speak of “gifts.” References that are sometimes interpreted as “office,” and so teaching that there are two offices in the eldership, are really speaking of “gifts.” One such passage is Romans 12:7, 8. Here, the phrase to which Calvin and the Westminster Assembly turned to establish their view is in the middle of verse 8: “He who leads, with diligence.” The entire passage, verses 4–8, reads: “For just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. And since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, *let each exercise them accordingly*; if prophecy, according to the proportion of his faith; if service, in his serving; or he who teaches, in his teaching; or he who exhorts, in his exhortation; he who gives, with liberality; he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness.” Paul is clearly dealing here with gifts, not offices. If a man has the gift of ruling, he must exercise it with diligence.

Another passage, commonly interpreted as referring to the *offices* when it actually refers to *gifts*, is 1 Corinthians 12:27, 28. It reads: “Now you are Christ’s body, and individually members of it. And God has appointed in the church, first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administration, *various* kinds of tongues.” Here again, Calvin and the Westminster Assembly have erroneously taken as *office* that which refers to *gifts*. The word *then* in the middle of this passage creates a clear break between *office* and *gifts*. The Greek word for *then* (*epeita*) is significant here. If Paul had been led by the Holy Spirit to write *epeita* before each of those words, we would understand that the word *gifts* applies only to healings. Yet as he wrote the passage, *epeita* must apply to all the items listed. Therefore, we have, for example, a gift of administration. Such is the view of many biblical commentators, including Harold Lenski. Consequently, the Synod of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America rejects as error the two-office view propounded by John Calvin and the Westminster Assembly.

The Job Description of an Elder

Now let us consider the matter positively. What is the scriptural doctrine of the eldership? The Bible speaks of elders as a body of Christian men in charge of the congregation. Acts 14:23 states: “And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.” The Greek phrase, which is rendered in many different translations as “in every church,” is *kat’ ekklesian*. It is possible, but highly unlikely, that the church in Galatia had by this time spread out to several congregations in Lystra, several in Iconium, and several in Antioch with each church having its own separate elder. It is far more likely that a *body of elders* was in charge of each congregation.

What is an elder to do? Most important, the elder, as the servant of God and of God’s people, is to serve. Our Lord put it plainly to his disciples: “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and *their* great men exercise authority over them. It is not so among you, but whoever wishes to be the first among you shall be your slave: just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many” (Matt. 20:25–28). This command to serve is implied in one of the Greek words for the office (*proistemi*). It means not only “to stand before, to lead,” but also “to care for, to give help.”

Polycarp, one of the greatest of the early church fathers, summed it up well: “Let the elders be tender and merciful, compassionate toward all, reducing those that are in error, visiting all those that are weak, not negligent of the widow and the orphan and him that is poor; but ever providing what is honest in the sight of God and man; abstaining from all wrath, respect of persons and unrighteous judgment; being far from covetousness, not hastily believing a report against any man, not rigid in judgment, knowing that we are all faulty and subject to condemnation.” The elder is a servant, and in the spirit of service he functions.

How is the elder to serve? First he exercises oversight. In Acts 20:17, Luke reports that “from Miletus he (Paul) sent to Ephesus and called to him the elders of the church.” In verse 28, Paul exhorts these elders to “be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers.” He makes the same point in Titus 1:5, saying, “For this reason I left you in Crete, that you might set in order what remains, and appoint elders in every city as I directed you,” and adds in verse 7, “for the overseer must be above reproach as God’s steward.”

Peter, in 1 Peter 5:1, 2, writes: “I exhort the elders among you, as your fellow-elder and witness of the suffering of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed, shepherd the flock of God among you.” That is, the elder serves God and God’s people by watching over them.

Second, the elder serves by ruling (*proistemi*), which demonstrates his care for God’s people and the strength of his caring. Paul tells the Thessalonians, “We request of you, brethren, that you appreciate those who diligently labor among you, and have charge over you (*proistemi*) in the Lord and give you instruction” (1 Thess. 5:12). That is, all elders are responsible to labor diligently and to take charge of the congregation. And again: “Obey your leaders, and submit to them; for they keep watch over your souls, as those who will give an account” (Heb. 13:17). The word rendered *submit* (*hupēikēn*) is a strong word. It means “be subject to.” The elder must serve by ruling.

Thirdly, elders serve God and God's people by shepherding or pastoring them (as we have already seen in Acts 20:28 and 1 Peter 5:1, 2). The elder's care for the flock must be motivated by the same love that a faithful shepherd would have for his sheep, which includes not only keeping the flock together and providing good pasture, but going after those who wander away.

Fourth, the elder serves by teaching. We read in 1 Timothy 3:2 that "an overseer, then, must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, prudent, respectable, hospitable, able to teach." Yet, the elder's teaching is not restricted to presenting God's Word from a pulpit or in a Sabbath school class. Titus 1:9 makes it clear that teaching means "holding fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, that he may be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict." So elders are to exhort in sound doctrine. The word for *exhort* (*parakaleo*) carries the idea of putting "a word in your ear" as Leon Morris renders it. The word refers to person-to-person conversation or private counseling from God's Word in the name of Christ. That is, the elder may fulfill his teaching responsibility on a one-to-one basis or in addressing small groups.

Fifth, some elders are responsible for a function in addition to those already mentioned. These men labor in the Word and doctrine. Paul says, "Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching" (1 Tim. 5:17). And again, they serve in this capacity according to their "gifts." These elders are especially gifted with insight into the Word and with a facility for teaching it. We call them ministers, or pastors, or teaching elders. They serve as all other elders do, and they apply their special gifts as well.

In Summary

This pamphlet was written to explain why the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America has concluded, based on its understanding of Scripture, that the office of elder is *one office* with *two different functions*: (1) ruling, and (2) ruling and teaching. The pamphlet is the statement of a denomination that is Reformed and is still reforming in order that we may be more thoroughly conformed to Christ as individuals and as his bride, the church.

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