

THE PRESBYTERIAN
RULING ELDER
AN ESSENTIAL GUIDE

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REVISED BY

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Introduction

If you are reading this book, you have probably been elected a ruling elder by your congregation. It may have been given to you as part of a program of training and development in which you will be involved before you are ordained by the session and installed as an active member of that session. When you were asked if your name might be placed in nomination for the office of ruling elder, you doubtless had some concerns and questions: Am I the right person? What is a ruling elder and what does he or she do? How much time will it take to serve on the session? Some of these questions may have been answered by the nominating committee; others will be answered during the time of preparation. But you consented to serve if elected because you love your church and wish to do your part in serving it.

This book is intended to provide some answers to your questions about being a ruling elder in the Presbyterian Church: what are the duties of ruling elders and how can

you perform them more effectively. With the other materials you will be examining, it will help you to find satisfaction in your service to the church. You will not find all you may wish to know in these pages. There is much more to learn, and there is a wealth of resources to help you.

Since its beginnings, the Presbyterian Church has placed great emphasis on the leadership of laypersons, both as reflecting the will of God for the church and as essential for the vitality of the church. Consequently, your training, at this period and throughout your service as a ruling elder, is of prime importance. Among the most interesting aspects of the work to which you may look forward is the opportunity for self-improvement and growth as you work with your pastor and fellow leaders. Yours is an essential and important task. The Presbyterian Church holds it in honor. May you find increasing joy in the performance of your duties as a faithful servant of Jesus Christ.

Quotations from the *Book of Order* (e.g., G-2.0102) are from *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)*, Part II: *Book of Order* (Louisville, KY: Office of the General Assembly, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 2019–2021).

Chapter 1

God Calls Persons to Serve

You are a Protestant and you belong to a particular branch of Protestantism called “Reformed.” Even more particularly, you are a member of the Presbyterian Church in that family of Reformed churches. This particularity makes a big difference when you, as a layperson, seek to define your relationship to the church. You may have taken it quite for granted that as a church member you are called on to teach in the education program, to serve on committees that determine the programs of your church, to assist the pastor in parish visitation, or to perform the many other tasks necessary to the ministry and mission of your congregation. You may have participated in worship as a liturgist, preacher, or member of the choir. Whatever part you may have taken in the life of your church, you have correctly assumed, because you are a Christian and a church member, that you have the right and duty to be more than a spectator or a passive recipient of work done by “professionals.” In a very real sense, laypersons are the church.

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Let us take this thought a little further. Is the distinction we commonly make between laypersons and clergy a valid one? Certainly in such fields of human endeavor as medicine or law it is valid to differentiate between laypersons and professionals. Doctors and lawyers have specialized knowledge and skills that the rest of us do not possess, and we would be foolish not to recognize and avail ourselves of their competencies. But is this true also in matters of religion?

There are hierarchical churches that teach that this distinction must be recognized within church order. They hold that two orders of believers were created by Christ: a clerical order, with a unique status in relation to God, and a lay order, which stands in an inferior and different position ecclesiastically and functionally in the church. According to this concept there are gradations of spiritual authority, conferred by the rite of ordination into the succession of the apostles, in order that the church might be infallibly guided in all that pertains to right doctrine and moral living. All this is seen as a divine provision for the proper government of the church and for the nurture of the flock of God.

It is obvious that this is not the concept or practice of the Protestant church, and in particular it is not the way of the Presbyterian Church. The Form of Government of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) states that “the Church’s ordered ministries described in the New Testament and maintained by this church are deacons and presbyters (ministers of the Word and Sacrament and ruling elders)” (G-2.0102). It may sometimes appear that there are two classes of people in the

church—ministers and laypersons—but our constitution makes it clear that ministry, the work of the church, is one ministry. The difference between “lay” and “clergy” lies in particular functions performed by those who are ordained. “The existence of these ordered ministries [ruling elders, ministers of the Word and Sacrament, and deacons] in no way diminishes the importance of the commitment of all members to the total ministry of the Church” (G-2.0102).

Ministers of the Word and Sacrament must fulfill certain academic and other requirements (see G-2.06), including four years of college and three years of theological study while in covenant relationship with session and presbytery as inquirers and candidates. They are then ordained to a call by presbytery and perform certain functions that other persons do not, in particular the administration of the sacraments and moderating the session. If there is a valid distinction between “lay” and “clergy,” it is at this point.

For Presbyterian Protestants, the following two things are clear regarding the relationship of clergy and laypersons.

1. Priesthood is a vocation of every member of the church. Each believer is a priest. “Members and those in ordered ministries serve together under the mandate of Christ” (G-2.0101). We may all come to God without benefit of an intermediary because Christ is our Mediator. We may make our confessions and receive forgiveness by that right, which our Lord has bestowed on us. At the same time, all believers are to serve a priestly function to each other. In his pastoral letter, James exhorts believers to “confess your

sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed” (Jas. 5:16). Each person who is a forgiven sinner may be the channel of God’s grace to another sinner who is seeking God’s forgiveness and peace. Indeed, this loving service may be more effectively performed by a spiritually experienced Christian who is a friend than by a pastor. A part of our calling to be Christian bestows this privilege on us.

The priesthood of all believers underlies the worship of a Protestant church. Worship is a corporate act in which all participate and in which each participant helps the other. This is particularly evident at the Lord’s Table, where the one presiding points to Jesus Christ as the host. With the people, the one presiding gives thanks for the gifts of bread and wine and sets them apart for their sacred use. The elements are passed from person to person as dramatic evidence of the truth that we have one Redeemer and that we are all brothers and sisters. As persons partake of the bread and wine, they are led by the Holy Spirit to discern the *real* within the symbol, to offer their own and others’ needs to God, and to receive enabling grace. The emphasis is on the conversation between each soul and Christ, who is really present by faith. Thus each acts as his or her own priest, in partaking, and as priest to others, in passing the elements and in praying for others.

The priesthood of all believers is most obvious in worship in the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, but it exists in other parts of worship as well. Martin Luther observed that con-

gregational singing is a priestly service in which each worshiper helps others to praise God. Greeting each other with an offering of God's peace and sharing mutual concerns and joys in prayer are means of grace within common worship. Leading our families in worship in the home and interceding with love for friends, neighbors, and those in need of God's grace are special ways in which every believer acts as priest. When we are what we ought to be, every believer in Christ is one through whom others may come to God and God's grace may be poured out on them.

2. *This relationship between persons in the Presbyterian Church is also seen in our concept of ordination.* By ordination we refer to a religious rite practiced certainly from very early times in the Christian church (Acts 6:6; 13:3; 1 Tim. 4:14; 5:22). It is based on the conviction that the Holy Spirit bestows gifts on believers for the common good (1 Cor. 12:4–11). We acknowledge these gifts of special tasks and skills by ordaining, or “setting apart” through the laying on of hands, certain persons to orders in the church. Thus distinctions that may be made in the Presbyterian system are based on functions and on the recognition of those special gifts bestowed by the Holy Spirit that are to be used for the good of all.

Ministers are “responsible for a quality of life and relationships that commends the gospel to all persons and that communicates its joy and justice. They are responsible for studying, teaching, and preaching the Word, for celebrating Baptism and the Lord's Supper, and for praying with and for

the congregation” (G-2.0504). Most of these duties are to be shared with others, specifically with ruling elders and deacons, and this section of the *Book of Order*, G-2.0504, goes on to indicate how this is to be done.

Ruling elders are so named not because they “lord it over” the congregation (Matt. 20:25), but because they are chosen by the congregation to discern and measure its fidelity to the Word of God and to strengthen and nurture its faith and life. Ruling elders, together with ministers of the Word and Sacrament, exercise leadership, government, spiritual discernment, and discipline and have responsibilities for the life of a congregation as well as the whole church, including ecumenical relationships. (G-2.0301)

The ministry of deacon as set forth in Scripture is one of compassion, witness, and service, sharing the redeeming love of Jesus Christ for the poor, the hungry, the sick, the lost, the friendless, the oppressed, those burdened by unjust policies or structures, or anyone in distress. (G-2.0201)

Since we are concerned in this book with the work of the ruling elder, let us look for a moment at some points of similarity and difference between the orders of ruling elder and minister of the Word and Sacrament. As presbyters (those having governance and serving as members of councils in the church), ruling elders and ministers have equal standing. The vote of ruling elders in sessions, presbyteries, synods,

and General Assemblies counts just as much as does that of ministers. General Assembly is made up of equal numbers of ruling elders and ministers, and in presbyteries and synods the numbers are approximately equal. Obviously, there is little if any distinction made between the two orders in the governance of the church. On the contrary, there is significant parity between them. This is important in the life of the Presbyterian Church.

But there are differences. Ruling elders do not labor in “Word and doctrine.” This is required of ministers of the Word and Sacrament, who are also called teaching elders, and if it is to be done in a fitting and profitable manner, requires special training and faithful preparation (2 Tim. 2:15). Teaching elders will, therefore, ordinarily be more skilled in preaching and teaching the Word. Indeed, such persons may be said to have been called by the Holy Spirit to this vocation, for which academic discipline is intended to make them worthy workers. So by divine call and by training, the minister occupies a position of unique value and responsibility in relation to the flock of Christ. Ministers are honored and respected not because of any attributes or powers within themselves, but because of the calling of God and the training they have received for their work.

Our Reformed heritage causes us to take a dim view of “professionalism” and “specialists” in matters of faith. Faith is an encounter with God. The truth of the Christian faith is not some secret learning to which only certain initiates have access; neither is it a spiritual power that only some possess

and can transmit. The heart of our faith is that Christ comes to persons whom the Spirit has awakened to faith. It is a perversion to think of our faith in terms of “professionalism.” We would not tolerate professionals responsible for praying for us any more than we would tolerate professionals responsible for showing Christian love. The church is true to itself and its Lord when there are *not* two classes of people—one with a unique status in relation to the things of God and another standing in an inferior position.

Now let us look briefly at the history of the Christian church so that we may be reminded how, from its beginning, laypersons have been inherently a part of its order and life.

The New Testament provides ample evidence that God calls laypersons to labor in and through the church. Immediately we think of those whom Jesus chose to be with him, none of them members of the religious establishment. Peter was a fisherman, Matthew a tax gatherer. Except for Nicodemus, no rulers of the synagogue or of the temple hierarchy are mentioned among those close to Jesus. It is significant that he chose lay women and men who had a capacity for growth and loyalty and who were willing to give themselves courageously to a spiritual mission. This is another example of how God bypasses the establishment in order to get on with God’s purpose in the world.

The same evidence is found in the Old Testament. With few exceptions, the prophets and other leaders were laypersons, chosen by God for the often difficult and dangerous

task of calling the people back to the path God had chosen for them. There is an openness of heart to the Spirit of the living God that is characteristic of those whom God chooses for places of leadership and responsibility.

After the death and resurrection of Christ, there was little sign of formal organization among his followers. Peter seems to have been their accepted spokesperson, but as he began his missionary journeys it was James, Jesus' brother, who assumed leadership in the Christian community in Jerusalem. In the beginning, the company of believers continued to live and worship very much as they had before Jesus came. They worshiped in the Temple and doubtless attended the synagogues. But as their numbers grew and they were scattered throughout Palestine and abroad, they were more and more excluded from the synagogue fellowship. As the Christians grew more conscious of their new identity in Christ, they found themselves becoming separate from Judaism. The strong leadership of Paul and the rapid spread of Christianity among the Gentiles hastened this process. Consequently, the small communities of Christians throughout the cities and towns of the Roman Empire began to organize themselves, usually around the pattern of the synagogue with which they were familiar.

The synagogue was a democratic institution that had come into being at the time of the destruction of the Temple and the captivity of Israel in Babylon. It came to have such importance to the Jews scattered in communities around the Roman Empire that, even after the restoration of

Temple worship in Jerusalem, these synagogues continued to have a major role in fostering religious life. Mention is frequently made in the New Testament of the “elders of the synagogue.” These were probably older men whose prestige among the people elevated them to positions of oversight and trust. Leadership was often a function of age and experience. Even in the Roman senate and elsewhere, the rulers of the people, judges, and magistrates, were selected from among the elderly. In time the title “elder” was applied to certain leaders regardless of the age of the person.

When, as we have said, Christians became separated from the Jewish community and began to form communities of their own, they patterned both their worship and their organization after that of the synagogue. Thus, just as there had been elders in the synagogue who were entrusted with rule and order as well as the teaching of the people, so in the early Christian communities elders were appointed by the founders of the churches or chosen by the people themselves. The responsibilities of these persons were particularly heavy because the original apostles became fewer in number with the passing of the years, and they devoted most of their time to missionary work. Those who were trained and appointed by the apostles as preachers and teachers also traveled from place to place, founding new congregations and making converts. When these persons were not present, the nurture and discipline of the congregation fell on the shoulders of the elders. Naturally they came to be persons who were highly esteemed and invaluable to the church.

The measure of respect and confidence in which they were held by the apostle Paul is evident in the touching story in Acts 20:17–38, where he summons the elders of the church in Ephesus to Miletus for a conference and a parting word of encouragement and farewell. It is impossible to measure how much of the spread and the continuing strength of the early church was due to the efforts of these early elders. It was they who preserved, in large part, the integrity of the faith and who, in times of persecution, rallied the flock to stand firm.

In the centuries that followed, this democratic, lay-administered organization of the church gradually weakened. As the church grew in numbers and importance, there developed a hierarchical structure in which the administration of the church and its work of preaching, teaching, and worship were placed more and more in the hands of the clergy. The consequence was that laity were excluded from all responsible participation in and direction of religious activities. The lay movement did not die out, however. Certain lay orders arose within the church and fostered a life of piety and good deeds. These communities of humble faith and service kept alive a genuine spiritual glow during centuries we sometimes call the Dark Ages. To them also we owe the preservation of the Scriptures and much of the art, music, liturgy, and sense of mission and ministry that belong to Christ's church.

At the beginning of the sixteenth century, the time was ripe for change and renewal. With reforms in politics, economics, and learning came a corresponding religious

movement known as the Reformation. The purpose of its leaders was not to start a new church but to cleanse the existing institution of abuses and impurities. It was sparked by a rediscovery of the faith of the early Christians to which the New Testament bore witness. For our purposes we shall confine our story to the Reformation in Geneva, Switzerland, of which John Calvin was the leader. The beginnings of the Presbyterian system of doctrine and church government lie there.

For his organizational model, Calvin used the church of the second century. We have mentioned that there is little in the New Testament or in other historical material about the organization of the very early church. Indeed, there seems to have been little in the way of formal organization among the early companies of Christians. They held that the Holy Spirit distributed gifts among the faithful to be used to benefit the whole group (1 Cor. 12:4–11), and the whole congregation assumed responsibility for its own order and discipline as its circumstances and location demanded. A better-articulated system developed during the second century. Calvin held that Christ had instituted in the church the four offices of pastor, teacher, ruling elder, and deacon. Pastors were to preach the Word of God, teachers were to establish schools for the education of the young and the instruction of adults (the beginning of the public school system and the Presbyterian emphasis on Christian education), ruling elders were to maintain order and discipline, and deacons were to administer charities for the relief of the poor and destitute.

In Calvin's Geneva, the ruling elders were laymen, twelve in number, who represented the various parishes in the city and related both to the church and to the civil government. They took an oath similar to that prescribed for ministers. They met once each week with the pastors in a body known as the consistory to hear complaints against immoralities, indecent language, doctrinal error, or other matters that might corrupt the purity of the church and bring reproach on its good name. At the end of the year the elders presented themselves to the magistrates, who decided whether they had faithfully performed their duties and should be kept in office.

Here we have the elements characteristic of Presbyterian ecclesiastical life and discipline. Here were ministers and laity with equal authority but who, with a division of responsibility and labor, served the church for its edification and order. The system was somewhat modified when this family of the Reformation spread beyond Geneva. Civil authority became much less closely tied to the church, and ruling elders came to be elected by members of the congregation and not appointed by the councils of municipal government. Yet they continued to be entrusted with the "peace, unity, and purity" of the church, and so, to distinguish their office from that of pastors, they were called "ruling elders."

From Geneva, Calvin's Reformation spread to Scotland, to northern Ireland, to Holland, and from the Old World to the New. During this migration it never lost the essentials of its ecclesiastical structure. In any Presbyterian church,

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regardless of size or location, the session is the superior authority charged with responsibility for the whole life of the congregation. Ministers of the Word and Sacrament and ruling elders—both ordained—work together under the guidance of the Holy Spirit to present every person “mature in Christ” (Col. 1:28).