

Introduction

This booklet is designed for the person who has been nominated as a ruling elder or is already occupying the position, it is written with the prayer that each ruling elder will face before the Lord the weighty matters involved, all to God's glory.

It is not meant as an outlined textbook from which ruling elders might be taught. There are many suggestions that might prove helpful to a ruling elder taking an officer training class. But such a course should be more extensive than this booklet.

The booklet is written from the position of the Reformed Faith. A short, but excellent, definition of this is "That system of Christian doctrine which holds to the absolute sovereignty and complete control over all things, and man's absolute dependence on God for every facet of his salvation, faith and life" (J.G. Vos). We are Reformed in our faith and Presbyterian in our polity. Therefore, we are governed by a plurality of elders (teaching and ruling) in a series of graded church courts.

Presbyterians have experienced great difficulty keeping the purity of the church down through the generations. Certainly, there are many other reasons, but too many times the cause has been a wrong view of the eldership. Since the ruling of the church is so important in regard to the ability

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of the church to live to God's glory, the responsibility is great on those who occupy the position of ruling elder.

It should be noted, even as we begin our study, that there are many facets to the responsibilities of the ruling elder. The following list, though not exhaustive, will point out the importance of the office:

- He is to rule regarding the correctness of the preaching and teaching of God's Word in the church;
- He is to rule regarding the benevolent program of the church;
- He is to rule regarding the moral behavior of the members of the church and to exercise, with love, biblical church discipline when necessary;
- He is to serve as a ruling elder in the visitation program of the church;
- He is to serve as a ruling elder as he teaches the members of the church in "order that they will comprehend God's Word;"
- He is to serve as a ruling elder in the correct administration of the sacraments;
- He is to serve as a ruling elder in the implementing of the lawful injunctions of the higher courts and is to serve in these courts when appointed;
- He is to serve as a ruling elder in the supervision of the Christian education program of the church.

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The danger of a wrong view of the eldership, which causes the purity of the church to suffer immeasurably, should be obvious. Therefore, we will consider three important questions in our study:

Are you called?

What is your view of the church?

Are you qualified?

A realization is necessary: the standards presented in this booklet will be high, and perfection is impossible. But we should seek the highest standard possible as we live out the dictates of Scripture. Our approach to the Word of God in this study is as follows: God's Word is *authoritative, sufficient, and efficient,*

Our goal in this booklet is that it be used to the glory of God.

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Are YOU Called?

You are nominated or you may already be serving as an elder. But, are you called of God, were you called by God? This is where the discussion of the ruling elder must begin, for it is here where many mistakes are made. There is the fearful possibility of having elders who were never called by God.

God has called out His officers for His Church. *The Westminster Confession of Faith* states, "The Lord Jesus, as King and Head of His Church, hath therein appointed a government, in the hand of Church officers, distinct from the civil magistrate" (XXX.1), The Bible states, "Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which He hath purchased with His own blood" (Acts 20:28).

In past days there usually has been a correct emphasis on the calling of the *teaching* elder but very little emphasis regarding the calling of the *ruling* elder. It is to be

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wondered how much grief has been caused in the church by having men occupy the office of ruling elder without ever having been called, to say nothing of not being qualified.

At this point, there needs to be a consideration of who should rule whether or not an elder is qualified. Today the two views in Presbyterian circles regarding this matter are:

- There are different functions assigned to ruling and teaching elders. This is the historical view and is based on such passages as 1 Timothy 5:17, Romans 12:8, 1 Corinthians 12:28. Therefore, the call of ruling elders has been ascertained by the session of the church and the congregation. The call of teaching elders has been ascertained by the presbytery.
- Both ruling and teaching elders, in essence, have the same functions. This view arises primarily from, among other considerations, the lack of any distinction in the qualifications of elders in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1. In addition, there is the claim for parity (equal in authority) on the part of ruling elders in the preaching of the Word of God and other duties normally assigned to teaching elders. This second view would demand that the call of ruling elders be ascertained by presbytery.

The first view, that of one office with two functions, has been in effect in Presbyterian circles in this country for generations. The second view, if ever adopted, could mean disaster to the purity of the church. It would be difficult to imagine a presbytery insisting on the training of all present

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ruling elders to be consistent with that of all present teaching elders in order to qualify. It would be equally difficult to imagine the ruling elders themselves consenting to the training and, in the case of many, having the necessary ability to take the training. An untrained eldership could result from the second view.

It must be faced, though, that whatever view is held regarding the eldership, there should be a definite call from the Lord. The question must be asked by every elder: am I truly called by God to the high office of the eldership? For example, Acts 20:28 speaks to the elders of the church at Ephesus. The call in the passage is valid for all elders because there is no distinction made. To take heed to all the flock and to feed the church of God is a high calling.

A valid question for the ruling elder is: what do I expect from a teaching elder that certifies his call in my eyes? The obvious point is that the ruling elder really does not have any right to expect less from himself. Or, is the call to the ruling elder a lower calling than the one to the teaching elder? Is there any such teaching in God's Word?

One difficulty is that of confusing the "function" of an elder with his "calling." God does call some men to function differently as an elder. This does not warrant ruling elders to think the standard of their call is less than that of a teaching elder.

The second problem the ruling elder must face is that of his walk before the Lord at the present moment. His life must be examined before the Lord. There is no magical ingredient inserted into an elder at ordination that causes

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him suddenly to be faithful in his responsibilities as a believer. The ruling elder must ask some important questions at the present time:

- Am I showing loving concern toward others, especially those in need?
- Am I taking time each day to pray, to study God's Word?
- Am I faithful to the work of the whole Church?
- Am I ruling my own home well and am I known among men as one who does?
- Am I able to teach a Sunday school class, to exhort the members from the Word of God?
- Am I witnessing to others about the Christ of the Scriptures?
- Am I willing to submit to my brethren in the Lord?

These are basic elements that should be fulfilled by all believers in Christ who are males and who would be legitimate candidates for the office of ruling elder. To think that a person can "desire" (1 Timothy 3:1 teaches this is proper) the office of a ruling elder and not have the above characteristics would be to court disaster for the church.

What constitutes a call of God? This question must be considered in spite of the omission of any question regarding the call to the ruling elder in the questions asked of him at his ordination. It is interesting to note it is included in 'The Form of Church Government in the Act of

the General Assembly in 1645" under "Other Church-Governors."

The following list is not exhaustive but is basic when the call is considered:

- The person called must be saved by God, a member of the church, and have a high view of the church.
- The person called must be led by the Holy Spirit to the work, recognizing it is by the grace of God (1 Cor. 15:10).
- The person called must have a burden from the Lord for the work and an assurance that the awesome responsibilities will not negate the burning desire.
- The person called must have gifts for the work as outlined in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1.
- The person called must be manifesting the above gifts, for a novice must not be ordained.

It is necessary that each person being considered for the office of ruling elder face in an honest way the primary qualification of the call. The Lord is the maker of elders. And the Lord works through the Holy Spirit in the hearts of His people. The Church of the Lord Jesus Christ should be willing to wait on the Lord to move in the hearts of those He calls. To hurry up the process would be to subject the church to the danger of placing into the eldership men who could disrupt the peace and purity of the church (Acts 20:30). A ruling elder who was never called can be a weakening influence on the Church.

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Scriptures to Study

1 Thessalonians 5:12; Acts 20:28; 1 Corinthians 12:18;
2 Corinthians 3:5; 1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:9.

Reference to the Westminster Standards

Confession of Faith - XXX. 1

Larger Catechism - Question 63