

Paragraph three of the first chapter of our denomination’s constitution which we call the Book of Forms describes the means and the motif behind our denominations way of governing itself. It reads: “The ‘principles and practice of Presbyterian Churches’ are set forth particularly in the Second Book of Discipline, 1578, and acknowledge: that Christ Jesus, our Lord, as the Head of his Church, has appointed its constitution, laws, ordinances and offices; that its government and discipline are to be administered according to *his* will as revealed in Holy Scripture, by officers chosen for their fitness, and duly set apart to their office; that these officers meet for deliberation and united action in sessions, presbyteries, synods, and General Assemblies, and in such order that the organic unity of the church is maintained in a hierarchy of courts (in contradistinction to a hierarchy of persons); *the authority of which courts is ministerial and declarative, announcing what **Christ** has revealed, and applying **his** law according to **his** direction.*” In the next paragraph the Book of Forms further says: “‘*To take away all occasion of tyranny,*’ our Lord wills that office-bearers in his Church “should rule with mutual consent of brethren (sic), and equality of power, every one according to his function” (Bk. of Dis. II, 4).

To restate what it says, we Presbyterians believe that the Lord’s will is best discerned in and for the church by smaller groups of people called by Christ Jesus himself through the voice of the mutual consent of a larger church body. We call these people elders. In fact, the word “Presbyterian” means “elder-led” coming from the Greek word for “elder” which is “*presbyteros*”. We believe this method of leadership protects the church from the tyranny that has historically arisen in churches where there has been a hierarchy of individuals as well as, on the other hand, a mob-rule mentality that can arise at times in any congregation.

Elders are called by Christ through the voice of the mutual consent of a congregation to whom they will minister the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ who came not to be served, but to serve. In my brief ten years as a minister and a Presbyter I have come to trust to a fault is the process of nomination and election or call in the Presbyterian church. Those who are elected elder or even minister are precisely those whom Christ *himself* has called. There is no saying, “They just called the wrong person” as does happen a call fails. Also, the accusations of Crony-ism (the Good-ole-boy thing) or Nepotism (the showing-favoritism-to-family-members thing) in the Presbyterian church is way off base. Christ calls whom he wants. Whether it be to teach a church a lesson or to lead the church forward, Christ calls whom he calls. Those who are elected are indeed in the end those whom Christ himself has called even if they are a Judas.

To be elected elder is not to have won a popularity contest. It is not a reward as if someone could earn the call. It is not a means of trying to re-activate a member whose attendance has begun to wane. It is not playing politics where you put someone in a leadership position to either shut them up or to keep them from going somewhere else. Those whom Christ calls are those whom he sees as fit to lead a particular congregation at a particular time and the qualifications which he uses will not be contradictory to Scripture. There are times when we may not and will not understand why Christ calls those whom he calls, but my experience is that in time his reasons flesh out. There are many in

any congregation fit to be elders and indeed would make fine elders, but Christ calls whom he calls and I have the utmost faith of his workings in the process.

The work of elders is as such. Of primary importance is the pastoral nature of the call. Each elder on session is given a district from among the people of the congregation to whom they are called to minister Christ's own ministry assisted by the minister where applicable. It is not the other way around. You will be hard pressed to find in our Book of Forms where it says that elders are to assist the minister in the pastoral work. Indeed, it is the other way around. I am not off base in saying that everything you expect of your minister with the exception of Sunday morning stuff you should expect also of your elders.

Secondly, Elders are called to gather regularly as the Session to discern the will of the Lord for the congregation they are called to minister the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ who came not to be served but to serve. Their authority is ministerial and declarative and based in love. To speak idealistically here, Sessions are called to discern the will of the Lord for a congregation through praying together, studying the Scriptures together, listening to one another, challenging one another's motives, and coming to agreement. The Session is not the board of a corporation that carries out the ideas of the CEO. When the Session gathers the minister is simply the Moderator of the discussion and the teaching elder. If the will of one person even if it is the minister begins to overshadow the discerning work of a Session, then, quite obviously, there is a form of tyranny. I used the word idealistically a moment ago, because it is precisely in this area that Sessions truly begin to limp, but limping they must strive towards it. Discerning the will of the Lord is not simply doing what seems best or what worked in some other church. It is discerning the will of the Lord.

Thus, to answer the question of what an elder is. An elder is those whom Christ has called through your own voice to pastor you and lead you in his will by the power of the Holy Spirit and in accordance with Scripture. Now, I've something to say to those whom Christ has called to lead you. The office of elder is no less demanding than the call to be a minister. Christ has called you to this function of ministry so that you may know him better and be shaped by the Holy Spirit to be more and more like him. This means that you must let this congregation and the people of your districts be of sacrificial importance to you. Though there is Scriptural mandate for it, I will not say that these people must be as or more important to you than your own families. But, I will say that you are called to give sacrificially to this congregation. You must give sacrificially of your time, of your money, and of your abilities. Christ has called you to live a life exemplary of the Gospel and he will empower you to do just that. In the least, get to know the people to whom you have been called serve. Build a relationship with them. It is there that you will get to know your Lord and his great love. You are ministers of his grace which means you are a set aside personal presence in the lives of the people of this congregation through whom Christ will communicate his own presence, his own favour, and his own acting on their behalf. You are the grace of the Lord. Feed his sheep and you will know him. Amen.