



The Tasks of the Elder

By Pastor Kyle Wells

In the other documents, we have considered the importance of the office of Ruling Elder, as well as the character qualifications of those who hold it. But what does a ruling elder do?

The Bible does not go into great detail about the tasks of an elder. We learn something from the titles these leaders are given. As he is called “elder”, he is to be *spiritually* mature and an example to God’s people (1 Pet 5:3). Elders are to watch over and nurture the family of God, communicating the firm direction and lovingkindness of God’s fatherly care. They give counsel to God’s family (Ezek 7:26). Just like elders in the Old Testament, elders also provide judicial decisions (Matt 16:19; 18:18–20; Acts 15:2, 16:4). They are thus to be wise, understanding, and experienced men who are able to look at all sides, weigh the evidence, and render a verdict (Deut 1:13–16; Ex 18:15–25; Josh 20:4; Ruth 4:4–5). These verdicts are to re-establish order in the community. For this they need wisdom and the Spirit’s empowering (Num 11:16–17).

As he is called “overseer” (1 Tim 3:1; Acts 20:28), an elder has been given oversight of God’s people and with his fellow elders has a responsibility to care for them. Oversight involves at least two things. First, elders must guard God’s people from doctrinal and moral error (Tit 1:9–14; Acts 20:28–30). In order to do this, first an elder must be teachable himself (Tit 1:9a), and then able to distinguish truth from falsehood and communicate that distinction in a clear manner (Tit 1:9b).

Oversight also involves ruling/leading the church (1 Tim 5:17). This is exactly why Paul says that elders must be good household managers (1 Tim 3:4–5). In order to understand this, we need to step out of our modern world and enter the ancient one. In the ancient world a household was not so much a family unit as a family business, which included various workers doing various jobs (see Eph 5:22–6:9; Col 3:18–4:1; Luke 12:42). An elder is God’s *steward*, his *household manager*, or his *business agent* (1 Tit 1:7; compare Luke 12:42 and 16:1 where the same word is used). It was a manager’s duty to distribute work or pay among his colleagues and see to it that the work was done properly. This means that an elder must have administrative gifts and know-how to be able to manage people and institutions, to ensure that all are working together toward a common goal, by leading the church in shared values and priorities. In other words, ruling and teaching elders must be able to lead the people of Christ Presbyterian Church in the development and accomplishment of the institution’s mission and vision.

Here is how this works out practically at Christ Presbyterian Church. First, ruling elders advise on, and the session (the body of elders) must approve, any changes to the vision, direction, philosophy, policies, and ministry style of Christ Presbyterian Church. The session also has the authority to review and control the program decisions of the pastor and staff by comparing those decisions to Scripture, our constitutional standards, our policies, and our philosophy of ministry. The pastor (if applicable with other teaching elders) has the responsibility of equipping the saints, especially ruling elders and potential leaders, for the work of ministry (Eph 4:11–16; 2 Tim 2:2). Additionally, he is given responsibility by the Session and under the Session to make strategic and programmatic decisions as to how the Church’s vision, values, and philosophy is implemented.

This leads easily into our next point. As he is called “under-shepherd”, an elder is to be led by Christ. Over and above the concerns of the congregation, elders are to care about the concerns of Christ. A session’s primary question is: What does Jesus want us to do? Its primary task is to listen to, discern, and carry out Christ’s will, not the congregation’s. That is not to say that elders don’t care for the needs of the congregation, they do. As under-shepherds, they are called to care for the flock: to pray with and for them (Jm 5:14–15); to preserve and nurture their people’s life in covenant with God. For this reason each ruling elder is assigned a group of members for whom he has primary pastoral care, knowing their needs and names (Jn 10:14), and running after those who stray (Lk 15:1–7). Discipleship is therefore one of his primary responsibilities (2 Tim 2:2). But on the last day, under-shepherds will not be held accountable to the sheep, but to the Shepherd. They must therefore work for Jesus and lead the congregation where they believe Jesus wants it to go.

As under-shepherds, elders provide care by giving protection, provision, and guidance. This is what shepherds do (see Gen 48:16; Pss 23, 77, 78; Jn 10, 21). And they must do that for individual saints, as well as for the church as a whole. The Session is to guard and promote the vision, values, identity, and mission, which the Lord has given. If an afflicting cancer comes into the church which threatens our identity or hinders the promotion of the gospel, our elders must remove it, whether it be a heresy, a cantankerous person, a distracting idea, or something else. One very specific and vital way in which they do this is by protecting the pastor, who is called to proclaim the gospel. They must protect the pastor from those who would present undo criticism or outright attacks, thus curtailing his ministry. They also must protect the pastor from himself, by pastoring his heart and seeking to make sure that he is cultivating his covenant relationship with the Lord. A vital task indeed!