

One of the greatest contributions of the Reformation to Western Europe was the restoration of Biblical church government. Biblical government is basically the rule of elders and deacons in the institutional church, for the health and well-being of God’s flock.

We believe that the supernatural offices of the prophet, evangelist, apostles passed away with the apostolic age, and there remain today on two ordinary offices: elder and deacon. Within the office of elder we see those who are set apart to that which remains of the prophetic offices, the preaching the teaching of God’s word: in the RCUS, those are called ministers and are examined and credentialed by classis to exercise that office in their local church, or charge. There are lay elders who are not credentialed by classis, but are called to rule with equal authority in the local church and may represent that church in classis and synod. They may teach formally in the local church, or they may not; but even if they do not teach formally, they are called to instruct the flock and be sound in doctrine and in life. The distinctions and duties of each of the officers of the church are set forth in the Constitutions of the church.

The requirements for elders and deacons are essentially the same, and both sit on the Consistory of the church, the deacons and elders together are responsible for the overall government of the church. The elders make up the Spiritual Council, a judicatory charged with the spiritual well-being of the flock and its discipline.

Before Paul’s last trip to Jerusalem, where he would be bound and begin his period of imprisonment which would culminate in his martyrdom and beheading at Rome, he called the elders of the church at Ephesus to him, to give them instructions. Here in Acts 20, we have the history of that meeting and of his charge to them. This charge is edifying to us today. We see that his charge includes two basic things: Take Heed to Yourselves; Take Heed to the Flock. I will add a third thing, which underlies this charge: Take Heed to Christ.

- I. Take heed to yourselves. Sin is deceitful and you must be on guard at all times. The devil knows where the authority of Christ is vested in the church, and he particularly aims his arrows at the officers: the elders, the deacons, and the minister.
 - A. Above all things, these men must be true Christians and know the doctrine and power of the church, the gospel of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit.
 1. The sins of those who have authority under Christ are essentially of two kinds [applies to fathers, ministers, magistrates—all in authority].
 - a. There is the sin of tyranny. This is the sin of wasting and ruining the flock by usurpation of authority beyond that give in the word of God.
 - (1). This is fueled by pride and arrogance, the very sins of the devil and sows havoc and distress in the flock.
 - (2). The elder must beware of that infernal wisdom that James speaks of: the wisdom from below: earthly, sensual, devilish, full of envy and strife; but rather he must seek that wisdom which is from above: first pure [not contaminated by other agendas], then peaceable, easy to be entreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, without hypocrisy.
 - (3). Fueled by pride and arrogance, the fruit of tyranny is hatred and malice, the other sins of the devil who was a murderer from the beginning.
 - b. There is the sin of truancy. This is an old, but very appropriate term, and is applied to those who do not fulfill their responsibility but go to sleep on the job. They neglect to exercise the authority that is given to them, do not do their job, and neglect the flock of God, and leave them to their own devices.
 - c. In the modern individualistic, rebellious American society, the Christian man to seeks to fulfill his responsibility must be prepared to be accused of tyranny, if he exercises his authority at all. There are certainly many incidents of tyranny because of the ignorance of the Scriptures, yet the balance seems to be tilted toward truancy.
 2. Elders would be wise to follow Paul’s example that is set down in verses 18-21: “18 And when they were come to him, he said unto them, Ye know, from the first day that I came into Asia, after what manner I have been with you at all seasons, 19 Serving the Lord with all humility of mind, and with many tears, and temptations, which befell me by the lying in wait of the Jews: 20 And how I kept back nothing that was profitable unto you, but have showed you, and have taught you publicly, and from house to house, 21 Testifying both to the Jews, and also to the Greeks, repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ.” (Ac 20:18-21)
 - B. “Take heed” means to always have in your attention, not to ever let your guard down; be cautious for you do not know when the test will come. We are not ignorant of Satan’s devices; he would scatter the flock by causing the shepherd to fall into wicked tyranny or truancy. Be on your guard.
- II. Take Heed to the Flock.
 - A. The Holy Ghost hath made you overseers. This is the appointment of God. You must be very conscious of this calling, and you were asked about this after your name was suggested to the consistory by the congregation, before your name was placed in nomination. There are two things here.
 1. Your own personal conviction of your call as to the office. This must be of faith, for no one who understand the office can be confident that they can perform in their own strength. “Who is sufficient for these things,” the apostle asked; and if Paul did not feel self-sufficient, then you and I will surely be daunted by the task. But our sufficiency is of the Lord, and we walk by faith, relying upon the Holy Ghost, given to us by our Lord in Heaven.
 2. The other thing concerns the congregation. They accept your calling and your office by faith also, for we do not depend upon men, but upon of Lord in Heaven. Having done due diligence; having consulted one another; having prayed earnestly, the congregation and the consistory have determined that you are indeed called of God and trust you

to His care and guidance. We are equally dependent upon the Holy Spirit to lead you in the performance of your office, for we put no confidence in the flesh.

3. A few moments ago, we prayed again, as we laid hands upon you, that you would indeed be led, not by your own wisdom, but by the wisdom that is from above, the gift of the Holy Spirit.

B. You are made an overseer of the flock. "Oversight" is from "episcopos" from which we get the word "episcopal."

1. Two synonyms are "elder" and "overseer"

- a. The first refers to dignity, not to age. In Israel it referred to the rulers. A rich young ruler, or elder, came to Christ, you remember. The title of this office came to officers in the church, but they were not hereditary, but by the appointment of the Holy Ghost.

- b. The second refers to the function of the office: he is charged with seeing that things are done right, according to the word of God. He is to see that the flock of God is fed and protected.

- (1). He is to exhort the flock, privately and publically, that each person fear the Lord and do his duty.

- (2). He is to teach, teach, teach.

- (3). He is to patiently teach and exhort the wayward, the stubborn, the unruly.

- (4). He is to protect the weak from bullies and tyrants from within and from without.

- (5). He is to teach, teach, teach.

2. He is to feed the flock of God. He is to augment the authoritative preaching of the minister; to make application; to exhort to righteous living. He is to teach, teach, teach...by example, by precept, by exhortation, by reproof—with patience and love.

3. How precious is the church to the Lord Jesus. It is purchased with the blood of Jesus.

- a. She must be precious to the elder.

- b. Paul warns of those who lust after the church, but not after Christ. Vs. 29, 30

- (1). Some will come from outside: wolves, to destroy: false teachers; persecutors.

- (2). Some will come from within: schismatics; having their own agenda, not the good of the church, though they will pretend thus.

III. Take heed unto Christ. Your authority is from Him alone. You are the representatives of His kingdom.

A. Your authority goes as far as Scripture and no further. See Hebrews 13:17. Scripture speaks to all of life. But it teaches self-government.

1. Each elder is an elder to every individual, but for the purpose of calling them to submit to Christ in their own arena of service.

2. Each elder speaks to families, for the same purpose: self-government and responsibility.

3. Each elder also speaks to governments and magistrates, for the same purpose: yield to Christ. The elder does not usurp the office of father in the home or the authority of the magistrate, but calls them to obedience and submission to Christ.

B. The elder has no independent authority; only that given to him in the Scriptures and the constitutions of the church. He is one among many, and must work always in connection with the other elders and minister. In doctrine he is bound to the confessions of the church.

C. This authority, although limited, is over the whole church, not just Trinity Covenant Reformed Church in Colorado Springs.

1. His authority, in one sense is representational, for he represents the people of the church in the higher judicatories of the church: classis and synod.

2. His authority, however, is a divine authority, and does not come from the people, for the office is the appointment of Christ, and Christ defines its authority and function. Christ exercises his authority through the elders and there is no church where there are no elders. They are the manifestation of Christ and His Spirit in the world.

3. See Ephesians 4:1-16 This is no abstraction:

- a. Where there are no gifts, there is no church, and those who pretend are usurping the place of Christ before the people.

- b. Where the gifts are, they are to be exercised. Even if there are only two or three in the name of Christ.

- c. Where the gifts are, the church is to submit to the rule of Christ in them.

Summary: Acts 20:31-36

May God bless you. Amen and Amen