

Encountering the Reformation: Elders Who Care

Last week, I mentioned the “culture shock” I encountered as I was starting to embrace the Reformed Church. I told how the practice of “close communion” offended me – until a kind elder explained the Biblical reasons for the practice.

That explanation itself, and the tender discipleship it fostered, was another surprise. *What were these guys they call “elders”?*

OK, I wasn’t (quite) *that* clueless. I understood, mostly, what elders were. That is, I knew that these men had authority to make the decisions in the Church. In Reformed Presbyterian Churches, they often led part of the worship service, as well; and many of them taught catechism classes or Bible studies.

But until that elder sat down with me and discussed the elders’ *Biblical* responsibilities, I had no real recognition of how *significant* their role was.

Like many American Christians, my view of Church government grew out of my understanding of American government. “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” That’s where I started. So I tended to regard the folks in charge of the Church (call them elders, deacons, trustees, bishops – whatever) as the ones *we-the-people* *decided* to set over us. They have the power that *we decide to give*; no more, no less. And if we don’t like how they lead us, we can petition for change, vote ‘em out, or ... well, go somewhere else!

That’s pretty much what I thought about Church government before I got to Geneva ... and I wasn’t shy about expressing it.

I was, however, quite wrong.

That became evident as the kind elders at College Hill Reformed Presbyterian Church taught me (mostly by example, and occasionally in conversations) about the weighty calling God has laid upon His elders.

Above all, they taught me that it’s not “we-the-people” who give power to the elders, but *God Himself*. He’s the One who equips, calls and uses the elders. The congregation’s vote is simply the instrument He uses to make His will known (see Acts 1:24-26 and Acts 20:28).

And while it’s true that the elders are “in charge” of the Church, their authority is more than the power to decide what color to paint the walls and whether to buy new song books.

They are called to teach sound doctrine that will mature the saints, while silencing those who would lead others astray (Titus 1:9-2:1). They are called to exercise discipline by admonishing the people at home and in public (Acts 20:20-31), calling sinners to repent (Matt. 18:15-18), and removing those who are divisive (Titus 3:10-11) or unrepentant (1 Corinthians 5). Yet they also are called to restore those who repent by sharing the burden they bear (Gal. 6:1-2).

When those in the Church are sick, it is from the elders that they are to request prayer and anointing (James 5:14). The elders are to set an example of Godly living (1 Pet. 5:3; Heb. 13:7), striving to make their lives an example for God’s people (1 Tim. 3:1-7). They are to ensure by their teaching and by their exercise of authority that all things are done decently and in good order, especially the worship of the Church (1 Cor. 14:26-40).

And they are to do it all with the knowledge that they will answer to God Himself for the care they have given and the watch they have kept over the souls entrusted to them (Heb. 13:17).

Wow. As Paul asks in 2 Cor. 2:16, “Who is equal to such a task?”

But that’s the amazing part: none of our elders (or ministers, or deacons) is equal to the task – and they know it! The longer they serve, the more deeply they recognize how unworthy and insufficient they are. But they also come to see that it truly is not them who work, but God who works *through* them.

Paul writes: “Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong” (1 Cor. 1:26-27). Even Paul himself came “in weakness and fear, and with much trembling” (1 Cor. 2:3).

Yet neither Paul’s work, nor the work of *our* elders, rests on the power of the men themselves. The power comes from God, who works *through* those men by His Spirit, “so that your faith might not rest on men’s wisdom, but on God’s power” (1 Cor. 2:5). And just as the power comes from God, so does the authority – so that Jesus could say, “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven” (Matt. 16:19).

How unlikely – that God would choose to rule by calling common men to serve as His representatives. How unlikely – that He would choose to use such common men for such an important task.

But whether likely or not, that’s precisely what He has done. And He has caused these servant leaders who shepherd Christ’s flock to be a far greater blessing than any system which mere men could have devised!