

TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. SHEPHERDS.....	2
II RULERS	3
III. A MISUNDERSTANDING	3
IV. SWINGING THE AX.....	4
V. THE RULING ELDER AS A MORAL LEADER.....	4
VI. BREAKDOWN OF MORAL LEADERSHIP	5
VII. THE RULING ELDER AS A SPIRITUAL GUIDE.....	5
VIII. BREAKDOWN OF SPIRITUAL GUIDANCE	6
A. IN THE KIRK SESSION.....	6
B. IN THE PERSONAL REALM.....	7
IX. CAUSES OF THE BREAKDOWN	7
A. THE MINISTER.....	7
B. THE CONGREGATION	8
C. THE ELDER.....	8
X. CONSEQUENCES OF THE BREAKDOWN	10
XI. THE HEALING OF THE ELDERSHIP.....	12

A BARRIER TO EFFECTIVE EVANGELISM AND ELDERSHIP TRAINING: A
DEFECTIVE RULING ELDERSHIP

I. SHEPHERDS

Listen to Peter: *"So I exhort the elders among you as a fellow elder.... Tend the flock of God that is your charge, not by constraint but willingly, not for shameful gain but eagerly, not as domineering over those in your charge but being examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd is manifested you will obtain the unfading crown of glory."*

1 Peter 5

Such are the people whom Paul addresses in Acts 20: *"Take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you guardians, to feed the church of the Lord... be alert..."*

Among the functions and ministries which are found in the New Testament Church, that of the Elder is the most constant and receives the most thorough attention. Paul founding the church among the gentiles, flexible as he was in other aspects of his apostolic ministry, simply made no exceptions: he *"appointed elders for them in every church."* Acts 14:23

The Elder is at the very heart of the apostolic tradition. He is shepherd -- not a senior sheep.

From Titus 1:5-9, it is evident that Paul used the terms Elder and Bishop interchangeably. I Timothy 3:1-7 is, therefore, certainly applicable to our Elders. If some of this once was received with a smile, because it seemed dated (he must be *"the husband of one wife"* at a time), by 1973 the smile has surely died on our lips.

After the Reformation, Presbyterian and Reformed Churches placed the Eldership once more firmly at the centre of the Church's life. Even Ministers are, in fact, Elders. No more. Their function on the basis of their training, is distinguished from that of their fellow Elders by the term Teaching Elder alongside Ruling Elder.

The Ruling Elder, however, is far more than a decision-maker. The Book of Forms spells that out. See 106, 111 (note in 111a: *"It is also their duty to gather into the Sabbath School all children and young people within the reach who are not attending some school)* (note 111,3), and 111, 2.

So the Book of Forms lays great stress on the pastoral (shepherds') function of the individual Elder. There is no stress on individual's ruling or governing task. This is always a matter of teamwork, i.e. of the Kirk Session as a Court. As a person, the Elder has the calling to deal with God's people in

love; to be concerned for their well-being: to bring to their family-life, to their joys and sorrows, hope, and the admonishment of faith in Jesus Christ. He is to share his own joys with them, and to share in their tears. His knowledge and experience is to give them guidance and counsel. He is to them the living expression of the care, the love, and the concern of the Church for each one of her children.

II RULERS

The rule of Elders is the rule of Elders-in-council. Authoritative decisions are only made by the Elders as a Body, constituted as a Court of the Church.

The individual Elder is not a ruler. But he is called to uphold, to support, and to carry out the decisions of the Kirk Session, unless he is bound by conscience not to do so. In that case, he must inform his fellow Elders and Minister of his position, with consideration and understanding of the course they are taking, and in brotherly love. Unless he feels constrained to appeal to the higher Courts, this is as far as he can go.

Usually, though an Elder may have opposed the decision of his Session, the matter is not of such importance that he could not in good conscience support and carry out such a decision. His office requires that he should so serve the Lord. Wherever and whenever possible he must squarely take his stand with his Kirk Session and make his personal opinion subject to its majority decision. For how shall the Body of Christ function properly if one of its feet wanders off to the kitchen while the rest of the body climbs the stairs? The nature of the ruling function of Elders, therefore, is that of TEAMWORK. A Kirk Session which works well as a team is an inestimable asset to the life of the Church.

There will always be areas of controversy and conflicts of opinion. Ruling Elders, just as the Teaching Elder, will only serve the Church well at these points if they are thoroughly conversant with the Law of the Church, and equally important, if they handle that Law and the Church's usage in a spirit of love and understanding.

III. A MISUNDERSTANDING

It is a sad fact that many Elders do not understand what is the scope and the limit of their ruling function. When conflicts arise such Elders mean to rule by imposing their will on others. They may voice their disagreement with a decision of the Session and even campaign against it in their congregation. They appear appallingly ignorant of the Law of the Church. That Law amply protects Elders from being forced into positions which they cannot hold in good conscience. It provides for appeals to superior Courts. It shields them from harassment. But it equally

safeguards and protects their Minister and fellow Elders. Elders, too, are called to "obey" your leaders and submit to them; for they are keeping watch over your souls, as men who will have to give account. Hebrews 13:17.

Sometimes, when Elders are called to obedience-in-the-Lord to the Church, its Law and its Ministers, they simply balk at this. They wave aside the Book of Forms as irrelevant. They freeze into quiet resistance. The result may be a pouting resentful neglect of their duties, or a disdainful opposition to the course of the Kirk Session in the Congregation. Such Elders can devastate the efforts of a Kirk Session with a smile and a smirk, Then they become destructive instead of constructive, a curse instead of a blessing. Sometimes simply ignoring a Session's decision can do great harm. A non-committal Elder can destroy a whole segment of congregational life.

IV. SWINGING THE AX

An inevitable deterioration in the life of the Congregation is the result. Many a disgruntled Elder will lay the blame for that with unerring precision at the feet of the Minister. The Minister is the man from "outside". Of all people, he is most easily identified as the source of "irregular" ideas, the disturber of accepted ways, a man trying to impose his will on others. You see, he is the Teaching Elder. Teaching means deepening insights, opening up new visions, correcting views and behaviour, leading into new life patterns, in short: change. He has been called to the Congregation from somewhere. Therefore, the fallacious argument goes, it must be possible to make him go somewhere.

If an Elder can convince others that it is the Minister as a person who stands in the way of peace and harmony, soon a sizable segment of Session and Congregation may become infested with the idea that his removal is "in the interest of all concerned." Faced with unrest and flaring tempers in such Congregations, Presbyteries have been known to take recourse to section 377 of the Book of Forms, which is the sword of Damocles hanging over the head of Ministers, especially when the last sentence of the paragraph is ignored. Then the way of love is lost. The Minister has to go.

That Minister's successor is of all men most to be pitied.

V. THE RULING ELDER AS A MORAL LEADER.

In the moral life of the Congregation~: and its members, the Ruling Elder has a most sensitive task. First of all, his example must be beyond reproach, as the Scriptures require.

Secondly, he must be willing to disregard ties of blood or friendship for the sake of Christ. As unethical actions occur in the congregation, he is called to sit in judgment-in-council. Individually, he is not the judge of others. But as part of the Kirk Session, he must take cognizance of sins which dishonor the Name of Christ and disgrace the Church, as a bearer of "that. Spiritual authority which the Lord Jesus Christ has appointed in His Church". (B.O.F. 313) When he has personal ties with someone whose life comes under the scrutiny of the Session, he must offset these by being even more conscientious than his fellow Elder in reviewing the matter. Or he may feel so deeply involved that he must choose to be silent altogether.

VI. BREAKDOWN OF MORAL LEADERSHIP

To begin with the second factor, more often than not Elders will spring to the defense of people with whom they have personal ties, no matter how dreadful their actions may be. They will defy the session, the Minister and the Church Law, rather than to enter with their brothers into a process of a winsome presentation of the demands of the Gospel, admonition, and - as a last resort - a process of Church Discipline. Kirk Sessions are constantly paralyzed by such attitudes of Elders. Where there is a closely-knit small community, these attitudes may be so common as to prevent any moral leadership the Kirk Session may give to its Congregation.

In regard to their personal example, there are some Elders who disregard the fact that moral leadership is a vital function of their Office. For an Elder cannot set an example to the Congregation, if he is known to drink to excess or if his marriage is a shambles; if his home-life is lacking in Christian standards; if his attitudes toward honesty and truthfulness are doubtful, if his treatment of others in business or labor relations is without compassion. Such Elders should reconsider their position in the Church.

Sometimes a whole Session, including the Minister hide their eyes from the evil in their midst. Then the best among them cannot give moral leadership to the congregation, because they are unable to remedy what is wrong among themselves.

VII. THE RULING ELDER AS A SPIRITUAL GUIDE

Here is the very heart of the Ruling Elder's function as the Book of Forms makes quite clear (106,111). He is called to give loving and concerned care to the spiritual life of his people. To facilitate this, most Elders have a certain number of church members assigned to them as their "district". These are the people for whom they will look in church. They will know especially when they are present at the Lord's Supper. In

personal contact by visitation they come to know their family. They check on the church school attendance of their children. When there is sickness, they bring the love and comfort of the Church to their sickbed. In sorrow they are by their side. When there is transportation needed to the church, the hospital, or in some emergency, they will arrange it. They will encourage them in family-worship, take an interest in problems of youth, and by their prayers, comfort and encouragement set an example for them in faith and love. Their advice in the choice of Christian literature for the home and in developing a Christian life style as a witness to the community will be invaluable. With love and gentle firmness, they will win over the doubting, the drifting and the lost. And such Elders will direct the Minister to the trouble spots where further help is needed.

Far from being a fond dream, the above flows from the practice and instruction of the Apostles, from the Law of the Church and the Confession (see Westminster Conf. XXX, III). Neither would Elders who work according to this pattern infringe upon the Minister's work, let alone take it out of his hands. On the contrary, where Elders are active in this way, the Minister's task will be increasingly demanding and effective.

VIII. BREAKDOWN OF SPIRITUAL GUIDANCE

A. IN THE KIRK SESSION

In reality, however, Ruling Elders functioning in this way are the exception rather than the rule. In fact, little of this shepherd's concern and loving care for one another is found in the Kirk Session itself. Here, where the spiritual life of the Congregation should have one of its focal points, the breakdown of the Elder's spiritual function begins. There is little prayer, less Bible study, and not much concern for each other's soul. In many Sessions, no two Elders have ever heard each other pray. Even the gravest crisis in the congregation does not bring them to bow their heads and pour out their concern together before the Throne of Grace. How often does the Bible remain closed the year around, except for the purpose of a formal opening of the meeting? The Elder who upon being asked by the Minister to close in prayer, replied. "We leave that kind of thing to the Minister," spoke for numerous other elders. Many Kirk Sessions would run the Church as one would run a well-oiled machinery, or a supermarket in which there is something for everybody. They shy away from the intimacy of prayer and from facing the demands of Christ. It is too un-business-like.

Such Kirk Sessions, in relation to the Church at large, are anxious to have favorable statistics on hand, but on the other are holding the higher Courts of the Church and the wider concerns for Mission and Evangelism at arm's length.

In relation to their own Congregation, such Sessions seem

preoccupied with efforts to smooth ruffled feathers, to prevent any rocking of the boat, to keep everybody happy, to please everybody, and not to stand for anything in particular. Many dark spots in the life of the Church are carefully plastered over. Enthusiasts and people breaking new ground are effectively side-tracked. The call to Christ in Evangelism from the pulpit or at special occasions is pooh-poohed. The young are received into communicant church membership without asking any questions, which may well be the most devastating factor in the work of such Kirk Sessions, because it will perpetuate the kind of Eldership which is a burden rather than a blessing to the Church.

When such Kirk Sessions appear with a certain pompousness at the Lord's Table and when in some cases they insist on being constituted as a Court of the Church for the occasion, they can only seem the more pathetic to one who knows them well.

B. IN THE PERSONAL REALM

Many Elders know that they are to give loving and concerned spiritual guidance to the people entrusted to their care. But coming from a Kirk Session as described above, they are ill equipped for it and uninspired. They know that they are acting merely as an ecclesiastical paperboy, if they once every so often take communion cards to the homes and, after some small talk, leave for some more homes to be ~'visited" that evening. We cannot blame them for mailing those cards or just dropping them between the doors. But one wonders how they can carry on year after year, when their spiritual leadership in the Congregation is lacking in strength and a sense of purpose; when they are held in contempt or disregard, and sometimes even are felt as a hindrance in the life of the Congregation; when developments pass them by and new forms of spiritual life emerge in which elders have no part and the Session has no say. And these things are found among the realities of church life with staggering regularity. No wonder that there are Elders who are among the most unfaithful church attenders; who seldom appear in the Session Meetings; whose givings to the Church are minimal; whose children are not in the Church school, and whose families take no part in church life. In such cases, spiritual leadership is not even in the picture. The breakdown is complete.

IX. CAUSES OF THE BREAKDOWN

A. THE MINISTER

As the Teaching Elder, the Minister has the task to instruct and guide his Elders in the right understanding and appreciation of their Office. With understanding for those factors which have dulled and hollowed out the Eldership in the Church until often a mere shell of officialdom is left, he must lead them back to the intent and content of their office, and, indeed to the glory

of it. Failing to do so, he ought not to be surprised when he finds himself in his own efforts at spiritual leadership blocked by a rather solid opposition of his Elders.

B. THE CONGREGATION

There are elders who have been elected by a Congregation which thoroughly misunderstands their function, using standards and ideas which have often nothing to do with the Church of Christ. Congregations elect their Elders for many reasons such as:

prominence in the community; status due to higher education; membership of long standing; financial liberality; cliquishness; age; business ties; lodge affiliations; and of late their sex. On occasion an Elder is elected for the sole purpose of blocking the election of someone else. None of which has anything to do with the Church

Right reasons for the elder's election would be:

personal devotion to Christ; faithfulness in the work of the Church; honesty in the face of injustice and evil; witness to Jesus Christ; knowledge of the Scriptures; willingness to lead in prayer; familiarity with God's work in and outside the Church.

The sad fact is that Elders are usually not elected for these reasons.

The Chairman of the Board of Managers who, upon finishing his term, was not elected an Elder and who never set foot in the church again, is a classic example of what is wrong with the concept of the Eldership among church members. Many feel that in the Church one achieves status just as one does in the world; that years of some kind of service need to be rewarded with an honored position; that in the Church there is at a certain point just nowhere to go but into the Eldership if one is to go up at all. This attitude makes the Eldership appear as some kind of payment for services rendered, an award of ecclesiastical top-honors, a public compliment, and sometimes a kick-upstairs.

Hence, when that plateau of Eldership is reached under such conditions, there is an end of striving to serve the Church, a deadly resting upon one's laurels, a desperate hanging-on to the status of decision maker. In the end, there is spiritual death.

A congregation, so deprived of spiritual leadership, surely bears a great deal of blame.

C. THE ELDER

Elders who take office against the background of the above misconceptions often hold such fictitious notions about the Eldership themselves. It then escapes them that to be an Elder they need more than an election by the Congregation and Kirk Session, especially where only a small part of the Congregation

takes the trouble to vote at all. They need a divine calling to a pastoral ministry, i.e. a shepherd's work. As a result there will be, generally speaking, four kinds of Elders who bear their Office not joyfully but sadly (Heb. 13:17), and to whom the Eldership becomes a futile exercise.

1. There are those who merely linger. Some too old, and some too ill. Some are frustrated to the point where even the act of resigning from the active function has become too much of an effort of the will, in view of the questions that might be asked or the urging of their fellow Elders to stay on.

2. Some are overcommitted in areas other than the Eldership and are unaware that to hold the Eldership on top of many other activities amounts to a gesture of contempt for their high calling **and** their own integrity. Among them are those who work seven days a week; who hold down two jobs (in the case of women, one as homemaker, another in business and industry); those who are overcommitted in social life (lodge, Service Club, Labor Union, golfing, bowling, spectator sports, hobby clubs, etc.); those who spend most weekends from May to October traveling, camping or in the cottage far from home; those who spend most of their spare time in the support and attendance of sports and recreational activities of their children; those who pursue intensive post-graduate or adult studies to further their position in society.

The list is not exhaustive. But the emphasis is on the word OVER in overcommitted. It is clear that what is listed above in itself is far from being an unworthy or unchristian activity. In fact, some of it is vital and necessary in family life. But an Elder who is overcommitted in such a way cannot function effectively.

3. Some Elders are uncommitted. They have not accepted Jesus Christ as their personal Savior and Lord, i.e. as Lord and Master of their life, their time, and their relationship with other people as well as Savior of their Soul. Such Elders are simply unable to lead others to Christ, let alone to guide them in spiritual growth. An Elder who cannot bring himself to lead in prayer, when visiting his people, reveals an inherent weakness of those Elders who insist upon being the Church's decision-makers, but have little sense of the spiritual dimension of their task. For an Elder to live as if one does not have to be a committed Christian to be a Presbyterian, and to hold office as if one does not have to have a divine calling to a shepherd's work in the Church to be an Elder, is self-contradictory and amounts to self-deceit. Such persons cannot rule the Church of God.

4. Some Elders are deeply committed to Jesus Christ, but are

simply not equipped by the Lord, or have not developed the gifts necessary for the guidance and comfort of God's people. They are out of place in the Kirk Session, and as one sees them struggle to serve the Church as an Elder, one can only love and respect them more deeply. But while they are tied down to the Eldership, they are prevented from rendering fruitful service and witness in other areas for which they may well be admirably suited.

X. CONSEQUENCES OF THE BREAKDOWN

The consequences of the breakdown of spiritual leadership by the Ruling Elder in the Presbyterian Church are disastrous. Several have been mentioned in passing. In summary, the following are in evidence:

In the Congregation: disunity, disloyalty, and individualism. The congregation does not develop into witnessing community; the several departments each become a kingdom in itself, with their officers jealously guarding against "interference" by the Minister and the Session. The old, the sick and people in distress are forgotten. To many the Eldership becomes a mere ornament around the Communion Table. The Ministry becomes a convenience at times of birth, marriage, or bereavement. Members move about from place to place, without giving a thought to affiliating with the Church in their new location, or even continuing to attend worship services. The acceptance of new communicant members becomes a formality. Congregational meetings become a kind of stock-holders meeting. Problems in need of being solved in Christian love become personality clashes. And to many members, especially the young, Paul's statement that "if anyone aspires to the office of bishop, he desires a noble task." looks preposterous.

It is clear that where such conditions prevail, there can be no question of outreach and evangelism.

In the Kirk Sessions: Sometimes a Minister, too, holds a defective view of the Ruling Eldership. He will accept their lack of spiritual leadership as a matter of course. In other cases, a Minister may have contended with it so long and with so little result, that he no longer hopes that his Elders will share the shepherd's burden with him. He will try to carry it alone. In such Kirk Sessions things continue rather smoothly, without much conflict, and without much life.

When a Minister comes to his Session with a vision of teamwork and spiritual leadership, however, it is a different story. Although Elders always receive their Minister with goodwill and the desire to support him, they will tend from the start to be his "loyal opposition" if they consider themselves as "senior sheep" rather than shepherds. Their main concern will be that he will "Fit in" well, and will be able to "fill the pews".

If the Minister is true to his divine calling as a Minister of Word and Sacraments, the Gospel must come from his pulpit as a message of judgment and grace, of repentance and faith, of the fear of God and the love of God. Both. But he must find sooner or later that such is not the prime concern of such a Session. As long as he refrains from offering his Congregation this completeness of the Gospel, but is "positive", "diplomatic", and "non-judgmental", all is well. But when he warns against "Cheap grace" and calls to commitment and loyalty, when he endeavors to bring sinners to their knees and Christians to accept self-discipline and self-denial, his Elders rush to his "aid". They reassure people that the man means well. He gets carried away a bit. One must get used to his ways. Another Sunday is coming up when things will look better, and all is well. In other words, they believe that they have to protect the Congregation from the dire consequences of what is coming from the pulpit. They try to soothe bad consciences. They think they must hold the Congregation together by counteracting the preaching of their minister. In short, they put the congregation at ease with what should disturb them. So they do no more than a public-relation job.

If that does not work, however, they will tell the Minister that they have given him all the support that they could. They have tried to reconcile the people to his words and ways. They have stood up for him. Now it is up to him to toe the line.

They do not see that it is not their task to stimulate goodwill in the Congregation toward the man in the pulpit, but to support the claims of Jesus Christ. They do not have to reconcile the people to the pastor, but lead them to be reconciled with God. They must not stand up for the Minister nor defend him as if something went wrong with his ministry. Instead they are to defend the Word of God and stand up for the honor of Christ among their people.

Many well-meaning Elders have rendered their Minister the worst service he could wish for. They have defended him, pleaded for him and showed him in another (supposedly better) light, than he presented himself. But they did not back him; they did not stand squarely behind him; they did not consider whether he was right and true. This was their concern: that he was acceptable to the people who foot the bill for his stipend.

In doing so they have degraded their Minister from being a servant of Christ to being a servant of men. They forgot that even as he ministers to men, as he serves them, he himself remains a servant to Christ alone.

At the very point where the Elders should admire and back their Minister, they often forsake him. All too frequent is the

picture of a Congregation in which the Elders are in the forefront of efforts by church members to bring the minister to heel and to make him serve the public image the mediocrity of spiritual life, and the religious rut in which a congregation may find itself.

Therefore, Elders who give no spiritual leadership in the Congregation, do not accept the Minister as their Teaching Elder:

they will not learn from him; they get in the way of his message; they turn the Congregation away from him, in spite of their intentions to the contrary. They do not grow in grace themselves, and they prevent others from doing so.

In such a Kirk Session, conflict is inevitable, and the Minister very lonely.

Eldership training does not stand a chance, of course.

XI. THE HEALING OF THE ELDERSHIP

If the above analysis in its main points is true to the facts of our Church's life, we stand in need of repentance for what we have done to the Holy Office of Eldership in the Presbyterian Church of Jesus Christ; repentance on the part of all of us, Ministers, Elders, and Members. For we have done it together.

That also means a return. Return to the concept set down in "I. SHEPHERDS" for if this is valid, it is the key to a renewal of our Church's life in a most vital area.

It also means some, sometimes painful, admissions and decisions on that basis. A few of these are:

1. A loyal, solid backing of decisions and directives of the Session by all Elders in the life of the Congregation.

2. A study of the Book of Forms by every Elder, and by the Session as a whole.

3. Self-examination of Elders as to their moral example in the community.

4. Bible study and fellowship-prayer in Session meetings.

5. Well-planned teaching periods in Session meetings by the Minister, as his acceptance by his Elders as THEIR teaching Elder, too.

6. Well-planned teaching by the Minister from the pulpit regarding the meaning and purpose of Ruling Eldership.

7. Term Eldership. As the resignation from active duty by an Elder tends to raise eyebrows and questions, it seems necessary that such as are ready to resign be given the opportunity to do so gracefully. As the Law of the Church stands today (B.O.F. 108) the onus for a resignation is entirely upon the Elder. But he can, in fact, terminate the active exercise of his Office. That is a form of term eldership. Without abandoning the principle that ordination is for life, this form of voluntary

term eldership can be changed to a well regulated form of term-eldership. This is needed for those who must reconsider their place in the Kirk Session, so that they may resign with honor, if they wish.

8. Renewed personal commitment to Jesus Christ for the sake of serving the Church as an Elder; in other words a renewed sense of calling and of high regard for the Office. Where Elders recapture these things, the Congregati9ns follow.

9. A conscious exchange of the idea of the Elder as a "senior sheep" for the idea of the Elder as a "shepherd".

Finally, it goes without question that such decisions and changes are to be made in prayerful dependence on the Head of the Church, Jesus Christ our Lord.