



C. Van Dam

Dr. C. Van Dam is professor of Old Testament at the Theological College of the Canadian Reformed Churches in Hamilton, Ontario  
cvandam@canrc.org

# Elders – A Treasure to Cherish

*Shepherding by the teaching and ruling elders  
is a great gift from God*

On Reformation Day we may celebrate God's goodness in unwrapping once more the glories of the gospel through his servants such as Luther and Calvin. The Word was proclaimed again in its fullness and the good news of being justified by faith alone resounded from the pulpits. Another, perhaps less known fruit of going back to the authoritative Word of God, was the rediscovery of the office of elder. It is easy for us to take this office for granted, but we would do so at our peril. This office is a gracious gift of God, established for the well being of the church.

## Some background

Right from the very beginning, the early Christian church had elders. This is not surprising given the fact that the first Christians were Jews and the elder had always played a vital role in giving leadership and direction to Israel and the Jewish people. As the new Israel (cf. Galatians 6:16), the Christian church simply continued using this office. It was a matter of course. Indeed, the first churches were called synagogues (thus literally James 2:2). And what is a synagogue without an elder? Because of this continuity with the Old Testament, Luke can mention Christian elders for the first time in Acts 11:30 without needing to give any explanation. All Jewish Christians were familiar with this office and it became standard throughout the entire church, including the congregations originating from Gentile believers. (See, for example, Acts 14:23.) When the Apostle Paul writes Timothy, he speaks of elders "who direct the affairs of the church well," but he also mentions those elders "whose work is preaching and teaching" (1 Tim 5:17). This passage

has been correctly understood to mean that there are two elder offices: the ruling elder and the teaching elder, or, as we are more accustomed to say: elders and ministers. These two elder offices were charged to shepherd the flock entrusted to their care. This shepherding meant especially that the Word was administered to the sheep in the public worship services as well as in the privacy of their homes (cf. Acts 20:20).

In the grand scheme of history, this beautiful setup of shepherding elders visiting the families and administering the Word to them did not last long.

## The corruption of the elder offices and their recovery

The early Christian church initially followed the apostolic example in seeing members in their homes. But over time that changed. Elders became known as priests. This is a great tragedy in the history of the church. With this change of identity the focus of their work shifted from the congregation to the sacraments. Indeed, this change came in part because the Lord's Supper celebration came to be regarded as a sacrificial meal which needed priests to administer. And instead of family visitation where Christ's under-shepherds visited the homes, the priest expected the people to come to him for the sacrament of penance. The church kept watch over the souls entrusted to them by making the church members visit the priest to do confession.

It was not until the Reformation during the sixteenth century that the important place of the elder was recognized again and teaching elders and ruling

elders functioned once more in the church according to the biblical pattern. It is noteworthy that Luther was willing to settle for what he considered a purified form of penance and so he never really gave the office of elder its full due. Calvin, however, broke radically with the sacrament of penance and restored the prerogative of the eldership to its proper place in shepherding the flock. Shepherding by the teaching and ruling elders is a great gift from God that he gave back to the church during the time of the Reformation.

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### *It is not easy to be an elder*

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We may be grateful heirs of this legacy. It is therefore fitting to remember this treasure on Reformation Day, for history teaches that this office cannot be taken for granted. It tends to disappear or become an empty formality. One very good way to make sure this does not happen is to have a renewed appreciation for this office and to cherish it.

### **A treasure to cherish**

Blessed is the congregation whose elders diligently do their work! They watch over the well being of the church and apply the gospel to the lives of those in their charge. They are not distant from the people or wait for the people to come to them, but they are shepherds who minister to those in their care. They do it humbly, seeking to serve rather than to domineer as is fitting for those in Christ's service, for Christ Himself came to serve and not to be served (Matt 20:28). In this way elders also stimulate the congregation to their duty to build each other up in the faith. Furthermore, ruling elders are to safeguard the pulpit and ensure that the preaching is sound. And they do all this and more as servants of Christ who have been called for this special task.

All of this means that it is not easy to be an elder. While the office is a great privilege for those who

have been called to it, it is also an enormous responsibility. The Chief Shepherd will hold the under-shepherds accountable for the safety of Zion and for the souls of those whom they have not warned or shepherded (Ezek 3:17-18; Acts 20:28-31). Also, the elders will constantly need to cultivate their gifts and use every opportunity to increase their knowledge of the Word of God. After all, that is the Word of their Sender and the Holy Spirit uses the Word to also equip the office bearers for their weighty task. Furthermore, through the Word also office bearers grow in the Lord. The Good Shepherd uses his Word and Spirit to give office bearers the confidence they need to do their task.

The upshot of all of this is that congregations must cherish their office bearers as Christ's gift to them. Practically speaking this means that church members regularly remember the office bearers and their labours in prayer during family devotions. Furthermore, they will honour and obey their leaders. That's not a popular thing to do in our secular egalitarian culture which has little respect for authority. But that's what God's Word says. "Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you" (Heb 13:17).

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### *Congregations must cherish their office bearers as Christ's gift to them*

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Elsewhere Christians are exhorted: "Now we ask you, brothers, to respect those who work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord and who admonish you. Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work" (1 Thess 5:12-13). And who would not gladly do that? These under-shepherds are Christ's gift to his church!

Celebrating Reformation Day also means celebrating the treasures Christ has entrusted to his people. Elders are an integral part of that treasure. After all, they are his instruments to guide the congregation to the greatest treasure of all – the gospel of being right with God by faith alone in Christ alone.