Theology Matters

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Preparing for Baptisms And Supporting the Baptized

by John P. Burgess

Opening prayer: Great God, we thank you for the gift of baptism, in which Jesus forgives us our sins yet lays your mighty claim upon our whole life. Call us back to the identity that you gave us at the font, that we would be free for grateful service to you and all your creatures. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Martha: Whenever we baptize babies, we vow to guide and nurture them as they grow up, to encourage them to follow Christ, and to be faithful members of his church. But I worry that we don't follow through very well.

Jerry: It's hard to keep track of the people in our congregation; we're all so busy. Maybe it would be better to baptize children after they've grown up a bit and can demonstrate that they are serious about their faith.

Lisa: Frankly, I've never quite gotten the point about baptism. It seems to me that what matters is whether people give their lives to Jesus, not whether they have water sprinkled on their head.

Max: Well, I think baptism is a wonderful way to welcome new children and adults into our fellowship.

In Chapter Six, we noted that the Holy Spirit makes Christ's benefits "effectual" for us. Through the Holy Spirit, we are united to the living, resurrected Christ and share in his life. We undergo a process of transformation (sanctification). In this chapter, we explore the "outward means" by which the Spirit does this work. Just as God uses the visible church to call us into Christ's way of life, so too God uses visible signs, such as baptism and the Lord's Supper, to touch us with his grace and change us. John Calvin noted that humans are composed not only of mind or spirit but also of a body, and that as physical beings we are responsive to material things. The sacraments have a special power for us because they use material elements—water, bread, and wine—to communicate God's grace to us. These physical signs reinforce, seal, and confirm God's promises to us in the gospel.

The sacrament of baptism is of special interest—and confusion—in the church today. Some Christian traditions, such as Baptist, do not regard baptism as a sacrament, but rather as an "ordinance." It is something that we do because it has been ordained or ordered by God, but it does not communicate God's grace in any special way. In addition, Baptist churches baptize only people who have first made a public declaration of their faith in Jesus Christ, which rules out infants and

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small children. This theology of baptism has influenced much of North American Protestantism. Even people who attend churches in the Reformed tradition may ask that we "dedicate" rather than baptize their children, leaving the children to decide later and for themselves whether or not to be baptized. The American spirit of individualism and personal choice may reinforce this attitude.

Other Christian traditions, such as Catholic, have a very different understanding. For them, a person's salvation depends on baptism. A child should be baptized as soon as possible after birth; if it appears that the infant is close to death and a priest is not nearby, a nurse, a midwife, or another layperson may perform the baptism. According to Catholic theology, baptism washes away the original sin that clings to the soul of every human, including newborn babies. Baptism immediately justifies and sanctifies us. This approach, while so different from Baptist theology, has been no less influential on many Americans. People sometimes come to our churches asking us to baptize their babies as a spiritual safety measure. These people may not be sure that baptism really does anything, but they don't want to take any chances.

Other motives may be at work when someone requests baptism. A couple may want to have their child baptized not because they care about baptism but rather because they wish to please grandma or grandpa. Alternatively, an adult may have been baptized as a child but asks to be baptized again because only now has he or she made a conscious commitment to Christ. Or a person may have once been baptized but then fell away from the church and now wishes to recommit him- or herself to Christ.

A baptism is almost always a special moment in the life of a congregation. People take delight in watching parents bring their baby forward to be baptized and welcomed into the community of faith. We admire an adult who stands before us to be baptized because he or she has made a commitment to Christ. But just what is God doing in a baptism? Is baptism essential for a person's salvation, or is it just a ritual that helps people celebrate their commitments to each other? Should a pastor or session ever refuse a request for baptism? We turn again to the confessions for guidance.

Two Principal Means: Word and Sacraments

The confessions speak of two principal means through which the Holy Spirit works to bring people into life in Christ: the preached word and the sacraments. As the Heidelberg Catechism declares, "The Holy Spirit produces [faith] in our hearts by the preaching of the holy gospel, and confirms it by the use of the holy sacraments" (HC 4.065; see also WC 7.088, which adds "prayer"). The Second Helvetic Confession acknowledges "that God can illuminate whom and when he will, even without the external ministry" (SH 5.007). But it and the other confessions affirm that God normally uses the church and its ministry of Word and sacrament to bring people to faith.

Preaching and the sacraments are closely related. While the confessions acknowledge the value of reading Scripture on our own, they insist that we also need the church's preaching and sacraments to help us rightly interpret the Bible. God uses the preached Word and the sacraments to "accommodate" himself to our human weakness, so that he does not overwhelm us with his power and glory but rather draws near in love and mercy.

According to the Westminster Larger Catechism, preaching aims at "enlightening, convincing, and humbling sinners, of driving them out of themselves, and drawing them unto Christ, [and] of conforming them to his image" (WLC 7.265). The Confession of 1967 makes a similar point: "Through preaching . . . the people hear the Word of God and accept and follow Christ" (C67 9.49). This kind of preaching makes demands on both the preacher and the people. For their part, preachers will take into consideration "the necessities and capacities of the hearers" (WLC 7.269). "The message is addressed to men in particular situations . . . [and] should be conducive to men's hearing of the gospel in a particular time and place" (C67 9.49). For their part, the hearers will "attend upon [the preaching] with diligence, preparation, and prayer . . . and readiness of mind, as the Word of God" (WLC 7.270).

The sacraments have the same function: to touch us with Christ's grace in the particular circumstances of our lives. The sacraments "seal and confirm [the Word and promise of God] in our hearts" (SC 3.18; see also HC 4.066, SH 5.169, and WC 6.149). Moreover, like preaching, the sacraments become effectual for us only by the power of the Holy Spirit, as it awakens in us faith in God's promises (see SC 3.21 and SH 5.183).

The confessions declare that Christ instituted two sacraments: baptism and the Lord's Supper (SC 3.21, SH 5.178, and WLC 2.274). The Second Helvetic Confession defines sacraments as "mystical symbols, or holy rites, or sacred actions, instituted by God himself, consisting of his Word, of signs and of things signified" (SH 5.159; see also WLC 2.273). Words and signs work together to set forth a sacrament's meaning. At the time of a baptism or the Lord's Supper, the minister speaks words—words that the people hear and understand—that declare what God has done and is still doing, while the physical signs and outward

actions of the sacraments make the meaning of these words clearer and more relevant to us. Here the Reformation-era confessions are reacting against a medieval Catholicism in which people did not understand the Latin words of the mass and the sacramental signs seemed to function as magical actions (see SC 3.22).

The sacraments, first of all, set forth God and his promises to us. As we noted above, the sacraments confirm and seal the promises of God that the preached Word sets forth. The Scots Confession tells us that God uses the sacraments "to exercise the faith of his children and . . . to seal in their hearts the assurance of his promise, and of that most blessed conjunction, union, and surety, which the chosen have with their Head" (SC 3.21). For the Heidelberg Catechism, the sacraments confirm "that our entire salvation rests on Christ's one sacrifice for us on the cross" (HC 4.067). The Second Helvetic Confession declares that the principal "thing which God promises in all Sacraments and to which all the godly direct their attention . . . is Christ the Savior—the only sacrifice" (SH 5.175). According to the Westminster Confession of Faith, the sacraments "represent Christ and his benefits, and . . . confirm our interest in him" (WC 6.149).

But the sacraments have a second trajectory, as well: to each other and our responsibilities to the world. As regards the church, the Scots Confession notes that the sacraments "make a visible distinction between [God's] people and those who were without the Covenant" (SC 3.21; see also SH 5.169 and WC 6.149). Further, the Westminster Larger Catechism tells us that as a covenant community, we are obliged "to testify and cherish [our] love and communion one with another" (WLC 7.272). Westminster adds that the sacraments "engage [us] to the service of God" (WC 6.149). As regards the world, the Confession of 1967 emphasizes that the sacraments strengthen the church's "service of God among men" (C67 9.49). By drawing us into the life of Christ, baptism and the Lord's Supper move us to seek reconciliation both within the church and in the world.

These insights from the confessions about the sacraments in general help us better understand the sacrament of baptism in particular. Words of promise based on Scripture are joined to the outward sign of water, and the outward sign sets forth and clarifies the promises, so that they touch us more deeply than words alone do. Moreover, the promises attached to baptism point us in two directions: toward God and his claim on us, and toward each other and the world around us. While faith, not baptism, is necessary for salvation, baptism is such a great help to us that we should not neglect it (see WC 6.158).

The Promises

As for God's promises, baptism especially represents forgiveness. The Scots Confession tells us that through baptism our sins "are remitted" (SC 3.21; see also WC 6.154). The Heidelberg Catechism speaks of "the washing away of sins" (HC 4.071). According to the Second Helvetic Confession, to be baptized is "to be cleansed also from the filthiness of sins" (SH 5.187). Water applied to a person's body helps dramatize this cleansing: "As surely as water washes away the dirt from the body, so certainly [Christ's] blood and his Spirit wash away my soul's impurity, that is, all my sins" (HC 4.069).

A second set of promises relates to rebirth or regeneration. The Heidelberg Catechism teaches that through baptism we are "renewed and sanctified . . . to be members of Christ, so that more and more we become dead to sin and live holy and blameless lives" (HC 4.070). The Second Helvetic Confession declares that in baptism "we are regenerated, purified, and renewed by God through the Holy Spirit" (SH 5.187). According to the Westminster Confession of Faith, baptism is a sign and seal of "regeneration . . . and of [one's] giving up unto God, through Jesus Christ, to walk in newness of life" (WC 6.154). The Confession of 1967 tells us that baptism represents "not only a cleansing from sin, but a dying . . . [and] rising with Christ" (C67 9.51). Just as water refreshes the body physically, the waters of baptism revive us spiritually (see SH 5.188).

Still other promises refer to the new identity that baptism bestows on us. The Heidelberg Catechism assures us that by baptism "we are included in God's covenant and people" (HC 4.074; see also WC 6.154). According to the Confession of 1967, "In baptism, the church celebrates the renewal of the covenant with which God has bound his people to himself" (C67 9.51). The Second Helvetic Confession tells us that in baptism we are "adopted" into the family of God (SH 5.186-.187) and separated "from all strange religions and people" (SH 5.189). Several confessions also promise us that through baptism the Holy Spirit "engrafts" us into Christ (SC 3.21 and WC 6.154). As with cleansing and renewal, water helps make this promise of new life in Christ clearer. When we shower or bathe, water covers us; in a similar way, the waters of baptism cover us with Christ.

And Responsibilities

Next to the promises that relate us to God are promises—and responsibilities—that relate us to each other within and beyond the community of faith. The Second Helvetic Confession tells us that we are obligated by virtue of our baptism to "concur [with all members of the church] in the one religion and mutual

services," while we fight against sin and evil in the world (SH 5.189). The Confession of 1967 declares that baptism "commits all Christians to die each day to sin and to live for righteousness . . . By baptism, individuals are publicly received into the church to share in its life and ministry, and the church becomes responsible for their training and support in Christian discipleship" (C67 9.51). Baptism calls us into a different way of life with God, with each other, and in the world.

Baptizing Infants

The confessions see baptism as a spiritual event in which God makes promises to us and we respond by committing ourselves to God and his ways. But then the question of baptizing infants arises, who, so far as we can tell, cannot yet understand God's promises or respond to them. Do those parents who wish to delay baptism of their children have a valid point? Why has the Reformed tradition affirmed baptism of infants, even though they cannot yet profess their faith, obey God, or serve others?

At the time of the Reformation, groups known as Anabaptists (those who "baptize again") insisted on baptizing adult Christians who had already been baptized as infants but were only now making a public profession of faith. The Anabaptists viewed baptism primarily as a way of marking a person's conscious choice to follow Christ and to join the church and its alternative way of life.

Reformed confessions consistently reject this position (see SC 3.23 and SH 5.192), justifying the baptism of infants by appealing to the covenant that God has made with his people.

The Heidelberg Catechism declares that "infants as well as adults are included in God's covenant and people, and they, no less than adults, are promised deliverance from sin" (HC 4.074). The Second Helvetic Confession recalls Jesus' words that children belong to the kingdom of heaven (Mt. 19:14) (SH 5.192). The Westminster Larger Catechism affirms that "infants descending from parents, either both or but one of them, professing faith in Christ, and obedience to him, are, in that respect, within the covenant, and are to be baptized" (WLC 7.276; see also WC 6.157). And because infants belong to the covenant community, the members of the church have responsibilities to them. As the Confession of 1967 notes, "The congregation, as well as the parents, has a special obligation to nurture [infants] in the Christian life, leading them to make, by a public profession, a personal response to the love of God shown forth in their baptism" (C67 9.51).

What if a person falls away from his or her baptismal identity? Can a baptism ever fail "to take"? And if so, may a baptized person who returns to faith after falling away be baptized again? The confessions see baptism as a one-time event in which Christ's death and resurrection are represented as sufficient once and for all for human salvation. Christ's saving work is not deficient. It does not need to be repeated. At the same time, the confessions recognize that the "efficacy of Baptism is not tied to that moment of time wherein it is administered" (WC 6.159). A person who falls "short of, and [walks] contrary to, the grace of Baptism" that he or she has received (WLC 7.277) needs not a second baptism but rather a return to the promises of the first. In the words of the Westminster Larger Catechism, "The needful but much neglected duty of improving our Baptism, is to be performed by us all our life long, especially in the time of temptation" (WLC 7.277). The catechism adds that the baptism of others can stir us up to reclaim our own baptismal identity (WLC 2.777).

As far as Reformed confessions are concerned, the sacraments are more than human rituals by which we attest our faith in Christ and are joined to a congregation (the Baptist position). Rather, God comes to us in a special way in the sacraments. But the confessions also reject the idea that the physical signs attached to the sacraments are somehow transformed into supernatural matter (the medieval Catholic position). For us, the waters of baptism remain water; the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper remain bread and wine. The confessions differ, however, in their explanations of just how God is present when we celebrate the sacraments.

For the Second Helvetic Confession, the Holy Spirit gives us grace inwardly at the very moment that we receive the sacraments outwardly. In regard to baptism, the confession declares that "inwardly we are regenerated, purified, and renewed by God through the Holy Spirit; and outwardly we receive the assurance of the greatest gifts in the water, by which also those great benefits are represented, and, as it were, set before our eyes to be beheld" (SH 5.187). Something similar occurs when the Word is preached or the Lord's Supper is celebrated: The inward work of the Holy Spirit occurs *parallel* to the outward actions of the church (see SH 5.005 and 5.196).

The Westminster Confession of Faith sometimes sounds like the Second Helvetic Confession: As we outwardly participate in the sacraments, God's grace touches us inwardly (WC 6.167). At other times, however, the Westminster Confession emphasizes that the sacraments *point us to* what God has done and is doing in Christ. They "represent Christ and his benefits" (WC 6.149). They are "a sign and seal of the

covenant of grace, of [one's] ingrafting into Christ" (WC 6.154). "Grace . . . is exhibited in or by the sacraments" (WC 6.151). When speaking of baptism, Westminster adds that this grace is not only exhibited but also *conferred* by the Holy Spirit (WC 6.159).

The Scots Confession comes closest to John Calvin's position that the sacraments are "means of grace" (though it does not use this term), that is, instruments by which God the Father through the Holy Spirit *unites* us to his Son, the crucified and risen Jesus Christ. The sacraments do not merely represent outwardly what the Holy Spirit does inwardly, nor do they merely exhibit God's grace. Rather, God is really doing something to us spiritually *through* and *by means of* the physical signs attached to baptism and the Lord's Supper. The Scots Confession declares that "we utterly condemn the vanity of those who affirm the sacraments to be nothing else than naked and bare signs. No, we assuredly believe that by Baptism we are engrafted into Christ Jesus, to be partakers of his righteousness, by which our sins are covered and remitted" (SC 3.21).

In sum, the *Book of Confessions* is not of one mind about how God is present in or through the sacraments. While agreeing that the sacraments "represent" God's grace, the confessions leave open the question of just how. Nor do the twentieth century confessions provide definitive resolution. Like the Westminster Confession, the Confession of 1967 speaks of "representation" without defining it further: "Baptism with water represents . . . cleansing from sin . . . [and] a dying with Christ and a joyful rising with him to new life" (C67 9.51). The Brief Statement of Faith simply states that the Spirit "claims us in the waters of baptism" (BSF #62). Recent Reformed liturgical resources, such as the Presbyterian *Directory for Worship* and the *Book of Common Worship*, have, however, been influenced by Calvin's conviction that the sacraments are means of grace that unite us to the living Christ.

In an era in which we often see baptism as a way of making a statement about ourselves—our profession of faith, our hopes for our children, or our desire as congregations to welcome and incorporate new members—the confessions challenge us to think about what God is doing in the sacraments. What is God promising us? How is Jesus Christ drawing us into his resurrection life? How is the Holy Spirit renewing us?

Salvation does not depend on baptism, yet baptism is God's great gift to us, and we will want it for ourselves and our children. The sacrament of baptism can strengthen our faith, which is constantly under assault from doubt, temptation, and everyday trials and difficulties. When we remember that we have been baptized—as when we confess our sins or participate in the baptism of others—God's forgiving and renewing grace can again touch us and renew us.

Our baptismal liturgies will be strong when they focus less on the beauty of a new baby or the commitment of an adult convert to Christ, and more on God's saving work in Jesus Christ. Through baptism, we participate in his death and resurrection. Baptism therefore makes demands on us. It calls us to die to everything that separates us from Christ. It asks us to work over a lifetime to grow into the identity that Christ has already given us. Moreover, baptism can have integrity only if parents and congregations follow through on their commitments to each other and to the children in their midst. That is hard work in a world in which people in churches easily come and go, and in which church leaders get so busy with administrative duties that they neglect their spiritual responsibilities.

Yes, a church that practices baptism must be ready for its demands. But baptism is not only demanding; it is also wonderful. It is wonderful because it sets forth to us God's free grace—the amazing truth that God accepts us and reconciles us to him before we do anything to deserve it. Baptism teaches us more deeply than through words alone that we and our children belong to God no matter what—no matter whether we or they grow in faith or fall short, no matter what hardships we or they endure, and no matter what other powers or principalities try to claim us or them. Baptism dramatically assures us, in the words of the Heidelberg Catechism, that "I am not my own, but belong—body and soul, in life and in death—to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ . . . Because I belong to him, Christ, by his Holy Spirit, assures me of eternal life and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him" (HC 4.001).

For Discussion

Do congregations follow through on their vows to guide and nurture those who are baptized?

Would it be better to wait until children can choose baptism for themselves?

Is baptism just an empty ritual?

Is baptism primarily about welcoming people into the community of faith?

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Recovering the Office of Elder
The Shepherd Model, Part II

by Eric Laverentz

In 1898, the ruling elders of the Second Presbyterian Church in Kansas City, Missouri, became aware through local media that one of their members, Dr. H.S Lowry had become sexually involved with one of his employees. Dr. Lowry repented of the sin and admitted his offense in writing to the Session. However, the elders of Second Presbyterian Church sought further to set the matter straight between the couple. They spelled out their terms. Dr. Lowry was forgiven, but to regain full *"communion and privileges of membership"* he would have to marry the woman. They made it clear: "An adequate repentance it seems to us can only be fully evinced by giving to the young woman you have wronged the right to bear your name and to look to you for the protection which a husband alone can afford a wife." Here is the full letter:

Dear Brother:

In view of the unhappy publicity what has been given your relations with your former employee and assistant you will not be surprised that as church officers we feel called upon to take notice of the results of your trial.

Recognizing that Church discipline has three purposes to subserve the acquittal of persons unjustly accused, the expulsion of members persistent in sin, and the rescue and support of those who confess and forsake their wrongdoing. We are happy to know that your written acknowledgement, placed before us, with expressions of sorrow and penitence, permit us to recognize you as belonging to the third class.

The offence to which you plead guilty is among the most grave it is possible for a man to commit, being nothing less than the seduction of one whose youth and helplessness should have appealed to your compassion, whose honor should have been defended by her employer, and whose virtue, sacredly guarded by one professing to be her lover. Her youth, her innocence, and her implicit trust in yourself ought to have appealed to your honor as a gentleman and your conscience as a Christian. We believe that, carried away by your passion at the time, you nevertheless intended to make every reparation in your power, when you realized the enormity of your offence. But illicit relations long continued blunt the moral sensibilities and beget recriminations and aversions unfavorable to betrothal vows. That however cannot free any man from the binding character of their obligations. It is not the civil service which constitutes marriage in the eye of heaven. In the forum of Christian morals we believe you to be as truly the husband of your former assistant as you ever can be, and that it is your duty to consummate that relationship by all proper and legal forms if it be permitted you to do so. Knowing as you do that this young person has held herself as absolutely faithful to you as if you were duly married any other marriage entered into by you would seem to us, and to the general public, as adulterous and bigamous. An adequate repentance it seems to us can only be fully evinced by giving to the young woman you have wronged the right to bear your name and to look to you for the protection which a husband alone can afford a wife. Exercising therefore the authority entrusted to us by our Book Of Discipline (Chap. VII Sec.47) and wishing to use it for the edification and instruction, we must pronounce you suspended from the communion and fellowship of the Church until such time as your evident penitence Christian life may warrant a full restoration of Church privileges. Trusting in the sincerity of your (indecipherable) *professions, we pledge personally our sympathies and our prayers trusting that you may profess to be fully restored to that place of public confidence and Christian esteem which you once enjoyed. We offer our prayers to the great Head of the Church that we may be helped in keeping His name pure and free from reproach, we remain yours most*

Sincerely,

The Clerk of Session

Acting According to Precedent

Whatever one thinks of the efforts of the elders of Second Presbyterian Church to impose marriage upon Dr. Lowry, they were acting according to historic precedent and executing their office in a fashion that had been practiced for nearly 4,000 years, reaching back to the synagogue and the time of Moses. They were not only doing what they thought best. They were doing what they thought was their duty. These elders saw themselves as shepherds of people with a sober

responsibility to care for their spiritual health, if not the condition of the souls of individuals under their authority. They learned this practice not only through study of Scripture but also through communal osmosis. It was the only form of elder leadership they had ever known, both as shepherds and shepherded. In the previous edition of *Theology Matters* 24/3 (Summer 2018), pp. 1–9), Martin Bucer's shepherd model of elder leadership was introduced.

Part of Bucer's legacy was to teach this model of leadership to a young pastor whose leadership had been rejected in the city he served. That city was Geneva. The pastor's name was John Calvin. It is his name not Bucer's that would become synonymous with elders. If one had asked the elders prescribing marriage for their church member whose legacy and example inspired them, they would likely have mentioned John Calvin. This essay traces the development of the shepherd model of elders through the thought of John Calvin and Samuel Miller until its abandonment in the early 20th century for a more corporate, institutional model.

Calvin taught that there were four orders to the government of the Church: pastors, teachers (or doctors), elders, and deacons. He described the duties of elders in the Draft Ordinances of the City of Geneva: "Their office is to have oversight over the life of everyone, to admonish amicably those whom they see to be erring or to be living a disordered life, and, where it is required, to enjoin fraternal connections among themselves and along with others."[1]

In the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Calvin put an even finer point on the role of elders:

> Governors (1 Cor. 12:28) were, I believe, elders chosen from the people, who were charged with the censure of morals and the exercise of discipline along with the bishops. For one cannot otherwise interpret the statement, "Let him who rules act with diligence" (Rom. 12:9 cf. Vg.). Each church, therefore, had from its beginning a senate, chosen from godly, grave, and holy men, which had jurisdiction over the correcting of faults. Of it we shall speak later. Now experience itself makes clear that this sort of order was not confined to one age. Therefore, this office of government is necessary for all ages.[2]

Comments such as these suggest that Calvin focused perhaps more strongly on correction of morals and faults rather than a more holistic feeding of the sheep, as shown previously in the teaching of Martin Bucer, Calvin's mentor in Strasbourg.

John Calvin on Church Discipline

Calvin stressed discipline not only for the sake of the individual but even more so for the sake of the preservation of the church. Exercising discipline would be considered until the last half of the 19th century one of the chief tasks of an elder. Session minutes from that period are peppered with accounts of sundry acts of discipline and oversight of church members. While Calvin spent a lot of time providing pastoral care and was deeply involved in the lives of his flock, when it came to discipline he tended to place more emphasis on the preservation of the church whereas Bucer appears to have focused more on individual members. Simply put, Bucer emphasized love and care for the individual. Calvin sought first to defend and maintain the honor of Christ's Bride.

In the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Calvin names three purposes of discipline:

> The first is that they who live a filthy and infamous life may not be called Christians to the dishonor of God, as if his holy church were a conspiracy of wicked and abandoned men. … The second purpose is that the good may not be corrupted by the constant company of the wicked, as commonly happens. ... The third purpose is that those overcome by shame for their baseness begin to repent. They who under gentler treatment would have become more stubborn so profit by the chastisement of their own evil as to be awakened when they feel the rod.[3]

Although the last two purposes, perhaps phrased a bit un-delicately, are grounded in a desire to see individual disciples lead a better life in Christ, Calvin's other statements on discipline seem to weigh more heavily toward his first concern, the preservation of the Church. In his discussion of communion in the *Catechism of the Church of Geneva*, there is a discussion on "fencing the table," which he regards an important tool of discipline:

> M[inister]: But ought pastors, to whom the administration is entrusted, to admit everyone always and without discrimination?
>
> C[hild]: So far as baptism is concerned, because it is now only conferred on infants, there is no room for discretion. In the case of the Supper, the minister ought to be very careful to offer it to none who is manifestly unworthy.
>
> M[inister]: Why is this?
> C[hild[: Because otherwise it cannot be done without affront and profanation of the sacrament.[4]

In his reply to Cardinal Sadolet, who had sought to win the Genevans back to Roman Catholicism, Calvin took

Rome to task for its persistent and flagrant refusal to exercise discipline. It was not Rome's disregard for individual believers that disturbed Calvin. It was Rome's lack of care for the institution: "Where, pray, exist among you any vestiges of that true and holy discipline, which the ancient bishops exercised in the Church? Have you not scorned all their institutions? Have you not trampled the Canons under foot? Then, your nefarious profanation of the sacraments I cannot think of without the utmost horror."[5]

The most infamous episode of church discipline under Calvin's watch was the burning at the stake of the heretic, Michael Servetus. Despite the fact that Servetus would have been executed as a criminal in almost any city of Europe, Calvin showed pastoral concern for him, at whose hand Calvin himself had endured a number of vicious personal attacks. There is also evidence that Servetus *wanted* to be martyred and to that end forced Calvin and the Councils' hand. Visiting Servetus shortly before his death, Calvin pleaded with him to recant. "I prayed him to devote his efforts to asking pardon of the Son of God whom he had disfigured with his fantasies, denying that he had worn our flesh and that he was like us in human nature, and whom by this means he had renounced as his Savior." Guillaume Farel accompanied Servetus during his final moments on Friday, October 27, 1553.[6]

Despite how he is often characterized, Calvin emphatically warned against discipline that was too severe. He criticized the discipline of "the ancients, which both completely departed from the Lord's injunction and was also terribly dangerous." The only result, Calvin asserts, which could come of discipline that is too severe is "either great hypocrisy or utter despair." He also cautioned especially in the matter of excommunication that unless "gentleness is maintained in both private and public censures, there is a danger lest we soon slide down from discipline to butchery."[7]

This demonstrates the multi-faceted nature of Calvin's thought on the difficult practice of discipline. Working to preserve the church need not entail the neglect of the individual or vice-versa. The individual bleeds into the institution and the institution bleeds into the individual. Separating the two is certainly not as clean or neat as one might think. Even Bucer agreed that at some point for the sake of the sheepfold a sick sheep must be removed from the pen—either to perish or be healed.

The stereotype of Presbyterian elders seems to suggest that Calvin's more rigid and institutionally focused perspective became their regular course. However, there is ample evidence that elders saw their duty as more multi-faceted and holistic than many have recognized or been willing to give them credit. We see this sentiment most explicitly in the work of the Samuel Miller, whose work on elders would guide Presbyterians at least for most of the 19th century.

Samuel Miller on Ruling Elders

Samuel Miller was born on All Hallows Eve, 1769, in Dover, Delaware. He was the son of a Presbyterian minister, the Reverend John Miller, who served as his first theological tutor. At the age of 23 Miller was ordained to the ministry and served First Presbyterian Church of New York City for 20 years. During his time as a pastor in New York, he published two widely acclaimed works in church history and served as a chaplain for the First Regiment of the New York State artillery. In 1806 he was named Moderator of the Presbyterian General Assembly. In 1813 he was called to be Professor of Church History and Government at the newly formed Princeton Theological Seminary, only the Seminary's second professor. For the next 37 years until his death in 1850 he continued teaching and publishing in service to Christ's church.

Miller's *Essay On the Warrant, Nature, and Duties of the Office of Ruling Elder in the Presbyterian Church* (1831) is a work of startling depth and breadth which begins with a long apologetic aimed at demonstrating the biblical and historical case for elders.[8] Miller's study of Scripture and history led him to believe that the primary role of the elder is governance and discipline, which in Miller's age was defined as "direction and restraint over the behavior of men in communities."[9]

Miller abhorred the notion that any Church would seek to function with elders exercising discipline without the assistance and guidance of pastors. He writes, "Without wholesome discipline for removing offences and excluding the corrupt and the profane, there may be an assembly; but there cannot be a Church" (178).[10] Second, Miller believed that elders and pastors were to function together as a team, each playing their own role. If they do not, the congregation falls apart. Discipline and government, Miller says, cannot be the job of the pastor only. He calls the very suggestion "absurd." Miller goes further in suggesting a delegation of duties between the pastor and elders:

> He [the pastor] cannot be everywhere, and know everything. He cannot perform what is expected from him, and at the same time so watch over his whole flock as to fulfill every duty which the Church demands. He must 'give himself to reading'; he must prepare for the services of the pulpit; he must discharge his various public labours; he must employ much time in private, in instructing and counseling those who apply to him for instruction and advice; and he must act his part in the concerns of the whole

> Church with which he is connected. …We might as well expect and demand any impossibility … (179).

Clearly, for Miller, the necessity of discipline demands that the pastor work with a dedicated group of elders, if nothing else, for the sake of sheer practicality. But this collaboration is important from another standpoint as well—our sinfulness, often displayed most fully in positions of authority and influence. To hold any minister's sinful tendencies in check, the elders must play a significant role particularly in shepherding and caring for the people.

> We know that ministers are subject to the same frailties and imperfections of other men. We know, too, that a love of pre-eminence and of power is not only natural to them, in common with others; but that this principle, very early after the days of the Apostles, began to manifest itself as the reigning sin of ecclesiastics, and produced, first Prelacy, and afterwards Popery, which has so long and so ignobly enslaved the Church of Christ. Is it wise or safe to constitute one man as a despot over a whole Church? (180).

Miller claims further that such an arrangement is contrary to Scripture, plain wisdom, and common sense. He condemns it in the strongest terms:

> Such a mode of conducting the government of the Church, to say nothing of its unscriptural character, is, in the highest degree, unreasonable and dangerous. It can hardly fail to exert an influence of the most injurious character, both on the clergy and laity… committing the whole government of the Church to the hands of the pastors alone, may be affirmed to carry in it some of the worst seeds of Popery; which, though under the administration of good men, they may not at once, lead to palpable mischief, will seldom fail in producing, in the end, the most serious evils, both to those who govern, and those who obey (185–181).

Today, our ecumenical sensibilities steer us from such characterizations of the Papacy. But Miller's argument for the necessity of discipline and shared responsibility reflects Scripture's deep and sober recognition of humanity's sinfulness. Miller takes this notion seriously and argues for a church government that takes it seriously as well.

Miller quotes John Owen to make his point. Owen called it a "vain apprehension" that "one or two teaching officers" alone, even those who give themselves to God in prayer and study, can adequately shepherd any congregation. Miller goes on to assert that to attempt to form a Church without discipline is "nothing but a preference of our own wisdom, unto the wisdom and authority of Christ" (182). Pressing his case, Miller lists the specific duties of discipline:

> To take cognizance of delinquencies in faith or practice; to admonish offenders; to call them, when necessary, before the proper tribunal; to seek out and array proof with fidelity; to drag insidious error, and artful wickedness from their hiding places; and to suspend or excommunicate from the privileges of the Church when the honour of religion, and the best interests of the body of Christ, call for these measures (185).

Miller has no illusions about discipline being easy work or anything that should be taken lightly. He goes so far to label it "strange work" and an "unacceptable and unwelcome employment." He adds, "We know that there are few things, in the government and regulation of the Church, more irksome to our natural feelings, than doing what fidelity requires in cases of discipline" (185). Even here we see an awareness of humanity's sinful nature; whereby Miller argues that discipline is a practice that should be employed carefully, even with trepidation, not rushed into and handled with great care and delicacy because human beings, especially those in power, are prone to sin and error. Discipline, for Miller, is joyless, arduous; yet necessary duty which the church ignores only at her own peril.

Miller on Church Discipline

Miller includes discipline under a larger scope of duties, both personal and public, for elders. He makes a distinction early on like Bucer, Calvin, and many others between teaching and ruling elders. He is mainly concerned with the duties of the latter. Nevertheless, the two are intended to cooperate. Miller succinctly states the elders' responsibility: "to cooperate with the Pastor in spiritual inspection and government" (196).

Following some rather rough comparisons between civil authorities and elders, Miller explains precisely what this shared duty entails. These duties Miller divides into three categories.

First, is the government of the church, which the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. held as one of the three chief functions of the Session for 170 years: "This body of Elders, with the Pastor at their head, and presiding at their meetings, form a judicial assembly, by which all the spiritual interests of the congregation are to be watched over, regulated, and authoritatively determined" (199). Sessions functioning well in today's context may see their role similarly—watching over the "spiritual interests of the congregation."

Secondly, Miller claims that the duty of supporting and even defending the pastor falls chiefly to the elders. Although this role is balanced somewhat by the session's responsibility, included in their role as shepherds, to hold the pastor accountable, Miller makes a full-throated case for the need of elders to support the pastor with whom they serve:

> And as members of the Church Session, whether assembled in their judicial capacity or not as the Pastor's counselors and colleagues, in all matters relating to the spiritual rule of the Church; so it is their official duty to encourage, sustain, and defend him, in the faithful discharge of his duty. It is deplorable, when a minister is assailed for his fidelity, by the profane or the worldly, if any portion of the Eldership, either take part against him or shrink from his active and determined defence. It is not meant, of course, that they are to consider themselves as bound to sustain him in every thing he may say or do, whether right or wrong; but that, when they believe him to be faithful, both to truth and duty, they should feel it to be their duty to stand by him, to shield him from the arrows of the wicked, and to encourage him, as far as he obeys Christ (202).

Miller's conviction is for a robust team approach to elder leadership alongside the pastor. It is not a blind obedience, especially when considered alongside the later injunction when the pastor strays "to admonish him, tenderly and respectfully, yet faithfully" (204). Instead, Miller believes that the Session should serve as a company of shepherds, gifted with wisdom and compassion, no higher or lower than the pastor—equal partners in the spiritual leading of God's people.

Third, Miller believes elders have the responsibility to lead individuals in their walk with Jesus Christ and *exercise spiritual authority in their lives.* He writes they are to serve as "a judicatory of the Church" and "in intervals of their judicial meetings, and by the due discharge of which they may be constantly edifying the body of Christ." He then goes on to list a great number of specific "Shepherding" duties. A list of this nature and extent would make the majority of today's elders, at least of those with whom I have served, rather uncomfortable. I will quote from this at length because I believe it is this passage that stands at the heart of Miller's understanding of the work of elders:

> It is their duty to have an eye of inspection and care over all the members of the congregation and for this purpose to cultivate a universal and intimate acquaintance, as far as may be, with every family in the flock of which they are made "overseers." They are bound to watch over the children and youth, and especially baptized children, with paternal vigilance, recognizing and affectionately addressing them on all proper occasions; giving them, and their parents, in reference to them, seasonable counsel, and putting in the Lord's claim to their hearts and lives, as children of the Church. It is their duty to attend to the case of those who are serious, and disposed to inquire concerning their eternal interests; to converse with them, and, from time to time, to give information concerning them to the Pastor. It is their duty to take notice of, and admonish, in private those who appear to be growing careless, or falling into habits in any respect criminal, suspicious or unpromising. It is their duty to visit and pray with the sick, as far as their circumstances admit, and to request the attendance of the Pastor on the sick, and the dying, when it may be seasonable or desired. It is incumbent on them to assist the Pastor for maintaining meetings for social prayer, to take part in conducting devotional exercises in those meetings; to preside in them when the Pastor is absent; and, if they are endowed with suitable gifts, under his direction, occasionally to drop a word of instruction and exhortation to the people in those social meetings. If the officers of the Church neglect these meetings, (the importance of which cannot be estimated), there is every reason to apprehend that they will not be duly honoured or attended by the body of the people. It is the duty of Ruling Elders, also, to visit the members of the Church and their families, with the Pastor, if he request it; without him, if he does not; to converse with them; to instruct the ignorant; to confirm the wavering; to encourage the timid, and to excite and animate all classes to a faithful and exemplary discharge of duty (203–204).

Overcoming the Caricatures

21st century Presbyterians who possess at least a general awareness of Presbyterian Church history tend to look back upon the elders of Samuel Miller's age and, with a clucking of tongues, reduce their role to mere disciplinarians, hauling the wayward before the session, who, being the first to cast a stone, point out the speck in their neighbor's eye, or fence the Communion table. However, Miller—and he is not alone—outlines a broader and more encompassing role. *The elder is to have a relationship with the people for whom they are charged to be "overseers."* They are to be spiritual examples, leading the people in prayer and devotion, offering a word or two when it is appropriate. Indeed, if they do not, in Miller's words, they will be "dishonored."

They are to love and care for their children and youth, learning their names, assuring them of Jesus' grace-filled claim over their lives. They, not the deacons, are responsible for visiting and caring for the sick. Miller would have been appalled at a system of church

government that divorced care for the sick from spiritual formation. They are to instruct, encourage, confirm, and excite to "faithful and exemplary discharge of duty." The duties of elders stretch far beyond mere corrective discipline. It entails a broader and deeper understanding of their responsibility for the individual spiritual lives of the people under their charge. In short, they are to be given the authority to be shepherds and in that role they should have the respect, authority, and love of the people. Miller goes as far as to compare that respect to that given to a "faithful" civil magistrate "who firmly and impartially executes the law of the land."

> So every good Christian ought to feel himself bound in conscience and honour, as well as in duty to his Lord, to strengthen the hands, and encourage the heart of the spiritual Ruler, who evidently seeks, in the fear of God, to promote the purity and edification of the Church (219).

Who 'Runs' the Church?

Since the sixth chapter of Acts, the question has been often raised, "If elders are busy shepherding people, who will run the ministry of the Church?" The answer Scripture gives is: Deacons. Miller champions the importance of deacons and understands the biblical and historic nature of the office. He conducts a brief survey of the theology and history of the office before concluding about the role of deacons:

> An attentive and impartial perusal of the record of this first institution of Deacons, must convince any one, that preaching, baptizing or partaking in the spiritual rule and government of the Church, were so far from being embraced in the original destination of the New Testament Deacon, that they were absolutely precluded, by the very terms, and the whole spirit of the representation given by the inspired historian (232).

> Miller laments that some Presbyterian Churches do not employ deacons. Because deacons are not called to exercise the same authority and responsibility of elders does not mean they are unimportant. *Indeed, for the elders to serve their proper role, the deacons must take up their mantle as well.* To this end, Miller outlines nine principles that distinguish the role of deacons and elders. Among those nine, which in general speak to the importance of deacons and their unique role, a couple points are worth mentioning.

First, Miller says, "That the function to which the Deacon was appointed by the Apostles, was to manage the pecuniary [financial] affairs of the Church, and especially to preside over the collections and disbursements to the poor." This is a major difference from how most sessions are structured today. Yet it is our current practice that reflects a departure from historic practice. My examination of 19th century session minutes from four congregations reveals this to be the case, particularly in the South. Deacons, when constituted, oversaw charitable disbursements and benevolences. However, in at least two cases, deacons formed the entire annual church budget and presented it to the session for final approval. In fact, in one conversation I had with a 90-year-old elder and deacon who had served in those capacities in a Tennessee congregation in the 1950s, he commented: "I could never understand why anyone would want to be on Session when the Deacons had all the power." An examination of that congregation's Session and Deaconal minutes reveals that when the discipline function had passed from Session almost all that Session did for the next 100 years was receive and dismiss members. Deacons had the power of the purse and far-ranging authority over the mission of the congregation. In short, deacons "ran" the church.

Today's common practice, of course, is for the elders to establish the annual budget, handle personnel matters, and oversee all the business and property affairs of the congregation. The 1789 Constitution, with which Miller was very familiar, stated about deacons, "To them may also be properly committed the management of the temporal affairs in the church."

Second, even as Miller affirms the necessity of deacons, he leaves no doubt that their role is not one of spiritual oversight and guidance: "There is no warrant whatever for assigning to Deacons the function of government in the Church; and that their undertaking any such function, is nothing less than ecclesiastical usurpation" (249). It is important to note that Miller includes under the government function to be carried out by the elders, the care of the sick and the downtrodden of the congregation. The role of deacons, according to Miller after his thorough examination of the biblical and historical witness, is to see to the business matters of the congregation to allow the elders to focus on the spiritual development of the people.

Advantages of the Presbyterian Plan

Finally, it is important to provide a brief mention of Miller's final chapter, "Advantages of Conducting Discipline on the Presbyterian Plan." In the broad main of the Presbyterian and Reformed tradition, Miller paints the Presbyterian plan for discipline as a moderating measure able to guard against clerical abuse and ambition as well as "preserving unimpaired the rights of private Christians." Against whom are these rights to be preserved? An abusive or ambitious pastor? Yes. But Miller conceives greater dangers to individual rights to be the unruly mob, who—perhaps

led even by an unscrupulous officer—turns against someone who has committed an offense (324). This safeguard exists not only for the sake of pastors but for others against whom the angry mob might also turn. A strong cadre of elders may help honest ministers in their proclamation of the Gospel by calling to task those members who place themselves in opposition to that work. Miller also admits that although the system may be rather inefficient when compared to that of a single priest administering discipline alone, if practiced properly, transparently, and by men of grace and integrity, it is most effective at guarding individuals as well as the larger body. Miller writes:

> Even on the Presbyterian plan, there is no doubt that delay and perplexities may, in some cases, arise. But where the whole management of discipline, from its inceptive steps to the consummation of each case, is entirely committee to a select body of pious, intelligent, prudent and experienced men, accustomed to the work, and aware of the dangers to which their course is exposed, we may reasonably calculate on their decisions being as speedy, as unembarrassed, and as much lifted above the temporizing feebleness or the tempestuousness, irregularity and confusion, incident to popular management, as human infirmity will allow (330).

Miller, unapologetically, makes the case for elders living out their biblically defined and historically supported role. It is common to think of church discipline as an instrument of oppression, and there is no doubt it has been sometimes used, tragically, in this way. But who among us cannot point to a committee or task force or team of elders who has not also fallen far "short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23)? So long as the church of Jesus Christ has human beings within her ranks, no system of government, no authority will be without a shadow of turning.

When properly practiced, Miller believed, discipline is an instrument of liberation and freedom and even a safeguard for individual rights. In addition, in the proper functioning of elders, Miller sees tremendous possibilities for renewal and revitalization:

> Were the foregoing views of the nature and duties of the Elder's office generally adopted, duly appreciated, and faithfully carried out into practice, what a mighty change would be effected in our Zion! With what a different estimate of the obligations and responsibilities which rest upon them, would the candidates for this office enter on their sacred work! And with what different feelings would the mass of the people, and especially all who love the cause of Christ, regard these spiritual Counselors and Guides, in their daily walks, and particularly in their friendly and official visits! This is change most devoutly to be desired. The interests of the Church are more involved in the prevalence of just opinions and practice in reference to this office, than almost any other that can be named. Were every congregation, besides a wise, pious and faithful pastor, furnished with eight or ten Elders to co-operate with him in all his parochial labors, on the plan which has been sketched; men of wisdom, faith, prayer, and Christian activity; men willing to deny and exert themselves for the welfare of Zion; men alive to the importance of every thing that relates to the orthodoxy, purity, order and spirituality of the Church, and ever on the watch for the opportunities of doing good; men, in a word, willing to "take the oversight" of the flock of the Lord, and to labor without ceasing for the promotion of its best interest: were every Church furnished with such a body of Elders—can any one doubt that knowledge, order, piety and a growth in grace as well as in numbers, would be as common in our Churches, as the reverse is now the prevailing state of things, in consequence of the want of fidelity on the part of those who are nominally the overseers and guides of the flock? (214–215).

The Day of Elders Has Not Yet Dawned

If only we could recover a proper understanding of the role of elders! Miller can be admired for believing such a transformation and reformation is possible. *Let it not escape us that Miller believed the day of elders functioning according to their biblically mandated role had not yet arrived. This means w*e can take his work to be, at least in part, prescriptive rather than descriptive. But this raises the question, "So what did the work of elders look like in Miller's day?"

We gain at least a partial picture by looking at the example of discipline cited earlier—from the Session of Second Presbyterian Church in Kansas City, prescribing marriage to and withholding communion from Dr. H.S. Lowry until he took said step. We see in this remarkable letter an intimate view of the practice of church discipline, and gain an important insight into the Session's purpose for discipline, their method in calling members to repentance, and the disciplinary measure undertaken for a repentant sinner.

For the Session of Second Presbyterian Church, to recall, the three purposes of church discipline were: to acquit the unjustly accused, to expel persistent sinners, and to rescue and support the repentant. These do not read exactly like Calvin's three purposes; nowhere is the defense of the church's purity mentioned, though we may assume expelling persistent sinners serves that end. The acquittal of the unjustly accused might be a pale reflection of Miller's warning against an unruly mob seeking its own brand of justice. Perhaps these

purposes emerged from their own practice. And perhaps they were not applied as faithfully or lovingly as they should have been by each member. But what is clear is the Session of Second Presbyterian had put great thought and prayer into the matter, and they could speak with confidence and certainty about their role.

The measure of discipline that the Session employed was the standard Reformed practice for nearly four centuries: he was suspended, not from attending services, but from communion. There is another note contained in the minutes dated March 5, 1899 that explains to a greater degree Dr. Lowry's suspension from the sacrament. It mentions that the following note was distributed to the congregation.

> *Dr. H.S. Lowry having submitted to the session of this church a confession of sin, expressing his contrition thereof and asking the charitable judgment of the Church upon his offense, promising by the grace of God a newness of life for the future, it has been decided by the Session that he be, and hereby is suspended from the communion and privileges of membership until he may by the fruits of penitence justify his restoration to the same. And to this end the Session seeks the prayers of all God's people.*[10]

Unfortunately, there is no record in the Session minutes of Dr. Lowry ever being restored to full communion. Did he refuse to marry his assistant? Did he simply join another church or move away? We do not know. But his refusal to heed the Session's wisdom foreshadowed an unraveling of the disciplinary process at Second Presbyterian. After bringing charges against two members for the granting of liquor licenses, the Session was mildly rebuked by the Presbytery for not considering "each case on the merit."[11]

By the early 1910s all discipline had ceased at Second Presbyterian Church. Less than ten years later in 1926, a few months after the arrival of a new pastor, the Session was organized into permanent standing committees and the minutes record that the institutional concerns of the growing congregation dominated their attention. At Second Presbyterian, a titanic shift in the role of elders happened in one generation. Elders went from recommending not only marriage to a church member, but also *whom* he should marry, to serving on evangelism, worship, and social committees.

In January of 1929, only 30 years after the elders demanded that Dr. H.S. Lowry marry his assistant, worshippers at Second Presbyterian Church in Kansas City would have seen in the Sunday bulletin five "Suggested Loyalty Goals":

* Increase the number in Church Attendance to 900.
* Increase the attendance at our Bible School to 1,000 and the enrollment of our School to 1,250.
* Increase the attendance at our mid-week service to 250.
* Increase our membership by Easter by at least 100.
* Increase the loyalty of every member of our Church—Loyalty to Jesus Christ as our Blessed Lord of Life, and Loyalty to His Church and Kingdom.

The goals concluded by reminding members: "We can do all this by your loyalty."[12] This simple five-part goal suggests the shift from disciple making to institution building was complete.

A third part in this series on "Redisovering the Office of Elder" will discuss how elders can reclaim their Scriptural role as shepherds of people and its impact upon carrying Jesus' mission for the church to "make disciples and teach them to obey" (Matt. 28:20).

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[1] John Calvin, "Draft Ecclesiastical Ordinances September and October 1541" in *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, trans. J.K.S. Reid (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1954), 63.
[2] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 4.3.8 (1061). Hereafter cited *Institutes*.
[3] Calvin, *Institutes* 4.12.5 (1232–1233).
[4] John Calvin, "*Catechism of the Church of Geneva*" in *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, 139.
[5] John Calvin, "Reply By John Calvin To Cardinal Sadolet's Letter to the Senate and People of Geneva" in *Calvin's Selected Works* 1, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Baker House, 1983), 38.
[6] Bernard Cottret, *Calvin: A Biography*, trans. M. Wallace McDonald (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 225.
[7] Calvin, *Institutes* 4.12.8 (1236); 4.12.10 (1238).
[8] Samuel Miller, *An Essay Upon the Warrant, Nature and Duties of the Office of Ruling Elder in the Presbyterian Church* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication and Sabbath School Work, 1832), 178. Hereafter in parentheses.
[9] Noah Webster, *American Dictionary of the English Language*, 1828 (San Francisco: Foundation For American Christian Education, 2002).
[10] Session Minutes, Second Presbyterian Church of Kansas City, Missouri, March 5, 1899.
[11] Session Minutes, Second Presbyterian Church of Kansas City, Missouri; undated entry written in 1911.
[12] Worship bulletin, Second Presbyterian Church of Kansas City, Missouri, Sunday, January 27, 1929.

Returning to the Basics

by Eugene H. Peterson†

Sixty miles or so from where I live there is a mountain popular among rock climbers—Stalamus Chief. It presents itself as a vertical slab of smooth granite, 2,000 feet high. On summer days rock climbers are spread out in varying levels of ascent up and down its face. Occasional climbers spend the night in hammocks (they call it bivouacking), hanging like cocoons attached to barn siding. It always strikes me as a might dangerous way to have fun.

I am fascinated by the sight and when in the vicinity, pull off the road and watch for a while with my binoculars. It is not the action that holds my attention, for there is certainly not much in the way of action up there. The climbers move slowly, cautiously, every move tested, calculated. There is no spontaneity in this sport, no thrills. Except perhaps the ultimate thrill of not falling—not dying. Maybe what grips my attention is death, the risk of death—life dangling by a thread.

Still, dangerous as it is I know that it is not as dangerous as it looks. Looking from the valley floor with my naked eye, the climbers appear to be improbably exempt from gravity, but with my binoculars I can see that each climber is equipped with ropes and carabiners and pitons (or chocks, wedges, and camming devices). The pitons, sturdy pegs constructed from a light metal, are basic, I have two sons who are rock climbers and have listened to them plan their ascents. They spend as much or more time planning their climbs as in the actual climbing. They meticulously plot their route and then, as they climb, put in what they call 'protection'—pitons hammered into small crevices in the rock face, with attached ropes that will arrest a quick descent to death. Rock climbers who fail to put in protection have short climbing careers.

Recently, while watching several of these climbers, it occurred to me that my ordination vows had functioned for the past 40 years as pitons, pegs driven firmly into the vertical rock face (stretching between heaven and earth) on which Christian ministry is played out.

Vows are pegs, protection against moods and weather, miscalculation and fatigue, vision and call, risk and inspiration are what we are most aware of and what others see when we submit to ordination whether as elder or deacon or minister of Word and Sacrament, but if there is no 'protection' the chances of survival are slim. And so we all take vows, nine of them. The sixth is: Will you in your own life seek to follow the Lord Jesus Christ, love your neighbors, and work for the reconciliation of the world?

It seems odd to include a question like this in *ordination* vows. This is a question to ask someone entering the Christian life. This is a beginning question, a vow that gets us started on the right foot. But here it is as number six in sequence of the first eight ordination questions. The group has already been covered pretty thoroughly, making sure that the ordinand is a confessing Christian (number 1), submissive to the authority of Scripture (2), agreeable to the Reformed confessions (3), knowledge-able concerning the office to which he/she is being ordained (4), willing to be a member of a community of peers (5). Three more vows will follow this sixth, making it clear that the ordinand knows that people are to be served as well as Jesus (7), and that this is not ordination to a place of privilege but one of diligent service requiring a lifetime of energy and resolve (8).

Embedded in the eight-vow sequence is this sixth, which doesn't seem to quite fit the context of ordination. Isn't the ordination ground amply covered in the first five and the last two? Isn't a basic Christian commitment assumed? Isn't this redundant?

Yes, But. *Yes*, it's there already. *But*, long experience in this business makes us alert to detecting loopholes. The loophole in this case has to do with becoming so diligent in entering the ordained life of *working for* Jesus that it crowds out the personal life of *living for* Jesus. The operative phrase in the sixth vow is "in your own life."

The constant danger for those of us who enter the ranks of the ordained is that we take on a role, a professional religious role that gradually obliterates the life of the soul.

The sixth vow specifies three areas: 1. following the Lord Jesus Christ; 2. loving neighbors; 3. working for the reconciliation of the world. This sixth ordination vow, it seems, has nothing to do with ordination as such; it is a vow to diligently guard and nurture our basic commitment as a Christian. Many a Christian has lost his or her soul in the act of being ordained. This

vow returns us to the basic vocation of being a Christian, a mere Christian.

For in ordination we do not graduate into an advanced level of religion that sets us apart from or above our earlier status as Christian.

But it is not easy to maintain that awareness. Karl Barth was eloquent in his insistence that we are always and ever beginners in this Christian life no matter how well we preach, are knowledgeable in theology, competent in polity, and diligent in carrying out the duties assigned to us. We never graduate from "Christian" and go on to advanced work in "ministry." Neither Christian living nor Christian ministry can ever "be anything but the work of beginners … What Christians do becomes a self-contradiction when it takes the form of a trained and mastered routine, or a learned and practiced art. They may and can be masters and even virtuosos in many things, but never in what makes them Christians, God's children" (Barth, *The Christian Life*, 79).

The sixth vow lays down protection against taking on the role of expert, and then taking over the work of leadership from the Christ in whose name we are ordained.

Will you in your own life seek to follow the Lord Jesus Christ?

Ordination puts us in a place of leadership. As we become good at leadership, we become used to people following us. They look to us for direction, expect initiative from us, and not infrequently turn over responsibility for their lives to us, expecting us to take up the slack that results from their indolence and passivity. Leaders usually work harder than followers. Leaders characteristically accept more responsibility than followers. Sometimes the followers admire us, other times they criticize us, but in either case we are made aware that we are being treated as a class apart; we are leaders.

Jesus' words "Except you become as little children …" do not lose pertinence in the act of ordination. But the act of ordination does make it easy to use them primarily on behalf of other people. Being childlike is a wonderful quality in a follower; it makes it much easier to be a leader when we are followed trustfully and unquestioningly. But a few years of being in charge of God's children makes it astonishingly difficult to be one ourselves—a child. Humility recedes as leadership advances.

It is a subtle thing and usually takes years to accomplish, but without "protection" the role of leader almost inevitably replaces the role of follower. Instead of continuing as followers of the Lord Jesus Christ we become bosses on behalf of the Lord Jesus Christ. Sometime we are very good bosses, looking out for the welfare of our employees, other times barely disguised pious bullies.

Will you in your own life love your neighbor?

It is a strange thing: the first casualty on the field of ordained leadership is usually the neighbor. The men and women with whom we live and work become objectified; instead of being primarily persons whom we love, whether through natural affection (spouse, children, friends) or by Christ's command (love your neighbor as yourself) they gradually become functionalized. Under the pressure of "working for Jesus" or "carrying out the church's mission" these former neighbors get treated in functional terms: they become viewed as "resources" or as "deadweight," as "assets or as "liabilities," as "point man or woman" or as "dysfunctional." Love, the commanded relation, gives way to considerations of efficiency and is interpreted by the abstractions of plans and programs, goals and visions, evangelism statistics and mission strategies. After all, we are ordained to something beyond and more intense than simply "Christian"—we have work to do. These people with whom we find ourselves placed in a responsible position of leadership need to be put to kingdom work, or at least church work. Loving neighbors recedes to the background as we go about making recruits, lining up allies, arguing the opposition into compliance, motivating the lethargic, and signing up participants to insure the success of a project or program.

Martin Buber, in one of the most important books of the century for people like us, *I and Thou*, showed how easy and common it is to treat people as It instead of Thou. He also showed how awful it is, turning what God created as a human community of men and women whose glory it is to love one another into a depersonalized wasteland of important roles and efficient functions. Buber also conceded that we cannot continuously maintain the open intimacy of "I/Thou" in our relationship—it would be totally exhausting; we need to be able to escape from time to time into the less-demanding region of role and function to carry out some of our basic routines. But the moment that region becomes our permanent residence and the neighbor becomes an object, an It to be used, no matter how righteous and glorious our use, sacrilege has been committed.

The sixth vow establishes protection against letting ordination develop into a subtle depersonalizing (and damning) into functions and projects of the very people Christ commanded us to love.

Dr. Randal Working is President of *Theology Matters*. Dr. Richard Burnett is Executive Director and Managing Editor. The Board of Directors consists of ruling and teaching elders in various Presbyterian denominations. *Theology Matters* exists to inform and encourage, instruct and inspire, members of the Presbyterian family and wider Christian community through the clear and coherent articulation of theology that is reformed according to God's Word. It is sent free to anyone who requests it. You can reach us at 864-378-5416 or admin@theologymatters.com or at our web site: www.theologymatters.com.

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Will you in your own life work for the reconciliation of the world?

The phrase from John, "For God so loved the world...," sets the context for the work in which we take up particular responsibilities when we are ordained. It is a staggeringly large, encompassing context: world. "World," in this phrase, means the whole thing—continents and oceans, city tenements and country barnyards, souls and societies, babies in the womb and men and women vigorously pursuing every imaginable venue for making money, helping the needy, grasping for power, exploiting the weak, discovering truth, growing food, making art, singing and playing. "World" is teeming with good and evil. It is this world for which Christ died, into which we are sent to baptize and make disciples and be "ministers of reconciliation."

But how does it happen then that ordination so often has the effect of pulling us out of this immense world and putting us to work in a religious institution that carries on its business pretty much on its own terms and with its own agenda? From within the ordaining institution it is easy to look out on the world that God loves and redesignate it as enemy, as competitor, as distraction. We who are ordained are then put to work on committees and projects that leave us with neither time nor energy for the world and diminishing interest in it. Ecclesiastical affairs require armies of ordained men and women to keep the wheels turning and it isn't long before ordination, instead of putting us on the front lines of reconciling love for the world has conscripted us into jobs, and agendas that effectively remove us from the very world whose plight is the reason for our ordination in the first place. It's the devil's own work to get us so busy in attacking or avoiding or competing with the world that we no longer are available for the critical and key work of reconciliation, the work of Christ to which we have been ordained.

That doesn't mean that our ordained life needs to be conspicuously on display in the world, holding press conferences and marching with protestors. Much, maybe most, of the work of reconciliation takes place in ways and places that the world itself never notices: in solitary prayer, in quiet study, in energy-renewing retreats, in vision-clarifying committees. Still, at some level everything we do and say, think and pray requires a believing and obedient relation with God's love for the world, with Christ's reconciling work in the world. When our work as deacons, elders, and ministers blunts our awareness of the world, distracts us from the world, puts us into competition with the world, or is simply an avoidance of the world, our ordination is falsified.

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† In loving and grateful memory of the life and witness of Eugene H. Peterson, an ordained minister of Word and Sacrament in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and one of the most loving, honest, courageous, and thoughtful churchmen of his generation, who died on Oct. 22, 2018, we reprint this essay that appeared in *reForm*, vol. I/1, Fall 1998, 33–37, with permission.