Theology Matters

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Invitation to a Pillar Fight

by Charles Partee

Preamble: Beyond the blue horizon an even-keeled professorship goes into dry dock claiming that (1) doctrine unites, (2) reason divides, and (3) bondage frees.

I. Surveying Our Rubble

Let us begin by backing up. If you are a Protestant in the Reformed tradition you might have hoped that the 500th anniversary of Protestant Christianity in 2017 would have offered a solid opportunity for careful reflection on, and reaffirmation of, our family identity. However, the most pious remembrance will seldom recover what has been massively neglected and will miss entirely what has been completely dismissed.

Thus, while half-heartedly attempting to pay genuine tribute to our honorable past, the subtext of many Reformation reminiscences was an embarrassingly smug lip-smacking account of mistakes made by our forefathers and foremothers, as judged by contemporary societal tastes. Of course, bits and pieces—even large lumps—of sixteenth-century doctrinal tidbits float around in the theological soup du jour, but this ingustable gruel must be flavored with larger doses of salts for those more sophisticated palates to which theology really matters.

The major threat to current Christianity is still "Indulgences," but not the kind sold in the Reformation Era. Now purchased at discount prices are "Overindulgences" in all seven of the deadly sins based on the conviction that since God is dying as a force in American culture, if not already dead, everything humanly possible is morally permitted. The current skeptical thought seems to be: "Grab all the gusto right away! You are only going around once!" This "everything goes" philosophy applies not only to Behavior but to Belief. In the old days, when Calvinists tiptoed through the T. U. L. I. P., we started with Total Depravity, which never meant that we are as bad as possible, but only that our greatest virtues can become vices (intelligence used to vicious ends).

Among the immediate tasks for those who believe that God is also to be worshipped with the mind (Mk. 12:30, Mt. 22:37, Lk. 10:27), is the requirement to get into a ferocious pillar fight. In the past we lived all together in a big house with heavyweight bearing pillars set on firm foundations by the magisterial Reformation, but many of those pillars are collapsed into rubble today. Especially sad to see are the once proud-standing columns which included: (1) the Bondage of the Will, (2) the Eternality of Election, and (3) the Certainty of Salvation, involving the Irresistibility of the twin graces: (a) Sanctification and (b) Justification. Doubtless, there are other pillars to bring to the fight, but we once close huddled around this cluster because, while everybody recognized making choices every moment of every day, Protestant Christians believed they received faith as an unmerited

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gift of God. This gratitude for grace should be identified, restored, appreciated, and accepted—not merely by select individuals but across a wide and faithful community. In other words, we need a rousing rabble in the rubble.

Uneasy lies the head tonight that tries to rest on these comfortable old pillars because it is impossible to close our eyes against the blinding glare of modern convictions such as: (1) the unregulated freedom of the human will; (2) a cash-register god whose chief functions are (a) to display the goods, (b) to evaluate what you buy and (c) check you out at the end, also; (3) an If/Then savior who offers you the conditions for salvation rather than the grace to receive it.

Given the boastful and competitive dumbing-down of so much of American life in this carnival culture, smartening up will be no simple task. Still, John Calvin's declaration that persons called to intellectual leadership in the Christian Church should be first-rate scholars (*Calvini Opera* 26, 406) has never been entirely forgotten. Some fine and godly teachers remain among us, although it may take a bit of an effort to locate one. Such an effort is worthwhile because common doctrine commonly unites us.

II. Polishing Our Tools

All attempts at communication, including this one, should be fine-toned. No one should chew off more than he can bite. Thus, having swung a large wrecking bawl at a wide edifice, a small apology is appropriate. Our good friend, John Calvin, reminds us that humility is the foundation of our thinking (*Institutes* II.2.11). No doubt the previous paragraphs offer a fair, vigorous, impartial, and unbiased presentation of my point of view. However, even the dearest of readers could not be expected to agree with any part of these lucubrations until engaging in some serious inner reflection and perhaps a good conversation with a trusted friend. After all, nothing is as touching as the personal touch.

In putting our hands to the up-building task, it is always useful to scratch our heads a bit. That is, on the relation of faith and reason it is often helpful to think again about thinking, to reason about reason. This is both a very old and very new issue. The dream of reason as a silver lining in the great cloud of unknowing is almost co-extensive with the history of western philosophy, which issued in the sanguine conclusion that human beings are rational animals. Perhaps the most sustained early elucidation of this concept is found in *De Anima* where Aristotle argues for three kinds of soul: nutritive, sensitive, and rational. Humans share the first with plants and animals, the second with animals, but the rational soul is unique to human being This view is repeated by Augustine (*On Christian Doctrine* I, 22), Calvin (*Institutes* II.2.12, 17), and more recently by T. F. Torrance (See his *God and Rationality*). The Westminster Confession teaches that the knowledge of God is revealed in (1) Scripture and (2) good and necessary deductions [i.e., proper reasoning] from Scripture (I.6). The uses and limitations of reason was a central topic for the early Protestant Reformers and some of the tools they brought to hand may be handy yet. Parts of our contemporary culture is still swaggering and staggering between the redoubts of modern anti-intellectualism and the older Puritan super-confidence in logic. The challenge for us is to find the proper balance between reason and faith.

The overweening confidence in reason was challenged by those who believed that the heart has reasons that the reason knows not of. In his travels Captain Lemuel Gulliver encountered a rational race of horses that shared their land with a bunch of Yahoos possessing human form and all the filthy habits and vile behaviors appertaining thereunto. The Swift point was that humans are not rational animals but merely capable of being rational animals. The most sustained screed against rigid reason is found in the more famous Charles Dickens' *Hard Times* when Thomas Gradgrind, in apologizing to his daughter for ruining her life, confesses that he had not recognized the wisdom of the heart. More sharply in *David Copperfield*, Dickens' claims of the simple-minded Mr. Dick, "[T]here is a subtlety of perception ... which leaves the highest intellect behind. To this mind of the heart, if I may call it so, in Mr. Dick, some bright ray of the truth shot straight" (chapter 42). Presumably this bright ray of truth can be seen by the "eyes of the heart" (Eph. 1: 18). The relation between knowing and believing is a perennial issue. And ways of knowing and believing are immensely complicated. Too seldom do we think about how we think. I am immensely puzzled by the "three brain theory."

In any event before we skip too far down the primrose path of reason, parts of the trail need to be surveyed once more. Some contemporary Christians might enjoy engaging the old challenges of Hume, Kant, and Darwin as well as the new social and cognitive scientists. A brave and learned cohort might be authorized to don the six pieces of the armor of God (Eph. 6: 11-17) and march off to fight for us in the current "Rationality Wars" since we are reason-ably divided on what and how to think.

III. Raising One Piller

Assuming (1) the desire to restore the theological load-bearing pillars of our noble Reformed edifice and (2) the expectation that our newly polished intellectual

tools are sufficiently sharp for the task, we should pause to examine the blueprint one more time.

Many definitions of theology cover a lot of ground, but few of us can live comfortably today in those huge doctrinal castles set on majestic promontories with sweeping vistas. Our little lives scroll out more modestly in quiet valleys. Grandeur and glory are all very well in their places, but Rome was not built in a day and the Temple took 20 years (I Kings 9:10). Heuristically (a nice wiggle word), theology should be viewed as a humble, human, essential, but second order activity standing behind worship and service. Theology serves the purpose of presenting the truth, and also of protecting the Truth as it is found in Jesus Christ (John 14:6). Thus, theology involves our best employment of reason but it includes the doxological. In short, in theology we confess of our faith.

Even using a functional definition, there is a great deal to confess, but no one can start everywhere at once. To my mind the first column to restore is the wonderful old doctrine of *Bondage of the Will*, which sounds un-American and is certainly counter-cultural. Sociologist Peter L. Berger is probably correct in claiming "modern consciousness entails a massive movement from fate to choice" (*The Heretical Imperative*, chapter one). That is, contemporary society accepts some kinds of necessity and some forms of determinism but still insists on the capacity for, and therefore the merit of, choosing God. This conviction refuses bondage in favor of freedom of the will. Western culture has had an eye problem since Descartes' "I think therefore I am." This mindset is well captured in the famous words of a defiant and triumphant poet: I thank whatever gods may be/ For my unconquerable soul/ [I] am the master of my fate:/ I am the captain of my soul."

The relation between fate and fortune, necessity and contingency, determinism and indeterminism, divine predestination and human choice (consider Pelagianism versus Augustinianism and Arminianism versus Calvinism) has been debated by our very best thinkers for centuries without finding a consensus conclusion. Some of us like to read this stuff, but the real question is not what is fun to puzzle over but what Christians should confess. The answer, of course, is "Jesus Christ is Lord" (Phil. 2: 11). And he said, "You did not choose me, but I chose you" (John 15:16). God's choice of us is God's gift to us. Therefore, Reformed theology insists that human response is a grace-full, God-aided action based on divine love not human desire.

When the Protestant Reformation raised again the old, old question, "What must I do to be saved?" Martin Luther, and his younger admirer, John Calvin, answered, "Nothing!" Salvation, they insisted, is entirely the result of God's loving grace, revealed to us in Our Lord Jesus Christ. Salvation does not depend on our acknowledgement of sins nor our desire to escape from the consequences of them. This sharp, and once defining answer made the great Erasmus (see his *Diatribe on Free Will*, 1524), the later Roman fathers, and most modern Americans quite uncomfortable. They offered a softer answer. "While you cannot do everything, you can at least do some things." This "can do" attitude has always appealed to Americans.

Most Americans believe they have the capacity to choose enough faith to be rewarded with more. Faith thus becomes a kind of work that is dependent on a freewill choice that every person is inherently capable of making. Presumably good Lutherans today choose not to read Luther's response to Erasmus entitled, *The Bondage of the Will* (1525). The church into which Luther and Calvin were born offered a way to God through condign or congruent merit (see note). Nevertheless, Brother Martin was never sure he had done enough to merit God's forgiveness. Finally he came to believe that the issue was incorrectly posed. Human merits are not the means of salvation. Salvation comes through the merits of Christ alone and is the result of a divine decision not a human achievement on any level. Protestants once believed the way to salvation was through faith alone, which is a gift of divine being and not a choice of human being. To think otherwise was to foster pride, the deadliest of the seven deadly sins, and allow it to fester.

Unlike today, bondage of the will to sin was considered a liberating doctrine in the Reformation era. Any kind of confidence in human freewill led to the question of its proper use and thence to uncertainty and thus to anxiety in regard to salvation. Our ancestors believed that assurance of faith was grounded entirely in God's grace and not at all in human desire.

Postamble: With heads held high, human beings come to the insight that the pursuit of freedom is among the loftiest of our desires. However, with knees bent low, Reformed Christians come to the site of the cross confessing the meritless bondage of our wills before God. Wherein we did not choose Him. He chose us. Thanks be to God.

Postscript: Sharp readers recognized a while back that they were being asked to employ the freedom of their wills to accept the bondage of their wills. Granted, this situation presents a serious antinomy to the mind, but Reformed Christians once accepted its reality as biblically correct and confessionally necessary to the faith.

Note: To define and illustrate: (1) condign merit—the

Roman Catholic view; (2) congruent merit—the Self-Help view; and (3) no merit—the Protestant view.

Condign Merit: Roman Catholic

1. When God's sovereign grace is bestowed,
2. An adequate human response is enabled
3. That results in salvation.

God is a landowner who has built all the quality houses in a subdivision called Earth. When, if, and since God comes by to show the houses, you may choose one and God will help you finance it. The initiative is with God (operating grace), but the choice is yours (co-operating grace). I suspect many Calvinists would be astonished to learn that John Calvin thought the idea of "co-operating grace" was a "most wicked idea" (*pessimus error*).

Congruent Merit: Self-Help

1. When you make a small human effort,
2. God's sovereign grace is bestowed, which
3. Enables an adequate human response
4. That results in salvation.

If you want a nice house and make an appointment, God will come by and show you what is available. If you choose a house, God will help you finance it. The initiative and choice are with you. Freedom of the will.

No Merit: Protestant

1. God has created and redeemed the world in Jesus Christ.
2. Which includes you. This inclusion is a gift of the Holy Spirit, called Faith, having two different but inseparable parts.
3. The first is called Justification which means that in Jesus Christ. God forgives your sin. The second is called Sanctification, which means that in Jesus Christ you are enabled to repent and more and more to lead a holy life.

God has built a house for you because God, your heavenly Father, loves you and comes by to take you to it. Then God gives you the deed with the admonition and expectation that you will live in faith, love, and hope with his presence and help. Both the initiative and choice are with God. The response to God's choice of us is comprehended and completed in humble gratitude. Salvation does not rise to the level of a calculated human choice because it is a gift from God. SOLA GRATIA.

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Recovering the Office of Elder
The Shepherd Model, Part III

by Eric Laverentz

In the last two editions of *Theology Matters* we have examined the historical and biblical role of elders as shepherds of the people rather than primarily as leaders of a corporation. The former expression was standard among Reformed and Presbyterian congregations from the 16th century until the early 1900s. Of course, our society has changed dramatically since then. But might it still be possible to recover this former understanding of the office of elder, which is so central to our history, identity, and being as Presbyterians?

In this final installment of this series, we seek to reclaim the office of elder for the 21st century. What would an elder as shepherd of the people look like today? What sort of tasks would it entail? Thankfully, we need not look far for a time-tested definition.

A simple definition of elders appears in the first edition of the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America adopted in 1788. It remained unchanged for 170 years: *"Ruling elders are properly the representatives of the people, chosen by them, for the purpose of exercising government and discipline, in conjunction with pastors or ministers*."[1]

How are we to understand this definition? There are at least four parts to it: 1) "representatives of the people"; 2) "in conjunction with pastors or ministers"; 3) "exercising government"; 4) "and discipline." Let us deal with each in turn.

1. Representatives of the People

A common misunderstanding in America of elders being "representatives of the people" is that elders are somehow delegates to a convention or are elected to give voice to a particular group or constituency in the congregation. This notion derives more from American democratic values than the Bible. Elders are elected by the people, but not to represent the people in the sense of a voting block to guard or promote their particular needs, interests, causes, views, etc. Indeed, there is a sense in which "representing the people" is the last thing elders should do. There are "sons of Korah" whose views we ought not seek to represent (2 Chron. 20:19ff). Rather elders are to represent the people in the sense of interceding on their behalf before God. Yet being a "representative of the people" in this sense is also problematic. Priests are supposed to represent people before God, but the Bible says there is only one true Priest, the "Great High Priest, who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God" (Heb. 4:14). So elders are not representatives in the sense of being mediators between God and the people. "There is one God and one Mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus" (1 Tim. 2:5). Nevertheless, elders represent the people in the sense that they 'stand in the breach' for the people, not to atone or redeem them from sin, but in the sense of being responsible for the care of their souls. Their faithful care, witness, and prayer "availeth much," Scripture teaches (James 5:1).

> *So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ … shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock* (1 Pet. 5:1-3).

Martin Bucer said there could be almost no lengths to which the diligent shepherd should be willing to go intercede for the flock:

> These must be those shepherds who leave everything else and undertake and do everything in order to bring back the lamb which has gone astray, not just by leading it or driving it, but by placing it on their shoulders … They must be those mothers who give birth again with pain and distress … They must be the Lord's servants who will endure and bear everything seeking and doing, with gentleness and keenness, in order to free from the devil's trap those whom Satan has taken captive to do his will …[2]

Reading Bucer's description I am reminded of George Hinsdale Winn, who served as an elder for 37 years (before the days of terms limits) at Kansas City's Second Presbyterian Church. Looking at the records of most discipline cases there, one finds G.H. Winn, who also served as the Clerk of Session nearly three decades. Winn was born in Georgia, the son of a pastor. He applied for service with the Foreign Mission Service Board but was turned down because of poor health. In 1905 the *Book of Order* was amended

placing term limits upon deacons and elders, but Mr. Winn was grandfathered. In December 1917, he resigned from his Clerk duties but was also elected elder for life. For decades, Elder Winn also served as the first option for pulpit supply in the absence of a pastor, only resigning from that duty in October 1925, well into his eighties. He continued to serve on session until his death a few months later on January 7, 1926. A eulogistic tribute to Winn was adopted unanimously by the Session and recorded in the minutes:

> Ripe judgment, calm consideration of the problems, a deep spiritual experience, a kindly nature all united in making him a model elder. His talks to those who came into the church on confession of their faith usually began with "We would encourage you in this step." There would always be mention of the seriousness of the step and of its solemn meaning; but the note of encouragement which opened the talk was the predominating spirit in it. … While his convictions as to what is truth were strong and unchanging, yet he held them always with that broad Christian charity which is able to say "Grace be to all who love the Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity."

Even in 1926, G.H. Winn was a throwback elder. However, he knew that to represent the people an elder must first know the people and must cultivate the bond of peace through relationships. Elders should be close to the people of the congregation, in relationship with them, having a sense of their spiritual needs, struggles and triumphs. As Samuel Miller enjoined the faithful: **"**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.'" [3]

Elders should know the church's people better than its program. We see pale reflections of this today in assigning a dozen or so families to elders to call once or a twice year—often around stewardship season. The great danger in elders not knowing the people is the possibility of the session becoming an echo chamber, losing touch with reality, and fomenting animosity between shepherds and the flock. One elder told me of leading a church through a difficult but necessary personnel transition. The elders and pastor had mismanaged the situation. Communication fell short and confrontation ensued. The elders retreated into a bunker as explosions of misunderstanding and anger rattled the rebar and the concrete. This elder, who was the point-man for the decision, stood at the annual congregational meeting in great fear and trembling as he said he had to "face the angry mob." Looking out upon the faces, however, he realized this was not a nameless or faceless rabble of strangers. They were his friends, people with whom he had worshipped and prayed and visited in their homes for more than a decade. "It was strangely comforting," he said.

Reading between the lines of history we can say with confidence that elders in the past often fell short in the "cultivation of a universal and intimate acquaintance." To be sure, it has always been challenging work. Bucer reminded elders and ministers of Christ's words to "Go out into the streets and alleys … and the roads and country lanes and make them come in." He further enjoins "the faithfulness, seriousness and diligence with which the Lord desires his lambs to be sought must be thoroughly taken to heart and faithfully considered."[4]

How should 21st century shepherds be "representatives of the people"? It begins with Miller's counsel to cultivate "universal and intimate" relationships with a specific purpose. Relationships are the last currency of authority left. Elders are to cultivate friendships and acquaintances that are ends-in-themselves, but are also the bonds of fellowship through which the Holy Spirit works. The days are long gone when a man or woman is likely to respond to an invitation to come before the elders to discuss a personal moral failing. Someone may respond to a friend, however, who has already walked along the way beside them, who knows their children's names, and who has been a guest in their home. Better yet, they may be so transformed by such friendship that such an intervention might never be necessary. The instruction of 1 Peter 5 to shepherd and exercise oversight "eagerly and by example" is the most effective way for an elder to impact the life of another. 21st century shepherds must look for opportunities to build relationships and involve themselves in the lives of people. This is something good pastors learn to do. They seek opportunities to engage individuals personally, face-to-face, eye-to-eye. It is a basic practice that elders should aspire to as well.

2. In Conjunction with Pastors and Ministers

Elders should work together as equal partners in a team with the pastors. Again, Samuel Miller was adamant about being co-laborers. Pastors cannot properly do their job as teachers if elders do not fulfill their role as shepherds. Miller called the idea "absurd" that a pastor could lead a congregation without elders serving as shepherds. William Henry Roberts called elders "Divinely-appointed helpers" in the pastor's "arduous labors."[5] As ruling elders live out their call for oversight and shepherding, it frees teaching elders to be pastors, to focus their attention on preaching and teaching, and to spend the needed time in prayer and study, not to mention raising up new leaders and casting vision—all the things pastors desperately need to do but get washed away in the tyranny of the urgent.

The phrase teamwork is probably overused today, but when elders and pastors do not know or fulfill their God-given roles the church suffers. A key development in the late 19th and early 20th centuries that led to the decline of discipline and demise of elders as shepherds was when the work of holding church members accountable was delegated solely to the pastor. Rather than a struggling or wayward member being approached by an elder for support or accountability, the pastor made a house call. Prior to that time, the pastor tended to play a supportive role as elders were dispatched to make home visitations. The Stated Clerk signed the summons to appear before the session.

Bucer was adamant in urging teaching and ruling elders to play his God-given and Holy Spirit-gifted role. The various and sundry people of God require various and sundry ministers:

> Because so much is involved in the pastoral office, with teaching, exhortation, warning and discipline, comfort and pardon; and for this a reputation, a sense of awe, and an example of life are required; and since the whole of this so varied ministry has to be carried out in such a way as to help any and every one of the elect; every Christian can easily see how various kinds of exalted gifts and skills are needed, as well as the earnest zeal, for the proper execution of the pastoral office. This is because the people who are to be won for the Lord, preserved and built up in him, are not all of one sort and have many and various weaknesses, and also the number of people in the churches is large. Therefore the Lord gives to each one his own gifts and task, not all the gifts to one or two, but will rather that always one should need and make use of the help of another.[6]

How would a 21st century shepherd work "in conjunction with pastors and ministers"? It begins with elders accepting their role to oversee the flock and tend to the spiritual needs of the congregation rather than simply delegating them all to the pastor. Working in conjunction with pastors and ministers begins when pastors are given time to do things they have been called to do: spending time with God, preaching, teaching, studying, training leaders, providing pastoral care, counseling troubled souls, casting visions, etc. Certainly there are times when pastors should be in the hospital or the living room. But this should not be considered their primary responsibility or something they alone are called or qualified to do.

The task of elder-shepherds may look like purposeful Holy Spirit guided relationships with the whole of the membership. It may look like purposeful Holy Spirit guided relationships with a class of leaders, perhaps in small groups, making hospital calls, learning the names of the children in the congregation, serving as mentors to confirmation class members, perhaps showing up at soccer games, or being the first to respond to a crisis without asking the pastor's permission. It looks like elders investing in the people whom they have been called to oversee and thereby earning the trust, the ability, and even the authority to "pay careful attention to the flock" (Acts 20:28).

We need not peer too far behind the phenomenon of pastor burnout to see their lonely execution of the shepherd role. There is no shortage of illustrative and even tragic tales here. But let us conjure an iconic figure: Reverend Elijah Lovejoy of *The Simpsons*. Lovejoy is not noted for his passion or zeal. One episode begins with Lovejoy, a member of the Western Branch of Reform Presbylutheranism, delivering a monotone sermon on "The Nine Tenets of Constancy." The sermon literally puts the entire congregation to sleep until the Reverend chooses between three sound effect buttons conveniently installed near his right hand in the pulpit: ambulance, bird, or disco whistle. A squawking bird rouses the room and they clap instinctively thinking the sermon is over. Later in the episode a distraught member of the congregation calls the Reverend seeking to resolve a crisis with his mother. Lovejoy intones, "Maybe you should read your Bible." The nonplussed man struggles to ask, "Any particular part?" Lovejoy replies, "It's all good."

We learn the source of Lovejoy's burnout: having to care incessantly for one of the members, Ned Flanders. In a brief montage we see a very bored Lovejoy with a phone attached to his ear taking calls from Ned on minutiae while sitting behind his desk, at the dinner table, playing with his trains in the basement, and at a restaurant with his wife with a view overlooking the Eiffel Tower. As the flashback ends, Lovejoy has a moment of honesty, "Finally, I just stopped caring. Luckily, by then it was the 80s and no one noticed."[7]

The solution, at least for this episode, is that Marge Simpson falls into the role of "The Listen Lady" and the attention-starved congregation beats a path to her door. The flock, their new shepherd, and even Lovejoy himself are given new life—until Lovejoy's envy of Marge sends him back into a funk. Although the writers blame the needy Ned Flanders, the root of the dysfunction here is the one-man band Lovejoy's inability to play his God-ordained, Holy Spirit enabled role. The full bloom is neglected and starved flock desperate for anyone to feed and care for them.

The way out is to recognize the Holy Spirit's gifts and calling among many and to free the elders, for starters, to put those gifts to use shepherding the people. The role of shepherding people will vary greatly from

congregation to congregation and context to context. Each elder is likely to be able to disciple or shepherd only six or seven individuals. It is important for sessions to ask how elders can best maintain these half-a-dozen or so relationships for the greatest effect in God's Kingdom. In a small congregation, six elders may be able to cover half the membership in small groups. In a larger congregation, the elder may primarily shepherd the leadership core. Elders may also shepherd the faithful by being good listeners, teaching, preaching, and providing care.

3. Exercising Government and Discipline

Given the contemporary meaning of the word government, we may be tempted to see here a strong foothold for the institutional model. In the 21st century we tend to think of government as institutional: structures, laws, organizations, assemblies, even the Department of Motor Vehicles. Definitions of government in the 19th century and earlier tended more to the management of human behavior. Webster's 1828 Dictionary defines government as: "Direction, regulation, control restraint, the exercise of authority; direction and restraint exercised over the actions of men in communities." Not until the fifth definition to do we get to our common, contemporary usage: "The system of polity in a state."

An unlikely ally, Michel Foucault, renowned for his deconstruction and post-modern interpretation of the shifting meaning of words, wrote about government:

> "Government" did not refer only to political structures or to the management of states; rather it designated the way in which the conduct of individuals or of groups might be directed: the government of children, of souls, of communities, of families, of the sick. It did not only cover the legitimately constituted forms of political or economic subjection, but also modes of action, more or less considered and calculated, which were destined to act upon the possibilities of action of other people. To govern, in this sense, is to structure the possible field of action of others.[8]

Samuel Miller clearly understood government to mean: "to structure the possible field of action of others." For Miller, elders served "the spiritual government of the congregation" in distinction to the temporal or physical government of the congregation. Miller listed the ways in which the elders are empowered to govern: all of them falling under a definition in line with Webster's and Foucault's:

> … the great Head of the Church has been pleased to invest in the governing powers of each particular congregation, for the instruction, edification and comfort of the whole body. To the Church Session it belongs to bind and loose; to admit to the communion of the Church, with all privileges; to take cognizance of all departure from the purity of faith or practice; to try, censure, acquit, or excommunicate those who are charged with offences; to consult and determine upon all matters relating to the time, place, and circumstances of worship, and other spiritual concerns; to take order about catechizing children, congregational fasts or thanksgiving days, and all other observances, stated or occasional; to correct, as far as possible, every thing that may tend to disorder, or is contrary to edification; and to digest and execute plans for promoting a spirit of inquiry, of reading, of prayer, of order, and of universal holiness among the members of the Church.[9]

Where is monitoring the finances? Where is upkeep and maintenance of the building? Where is the personnel committee? Where are mission, justice, and evangelism? Where is the program? Congregations may have been simpler in Miller's day, but such matters still demanded attention. Management of budgets, mission, benevolences, and the building was still needed. But discussion of these occurs rarely in the session minutes of the 19th century. Their oversight, by and large, was the work of Deacons and Trustees.

A distinction lost in the institutional model is made between the "things of the Church" and the "persons of the Church." The 1867 *Book of Church Order of the Presbyterian Church in the United States* makes this most illuminating and clarifying remark, "The jurisdiction of the deacons is not over persons, but only over things; it does not appertain to the government of the church or the cure of souls, but to the care of ecclesiastical goods and tables …"[10]

The *1788 Constitution of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America* lists two duties of the deacons. First, there is the care of the poor and the distribution of benefits "which may be raised for their use." The second duty states that to the deacons, "may be properly committed the management of the temporal affairs of the Church."[11]

Miller argues forcefully for the need of the office of deacon. He states that the office of elder and deacon "entirely different in nature, ought undoubtedly, to be separated in practice, to be discharged by different persons, and to be carefully guarded against that interference which is adapted to render both less useful."[12] But what is their work? Miller says, "the function to which the Deacon was appointed by the Apostles, was to manage the pecuniary affairs of the Church, and especially to preside over the collections

of and disbursements for the poor."[13] 'Pecuniary,' a word seldom used today, means 'relating to money.'

The Deacons' management of the things of the church, the temporal and financial affairs of the congregation, frees elders to focus on the people. With the expansive job description of elders, especially the broad oversight for the things of the church, the ability to focus on people has been made difficult if not impossible.

This job expansion has engendered ineffective elders because it has directed them toward a *product* rather than a *process* of transformation and growth through the work of Holy Spirit. Sanctification, unlike justification, is a process. It is a lifelong process of repentance, transformation, and growth. It is a process that occurs in Jesus Christ and in relationship with others through the work of the Holy Spirit. It is the fruit of the Holy Spirit's work. Bucer testified that the mark of the transformed Body of Christ was its overflowing works: "Such a church and community of God is clearly visible in its distinctiveness; for by its fruits one can know the tree."[14]

The institutional model tends to focus on maintenance and preservation of structures and organizations rather than personal discipleship. One need only look at the growth of corporate responsibilities and duties for sessions in the Presbyterian Church throughout the 20th century to see such priorities.

God's desire is not first or last that His children bear fruit, but that they keep relationship with Him. Tom Oden makes the point simply and powerfully:

> The Triune God's plan for redemption is accomplished only when God's own Spirit dwells in the human heart so as to refashion it. It is unthinkable that the prize offered to parents for the talent of their children might suddenly become more important to them than the joy of actually touching and embracing their children. The token is hardly in the same class with that which it betokens. So it is with God's delight in the life of human creatures made and restored in the divine image. God's experience of humanity is in itself God's delight, whatever their product or achievements or results. [15]

How do elders achieve this type of government that cultivates spiritual fruit, this type that 'structures the possible field of action of others'? Elders can cultivate relational discipleship by discerning Jesus' vision for the church and holding the church accountable for it. This is among the elder's most important tasks.

Leading the people of God in a unified Kingdom goal, rather than allowing 'everyone do what is right in their own eyes,' is key in achieving the unity for which Jesus prayed to the Father, "I in them and you in me, that they may be perfectly one" (John 17:23).

Discerning the Father's will for the congregation grounded in what the Holy Spirit is doing in the community, and then leading the people in that direction through example is a spiritual practice that cultivates the kind of spiritual government called for by Miller and earlier editions of the Book of Order.

4. And Discipline

Elders may also achieve this spiritual government through church discipline. There is an amazing symmetry at work here that reflects the work of Jesus. First, elders lead people in carrying out a vision for ministry and congregational identity in service to the kingdom. This is an important part of shepherding that we see often in the Biblical narrative. But this work must be balanced with relational discipleship, a presence in the lives of people, lest it devolve into mere quixotic ambition. The shepherd must stay in the field with sheep.

An honest discussion of the role of elders demands we address the question of "What is the place of discipline in the 21st century?" The very idea conjures up images of stocks and thumbscrews, fines and shunning, pride and judgment. In an age of consumerism, an era of preaching and teaching so focused on self-gratification and achieving our 'best life now,' we are tempted to jettison discipline altogether. Is it possible for elders in such libertine times to discipline a congregation, or anyone, or even themselves? Yes, it is possible, but only because "with God all things are possible" (Matt. 19:26). And with God it is more than possible but necessary, especially when discipline is understood foremost as *a sharing in the holiness of God*.

Hebrews 12:1–11 teaches that we are the beneficiaries of the work of our High Priest, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit at the direction and out of the great love of our Heavenly Father. This work grafts us indissolubly to God and transforms our communities into a place of outpouring of the holiness and righteousness of the Triune God Himself. Discipline is a process whereby God transforms together His sons and daughters into a collective vessel of holiness and righteousness and the living image of Himself.

> Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of

> the throne of God. Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted. In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons? "My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives." It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

Hebrews 12 comes on the heels of one of the most inspirational chapters in God's Word, Hebrews 11, the "great cloud of witnesses" (12:1). It is a catalogue of the faithful, a genealogy filled with the luminous names of Abel, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Gideon, Rahab, and David. It is intended to inspire the church to persist in their own faithful labors for the kingdom. So also intended is the example of those unnamed by the author who "suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated …" (Heb. 11:36–38). The role of the ruling elder is to embody the spirit of these great saints and serve as an example to the flock, demonstrating the kind of holiness toward which the congregation should aspire.

Hebrews 12 reminds readers of the example of these faithful ones who should inspire us to "lay aside every sinful weight and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us" (Heb. 12:1). We do not linger long with these lesser lights. Our gaze is immediately ushered to the highest example of One who endured much, by faith, for the sake of the Kingdom, Jesus Christ, whom is called "the pioneer and perfecter of our faith" (Heb. 12:2). In 12:3 we are encouraged again to "Consider him who endures from sinners such hostility against himself so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted."

Of course, Jesus Christ is more than a mere example. He intercedes for us while "seated at the right hand of the throne of God" (Heb. 12:2). The great Scottish theologian, William Milligan, builds his argument for the "Heavenly Priesthood of our Lord" Jesus Christ upon Hebrews. Milligan concludes that Christ's presence at the right hand of the Father goes way beyond mere inspiration to a sinful humanity:

> In the Incarnate and Ascended Lord, we have all that the human heart expects with unquenchable instinct and undying hope. Seated on the throne of that heavenly world which is above us and around us on every side is One in whom the human nature has been closely and indissolubly united with the Divine; and from that time onward humanity is filled with its loftiest potencies and most glorious prospects. At the Ascension the goal of humanity is reached.[16]

Most importantly, the discussion of discipline takes place amid the proclamation of Jesus' intercession at the right hand of the Father. We are disciplined by the very fact that Jesus, the God-man, sits at the right hand of the Father. It is His relationship with the Father and our relationship with Him that provides the context, substance, and basis of our discipline.

Notes on Paideia

In Heb. 12:5-9 the word "discipline" (*paideia*) appears six times. The word *paideia* lies at the root of our English word "piety." It is worth noting that rather than "spirituality," which had more currency in Roman Catholicism, the Reformed tradition has emphasized "piety" to describe the Christian life. But the Reformed tradition's understanding of piety derives not from an interior state, condition, or focus as in the Pietist tradition, but from this Greek word for "discipline."

What are we told about this *paideia* or discipline? We are told: 1) "not regard it lightly"; 2) that "the Lord disciplines the one he loves; 3) "for discipline we have to endure"; 4) "what son is there whom his father does not discipline"; 5) "if you are left without discipline … you are illegitimate"; and 6) "we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them." Given the parental connotations we should not be surprised that the term *paideia* refers most specifically to the raising of a child. *Paideia* is defined as:

> the upbringing and handling of the child which is growing up to maturity and which thus needs direction, teaching, instruction, and a certain measure of compulsion in the form of discipline or even chastisement. *Paideia* is both the way of education and cultivation which has to be traversed and also the goal which is to be attained.[17]

In Attic Greek the understanding of *paideia* is the process by which people are educated into their true

and highest form. Our best understandings of discipline typically fall along these lines. Flowing from the relationship of the Father and the Son and the Son to us, discipline is the act of learning obedience and, therefore, becoming grateful and joyful children of God, the true and highest form of our personhood. It is the work of the elders to cultivate, practice, and model this relational community for the congregation—first in their own lives, among each other as the session, and then amid the whole of the body.

Discipline is the work of the Holy Spirit. The final two verses in Hebrews 12 suggest a more hopeful understanding of the possibilities of discipline among a community formed by and filled with the Holy Spirit: "For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it" (Heb. 12:10–11).

The goal of discipline is twofold. Verse 10 teaches that the Lord disciplines us so that "we may share his holiness." Translated as either "share" or "partake" in most versions, the Greek word here is *metalambano,* a joining together of two root words, *meta* (a preposition meaning with, after or behind) and *lambano* (meaning receive or have). This phrase is used infrequently in the New Testament, but the general sense is of a heightened, indissoluble sense of partnership.

This heightened, indissoluble partnership is with the subject of this passage, Jesus Christ, the God-man sitting on the throne of heaven. John Calvin hints at the strength of this *metalambano* when he states, "It hence appears that the fruit or benefit [of discipline] is to be perpetual."[18]

This heightened and irrevocable sense of partnership in the holiness of God is only enhanced by the heavy emphasis upon Father/Son language in verses 5–9. Karl Barth draws upon Heb. 12:10 to describe the sanctification which comes via our fellowship with the Father through Jesus Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit. Barth proclaims that our only hope for freedom occurs through this three-fold fellowship:

> But called by Him to fellowship with Himself, placed in it, united with Him by His Holy Spirit, they are free here and now in correspondence to his kingly rule at the right hand of God the Father Almighty. To their salvation they are free only for this. But they are genuinely free for this. They can look to Him and be His saints in everything that they do in this look. 2 Cor. 5:17 is true of them: "If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature"; and especially Heb. 12:10: they are "partakers of his holiness" and above all Jn. 8:36: "If the Son therefore shall make you free, you shall be free indeed."[19]

This leads quite naturally to the second goal of discipline, the yielding "of the peaceful fruit of righteousness for those who have been trained by it" (Heb. 12:11). Throughout the New Testament we see this phenomenon, most noticeably in Gal. 5:22, the fruits of the Spirit. But we also see the joining together of the Holy Spirit and peace in Acts 9:31, Rom. 8:6, Rom. 14:17, Rom. 15:13, Gal. 5:22, Eph. 4:3, and 1 Thess. 5:23.

However, the Spirit's work is not merely a product. The very *process* of discipline itself must also be a "sharing in the holiness of God" and a "yielding of peaceful fruits of righteousness." Here the church has too often fallen short. My study of elder-led discipline prior to the 20th century revealed instances of elders spying upon church members from atop a high hill attempting to observe some unrighteous deed, fines levied for sleeping during the sermon, and even torture and death. Scripture, by contrast, teaches continuity between the means and the ends. James 3:11–12 teaches, "Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water? Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water." The guarantor of this unity and consistency between the means and the ends is the relationship formed in the unity of the Spirit and maintained in the bond of peace.

This is commanded in Christ's instructions on how to deal with one who has sinned, "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother" (Matt. 18:15). This understanding of church discipline is couched in the context of a relationship, and the end to which we are pointed is the restoration of the relationship. Jesus' phrase "brother" even suggests intimacy. Miller, of course, spoke about the "universal and intimate acquaintance" between elder and flock. Bucer strongly emphasized this as well: "Therefore those who wish to correct and win sinners according to Christ's command will by definition do this with a gentle spirit … and from truly heartfelt love which makes one willing and prepared to bear the sinner's burden … and also to make amends for him."[20]

Discipline, according to Scripture, occurs in a relationship between people that is grounded in and bound together by the Triune God. I have spoken about the intercession of the Son and the work of the Spirit, now we move to the leading of the Father.

Discipline is the consequence and fruit of God's desire to claim a people for Himself and draw them near. The Father disciplines us in love for us and we would know Him or feel right in His presence if we did not learn love what He loves or hate what He hates. Since we have made His sons and daughters through Christ, our Brother, we are addressed as such:

> … have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons? "My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives." It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? **(**Heb. 12:5–9)

We do not possess the gift of son-ship or holiness as individual believers alone. It is instead the gift of the Father given to His "sons" and shared among them. This is what it means to believe in the communion of the saints. The Father seeks for His community to live faithfully together a life transformed by this great gift. It is this gift of holiness which allows us to **"**lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us" (Heb. 12:1) and to become an ever-growing and expanding "cloud of witnesses." Holiness is foremost a gift to the community.

Discipline is carried out in the community at the will of the Father, through the priestly intercession of Jesus Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit. This perfect, loving union, one in essence, is not simply a model for us. It is itself the community into which we have been grafted through the priesthood of Jesus Christ. This community, by the power of the Holy Spirit, forms our earthly communities as we seek to share in the holiness of the Triune God.

So what about trials, asking men and women to come before the session to account for their sin, a provision still made in Presbyterian polity? They are harder to imagine today. Surely if trials occur outside this *koinonia,* they are doomed to fail and do more harm than good. *The important question is not trials, but whether we live together in the community of the Triune God. Here the church stands or falls, and it is to this end that elders are to lead the people*.

The work of the elders, 21st Century Shepherds, is to foster this *koinonia* regardless of the model of ministry. As suggested earlier, these imperfect models will rise and fall. But the fruit of righteousness, seeded and cultivated through the community that reflects the Trinity, is perpetually unspoiled. As elders open themselves to participate in the life of the Trinity via the intercession of Jesus Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit, holiness will overflow into the congregation through the relationships they form—first with the Father and then with the flock.

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The Call to Love the Small

by Tee Gatewood

Every year from Advent to Christmas, Christians tell a story of small things. We often begin with Zechariah and Elizabeth and Gabriel. God is doing something new and the action begins when the struggle of an insignificant, old couple is taken up and used within God's big salvation drama. God sends Gabriel to Zechariah in the temple and then to a small town in Galilee. Gabriel goes to appear to a young woman who may or may not be of the tribe of David. We do not know much about Mary, but we do know that she is of no or very low social standing. She is small in many ways, yet it is through her tiny ear that the great God is inaugurating his everlasting kingdom. And all of this is prologue to the manger where the Mighty One will be made small.

Year after year, we retell this story. We help our children produce it in pageants. We host live nativities and decorate our houses with smaller, more predictable versions. At each step along the journey, we are invited to wonder at the mystery of Christmas that God is with us. Year after year, twist after turn, the call of the Lord is to enter the story and ponder it in our hearts. And yet, all too often, we miss one key detail: that the God of the Bible loves to use what is small. The Lord of creation chooses to use Zechariah, Elizabeth, Mary and the manger. In freedom and infinite power God uses what is small to do something huge.

The fact of the matter is that we tend to miss the medium even when we get the message. We hear the good news that God is with us, but we don't see the small things that make the way. As a result, we tend to overlook the apparently insignificant as we respond to the God of the gospel. We undervalue the little. We lose the thread and fail to look for what the Incarnate One is doing in the tiny. The mistake in reading and retelling then replicates itself in living.

One of the many consequences is ecclesial: we miss the call to love the small. We miss the opportunity to share the Lord's delight in the little. We fail to see the great power of of God using small people and small churches. The result is that small churches struggle because they are overlooked and undervalued. This tragic tendency has far reaching effects in the life of small churches. The pastors that lead small churches and the people that fill them can feel irrelevant. Sessions that guide them function with a mentality of scarcity, fear, and futility. What could be lifted up and appreciated is dismissed from the outside. Inversely, what could be celebrated and enjoyed from within is settled for. In the end, too many small churches believe the lie that they are secondary and are only fit for small missions and downgraded hopes. Both within and without the small church, we fail to live into the story we tell of God working in and with and through small things to change all things.

As a pastor of a small church, I have seen this from the inside out. I have diagnosed the tendency in myself. I have seen the consequences play out among my neighbors. I have felt the insecurity and sensed the anxiety. I have watched as sessions and members are crippled by our culture's tendency to equate big with beautiful and associate large numbers in the pews with divine favor. At the same time and from the same place, I have also seen the glory of God revealed in the lowly, the little and the left behind. I have seen God's power made perfect in the microscopic. I have had the joy of watching small churches bless God's big world in surprising ways. I have experienced the delight of the few being sent out in missions near and far that bear real fruit and make faithful disciples.

In view of all that, I want to ask the question: Does size matter? Are small churches simply failing, dying and doomed, or are they critical to the health of Christ's body? Are small churches soon to be archaeological sites for discovering how we used to do church, or are they sites of the Spirit's ongoing work?

Christological Focus

To begin to answer those questions, or any theological question, the best and brightest among us tell us to turn to Jesus.[1] In this matter as well as others it makes gospel sense to look to the Logos who is the center of all reality and the standard of all truth.

When we turn, look, and learn moving from the manger to his mission, we often find the Savior in a crowd. Using Luke as an example again, we find that Jesus comes back from the Jordan in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spreads. The word goes out and crowds gather in. First, a crowd forms at the synagogue at Capernaum. Then a crowd gathers at Peter's house. At the lake, when Jesus teaches, a crowd presses in to hear God's word. In fact, the crowd is so large and the masses so eager that Jesus gets into a boat to create space for teaching and hearing. Although many are

present as well as eager Jesus only appoints twelve apostles. Still the picture in Luke is of a teacher travelling with a small group of disciples with just a few women who support them all. Here, as in the rest of scripture, there is a narrowing down from the many to the few to reach all. In other words, the way to the all is through the small.[2]

Jesus shows us a way of being God's people that starts small. He also teaches about a way that esteems the small. In Luke 13, Jesus tells his disciples that the kingdom of God comes through the small. The seed that might be overlooked and the yeast that might be underestimated are the means of kingdom abundance and effectiveness. In another key moment in this kingdom mission, Jesus takes a child and tells his 'eager to be great' disciples that they must become small like a child. They must come to value the little, or they will never get in on kingdom life.

What can, should, and must we say about the way of the Lord? That Jesus who made himself small in the manger continues to use the small in his mission. He becomes small, starts small, and calls us to love and strive to be like those who are small. At the least, we can, should, and must say that with this King, small is never a problem and just might be his kingdom preference.

Good News for Lots of Ears

God loves to use the small. Jesus starts small and delights to take hold of and transform what is small. In God's economy, the Spirit can use whatever we offer, no matter how small. That very truth is good news for small churches, and there are lots of them.

The median church size in America is 75 participants.[3] This means that there are about 150,000 churches in America with 75 or fewer regular worshipers. Now, it is true that a majority of American Christians attend churches with more than 100. Nevertheless, one in six people attending worship each week with fewer than 100 other people. So while the media might focus on megachurches, and seminary students aspire to staff them, the on-the-ground fact is that small is not just gospel good, but small is abundant. There are many small churches in our midst. There are many small churches that are just hanging on and others that are just starting. There are many small churches that are stable and still others that are stuck. There are many small churches that are underappreciated and under-staffed. So it makes sense to ask: What are the unique opportunities and challenges facing our small churches?
I have been a small church pastor for eleven years. I started at a big church on a large pastoral staff but then found myself called to a congregation with 129 members on the roles. Eleven years later, we have 75 members with an average of 115 in worship. I love our small church and delight in the way that God uses each of our wildly different members in surprising grace. Through my calling, experience, and my reading of scripture, I am convinced that small churches provide the unique opportunity to build deep relationships, foster life-on-life growth, model intergenerational giving and receiving, and maintain mission focus.

Opportunities to Explore

In what remains, I want to touch on each of these possible strengths before considering some perennial temptations and troubles.

Small churches have the opportunity to be places where deep relationships develop and mature. For this to happen, we have to value the small and the slow and the personal within the larger mission of our Lord. To state the obvious, Christians are a part of something grand, cosmic and universal. As John writes, "God so loved the world." The one true God makes all things and reconciles all things and will make all things new. The one work of God from creation to consummation is colossal. At the same time, the way of the triune God is always personal. Everything of God comes from the Father through the Son by the power of the Spirit. To the very depths of his being, God is personal: Begetting and being begotten, giving and receiving and returning, choosing and loving and sending and empowering are all person to person to person.

Small churches have a unique opportunity to reflect the character and way of our God in a world that is ruthlessly bureaucratic, technological and impersonal. In contrast, small church gatherings are unavoidable face-to-face events. No one is up on the stage beyond the crowd, above and aloof. The other side of that coin is that nobody can hide in the dark of the amphitheater if you meet in a small sanctuary. No one that is old or new can slide in and out and remain a number when you are small. In small churches, people have names, even when they have ordained roles or ordered tasks. The treasurer and the clerk of the session are never known as a mere function. In a small church what you do and how you do it are always personal. The more we connect this way of being God's people with God's way of being and the scope of God's mission, the more we provide a space for deep and slow growth through relationships that can change all things.

Small churches have a unique opportunity for life-on-life growth. Small churches can rejoice in the fact that people are called together to grow together. Here again, small churches have an opportunity to reflect the way of the Lord. Remember that when Jesus called disciples, he called them to himself, to follow him and learn his way. We see this most clearly when we note that Jesus

poured his life out into Peter, James and John. Jesus shared the gospel with these three as he shared his life with them so that they could grow with him. He took them up the mountain and into glory. He brought them into the darkness of Gethsemane when he battled the powers of evil. Over and over, Jesus called these three to himself, carried them along, and came for them when they wandered back into their old ways of life.

Jesus lived life-on-life with his disciples, and small churches have that same opportunity for growing together. Small gatherings allow people to be people with people who have complex lives and complicated days. Small churches can foster growth by sharing life in worship and mission as well as the small details and activities of everyday life. This gathering and going into the word and the world together does not happen automatically, but can happen when we share more and more of life together.[4]

For pastors, leaders and members this means meeting people where they are and moving through life with them from worship into the world and back. Within this Spirit-driven, Jesus-focused, child of the Father-existence, growth happens as we go deeper together. We grow together within the life of God, life on life. There are limits to how many people we share this kind of life with and grow with. These limits are sometimes called the Dunbar number. We can know five people intimately, fifteen people deeply and up to 150 well. Small churches provide the kind of life within these limits without anyone being left outside the circle of knowing and growing. This kind of life-on-life growth does not require small groups or large programs beyond worship when 100 or less are gathered in Jesus' name.

Small churches have a unique opportunity for intergenerational blessing. In this way, small churches can become beacons of light in an age of darkness and division. We live in a moment of great divides. There are political divides, economic divides, cultural divides and social divides. Our temptation is to love those like us and shame those who are different. This often happens across generational lines. When churches are affinity groups that cater to preferences tied to experience, nothing in our common life brings together young and old, middle age and millenial. But in small churches, people are typically people before they are an age cohort. The youth might tend to flock together, but rarely is a there a large group of independent and isolated 20 somethings in a gathering of 77 people. As a result, small churches have the opportunity to be places where wisdom is passed down, and energy is shared up. Small churches can create the kind of communities where people of different generations sing, study, and sacrifice together and, along the way, discover that our stories, salvation, and strengths are better together.

Small churches have the opportunity to stay focused and have a big impact through clearly defined missions. Big churches often have big buildings and big budgets and the amazing opportunity to meet the needs of many people. Small churches rarely have all those gifts that can tempt us to think that we should be all things to all people. Small churches that remain personal and provide people space to grow together throughout all of life also have opportunities to do a few things well. Small churches can move from worship to service directly without the need to create programs or processes or provide large sums of money. Small churches can love their neighbors and be the hands and feet of Jesus, even if they only touch a few people. This kind of mission clarity and immediacy is something the church to be able to care for the hurting world that is right next door.

Honest Conversation

Small churches have amazing potential in God's mission to make all things new. At the same time, small churches can have big problems. There is the possibility that one or two people or a single family can control, limit, or ruin a small church. In a small church, things are always personal, and this reality cuts both ways. In a small church, people also know each other, which can include their past as well as their family tendencies and tragedies. As a result, growth together can require more vulnerability and forgiveness. In addition, growing into something new is hard if we have never done it that way before and the way we have always done was passed on by Uncle Floyd and Grandma Julie. Intergenerational sin and stubbornness are as real as intergenerational fellowship. Lastly, mission drift knows no limits. Churches of any size can lose focus of their mission or or even their ability to recognize that they have a part to play in God's mission.

On top of these problems, there is a ubiquitous lack of money. Many small churches struggle to pay the bills. It is expensive to own a building and keep up the grounds. It costs a significant amount of money to be a part of a denomination, especially if they require ordained staff to contribute to a pension plan and pay health care cost for an ever-aging clergy population. But here the problem is more often than not with generosity and not with God's provision. One in five Christians in America literally gives nothing to no one at any time. Of Presbyterians who attend church—big or small—at least twice a month, 34% give nothing. The average American Christian gives 2.9 percent while the median amount is .62 of a percent.[5] Small churches, like big churches, often have big problems with stewardship and generosity. However, in a small church the impact of greed is direct, immediate, and personal.

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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One of those consequences is the problem of calling and keeping clergy. In a world of bigger is better, there is a temptation for pastors to want to move up and move on. Ministerial careerism has real effects on small churches that can become test sites for personal ambition and temporary stops along the way up. The long term effect of this on churches can be diminished expectations and the reduced hope of just filling the pulpit as you just barely survive.

Back to the Gospel

The answer to all these problems is the reformation's recurring answer: return to the gospel. Nothing transforms stingy hearts like the gospel of a generous God who gives his Son in life and death for his people. Nothing opens our pocket books like the an openness to the Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead. Nothing brings us back to a faithful appreciation of the small, mundane, particular and beautiful like hearing the gospel. Knowing this, we need to read the story more carefully noting the small details within the great drama so that we can live more fully and faithfully. In sum, nothing sets us free to be the church-large or small-like hearing the story of how the triune God works in all things for the good of those who love him.

Preaching, praying, living and sharing the gospel with a church community are no small tasks, but they are things to which we are called. Part of that call includes a return to the basic gospel truth that God loves to use what is small, including the small church.

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[1] Most decisively and thoroughly discussed in Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/1, trans. G.W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956), 16ff.

[2] Lesslie Newbigin most clearly articulates that the narrowing down and choosing of a few is always in service of the many. See *The Gospel in a Pluralist Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 80–88.

[3] Mark Chaves, Shawna L. Anderson, and Alison Eagle, Durham, NC, Duke University, Department of Sociology: *National Congregations Study*, 2014. Cumulative data file and codebook. www.http://www.thearda.com/Archive/Files/Descriptions/NCSIII

[4] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (New York: Harper & Row, 1954). *Life Together* is the classic vision statement for this kind of shared life.

[5] Christian Smith, *Passing the Plate: Why American Christians Don't Give Away More Money* (New York: Oxford Unversity Press, 2008).