

Electing Elders

Deuteronomy 1:5–16; Acts 14:21–28

Today we are holding an election for the office of ruling elder. Ruling elder, along with minister of the Word and deacon, is one of three continuing offices in Christ's church. This is a momentous day for our congregation. Why do we hold an election? Is it something the Bible specifies? The purpose of this sermon is to give the biblical basis for electing elders. As we shall see, this is not a mere formality or procedural matter. The office of ruling elder is a spiritual office. Hebrews teaches: "Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account." The care of souls is a spiritual office. When those who are in covenant with Christ voluntarily submit to the elders' spiritual oversight according to the Word of God, the whole covenant community enjoys God's blessing, and his name is glorified.

In our Old Testament text Moses—now 120 years old—is giving final instructions to the covenant people before his death. He recalls the time, forty years before, when his father-in-law, Jethro, came to visit him. This was just days after the LORD parted the waters of the Red Sea, allowing Israel to escape as the Egyptian armies drowned in the rushing waters—a clear miracle! Moses recalls that his father-in-law observed him as he sat to judge the people. They stood in line all day, waiting their turn to come before his court. No doubt there were many at the end of the day who had to be turned away for lack of time.

Jethro asked, "What is this thing that you are doing for the people? Why do you sit alone, and all the people stand around you from morning till evening?" Moses answered: "Because the people come to inquire of God. When they have a difficulty, they come to me, and I judge between one and another; and I make known the statutes of God and His laws." Jethro responded: "The thing that you do is not good. Both you and the people will surely wear yourselves out. For this job is too much for you; you are not able to perform it by yourself alone." Sage advice! Moses appointed leaders of thousands, leaders of hundreds, leaders of fifties, leaders of tens—essentially a system of graded courts which could handle the smaller, day-to-day matters, while the greater, more difficult matters could be appealed to Moses. This arrangement would serve Israel well.

Fast forward forty years. Moses tells the new generation that will go in and take possession of the Promised Land: "How can I alone bear your problems and your burdens and your complaints? Choose wise, understanding, and knowledgeable men from among your tribes, and I will make them heads over you." The people agree, so again, Moses took wise and knowledgeable men and made them heads over the people—leaders of thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens, and officers for the twelve tribes.

Notice, the *people* were to choose wise, understanding, and knowledgeable men, and *Moses* would make them heads over the people. The word for “make” in the original can be rendered *appoint*. Note the pattern: Moses did *not* force leaders upon the people; rather, the *people* chose leaders that they trusted, then Moses, as God’s representative, formally appointed them on God’s behalf. Once they were installed in office, then they had authority over the people. That, as we shall see, is precisely the pattern that is followed in the New Testament as well. The elder is elected by the people—what session proposes our congregation do today—and ordained and installed by the session (the ordination and installation service to take place, Lord willing, January 11, if the ruling elder candidate is elected).

So what does the New Testament teach regarding electing elders? For this we turn to our text in Acts 14, where we read of the apostle Paul’s fruitful ministry in Derbe. After he and Barnabas left Derbe, the missionary duo returned to the cities where they had previously evangelized—Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch—“strengthening the souls of the disciples, exhorting them to continue in the faith.” Luke specifically mentions that this ministry involved “appointing elders in every church.”

This is the apostolic pattern. *Every* church needed elders—plural! Every church! This pattern has never been overturned. It remains binding upon all churches in every generation. It should be said that the local congregations’ being under the oversight of elders is a continuation of the Old Testament pattern. Old Testament Israel was spiritually overseen by elders as well. I pointed out in a recent sermon that the phrase “the elders of Israel” is a common expression in the Old Testament, occurring some 33 times.

Among the last words of David is this aphorism: “He that ruleth over men must be *just*, ruling in the fear of God” (2 Sam. 23:3). Note well: civil and religious rulers must be men of good character: “just”—*God himself is just!* Rulers must exhibit the character of God himself. Human rulers inevitably fall short; only the incarnate Son of God meets this impossibly-hard standard, but human rulers should be men of integrity who sincerely aim at this standard.

This illustrates humanity’s need for the Gospel: not one of us measures up to God’s perfect standard, so each one of us stands in need of two things: first, our sins to be forgiven, and second, the imputation of the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ. The only way to heaven is through Jesus Christ. If you feel you can personally merit heaven, then you are lost and without hope. Believe in Christ, the risen Savior, and you will be saved!

“He that ruleth over men must be just, ruling in the fear of God.” Note that all human rulers must *rule in the fear of God*—that is, the true God, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. If churches and governments followed this rule, they would experience God’s blessing, and society would flourish. But to not

follow this principle is a curse—yes, a curse! Listen to God’s words given by the prophet Isaiah: “As for my people, *children* are their oppressors, and *women* rule over them. O my people, they which lead thee cause thee to err, and destroy the way of thy paths” (Isa. 3:12). Just to quote this verse in our present-day egalitarian climate is controversial—but it should not be! Even some professing Christians might be offended. Women pastors of some churches are surely offended! But remember, this is God himself speaking, warning his people that when children and women are in positions of rule, that is a curse. If societies—churches, civil governments—want to be blessed, then they need to follow God’s rules! Those who love Christ love to submit to his lordship. The Christian attitude is: “I delight to do thy will, O my God.” New Christians should never be prematurely promoted to positions of leadership, and women should not rule. Ironically, women can have a far greater influence on church and society by influencing their husbands and church elders—helping them to see the issues, encouraging them to stand up for God’s truth. That is God’s way.

But remember, every church needs *elders* (plural): elders who “rule well” (1 Tim. 5:17). No church should have *no* elders, or only *one* elder. Appointing “elders” (plural) in every church” does *not* mean appointing *no* elder, or appointing *an* elder (singular). The text clearly says: “appointing elders in every church.” Under Paul and Barnabas’s leadership, the members of the newly-planted churches in Lystra, Iconium and Antioch appointed elders (plural) in their churches. That was not an aberration, nor was it simply an accommodation to first-century thinking. It was not just a temporary measure; rather, it was a pattern for all time. If you are attending a church that has *zero* elders or *one* elder, then have them listen to this sermon. Do everything in your power to persuade the church to bring their polity (a fancy name for a form of government) into conformity with that taught in Scripture. If the leaders resolutely will not change, then seek out a more faithful church.

But let’s take a closer look at the heart of our New Testament text: Acts 14:23, “So when they had *appointed* elders in every church, and prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.” As I pointed out in a recent sermon, the word for “appointed” in the original Greek is χειροτονέω, and literally means *to stretch out the hand, to vote by stretching out the hand*.¹ This verb occurs twice in the New Testament: here in Acts 14:23, and again in 2 Corinthians 8:19 (“the brother . . . who was . . . *chosen* [same word] by the churches to travel with us with this gift”). The 2 Corinthians text references votes taken in a number of local churches to choose a reputable, trustworthy man to accompany the apostle Paul and carry the large monetary gift sacrificially given by

¹ For a helpful summary of the meaning of χειροτονέω, as well as practical implications for churches today, see <https://biblehub.com/greek/5500.htm> (accessed 12-12-25)

the churches to help the poor, suffering saints in Jerusalem. Remember, there were no checking accounts or electronic transfers then. Money was precious metals—silver and gold (as it should be). It was heavy and bulky, and to carry a lot of it was dangerous—setting up oneself for attack by bandits or highwaymen who could sniff out rich travelers carrying a fortune.

The other day I saw that the State Department has issued a travel advisory for a popular tourist destination in the Caribbean. It warns that most crimes against foreigners are crimes of opportunity such as pickpocketing and purse snatchings. Such crimes can occur in crowded outdoor shopping areas, beaches and other tourist spots, as well as near ATMs. The travel advisory cautioned against displaying signs of wealth such as wearing expensive jewelry or watches.

Good advice, because the heart of man in rebellion against God seeks to violate the eighth commandment, “Thou shalt not steal.” Evildoers consider the odds of getting away with a crime. They figure that if they can get away with it on earth, they’ll get away with it before the throne of God at the last day—but of course such a hope is vain. Justice should be speedy and sure. Ecclesiastes warns that “When the sentence for a crime is not speedily executed, the hearts of men become fully set on doing evil.”²

The churches of Corinth wanted to ensure that their monetary gift reached the poor saints in Jerusalem. The man they chose must be honest and capable, understanding the demands and dangers of his task. It would be unwise for Paul himself to choose the man; rather, the churches would decide who would carry their gift. Everything would be above board. Paul would write: “We want to avoid any criticism of the way we administer this liberal gift” (2 Cor. 8:20 NIV).

So to summarize up to this point: our Old Testament text establishes the principle that the people would choose spiritual and civil leaders who would be formally appointed by Moses, acting as God’s representative. In our New Testament text the members of the churches would choose their ruling elders, voting by stretching out the hand (χειροτονέω)—an in-person, public selection of the men in whom the local congregation had confidence. Such men would then be ordained by the laying on of hands and installed by corporate prayer into the office of ruling elder. To ordain is to invest with ministerial authority by the laying on of hands. Two New Testament texts teach us about ordination and installation.

The first is Acts 13, beginning at verse 1 (turn with me), where we read: “Now in the church that was at Antioch there were certain prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. As they ministered to the Lord and fasted, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Now separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work

² Eccl. 8:11 Berean Standard Bible

to which I have called them.’ Then, having fasted and prayed, and laid hands on them, they sent them away.” Here were the preachers and teachers of the church in Antioch—ministers of the Word. As they met together to pray and fast together, the Holy Spirit instructed them. Remember, this took place before the completion of the canon of Scripture. The New Testament was not yet completed. So the Holy Spirit “said,” “Separate to me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” The group obeyed. Having fasted and prayed, they laid hands on them, and sent them away. It is reasonable to see this as happening in a public meeting with the whole church in attendance, rather than in a staff meeting. Why would the ministers want to keep such a blessing all to themselves?

The ordination of Barnabas and Paul follows the Old Testament pattern. We read in Numbers 7:18ff. that “the LORD said to Moses, ‘Take Joshua the son of Nun, a man in whom is the Spirit, and *lay your hand on him*. Make him stand before Eleazar the priest and all the congregation, and you shall *commission* him in their sight. You shall *invest him with some of your authority*, that all the congregation of the people of Israel may obey.’” Just as Joshua received the laying on of hands by Moses, so Paul and Barnabas received the laying on of hands by the ministers of Antioch. The laying on of hands symbolized a commissioning and investiture with ministerial authority.

The other New Testament text that teaches us about ordination and installation is 1 Timothy 5:22, where Paul instructs his protégé, “Do not lay hands on anyone hastily, nor share in other people’s sins; keep yourself pure.” This word of instruction, given to a younger pastor, indicates that the laying on of hands is a perpetual ordinance in the church. As new ruling elders are chosen by the people, it is appropriate that they be ordained into office. As they carry out the functions of their office, they do so on behalf of Christ, who calls them. They are formally appointed to serve on God’s behalf. They, along with the ministers of the Word, rule in the church, opening the gates of the Kingdom of Heaven to the penitent and closing them to the impenitent—always in accord with the clear principles of God’s Word.

This does not prove that some members of the church are more equal and valuable than others. As Paul clarifies elsewhere, “the eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you’; nor again the head to the feet, ‘I have no need of you.’ No, much rather, those members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary” (1 Cor. 12:21ff.). *Every* member of the local church is necessary! Let us never forget that.

Our wise heavenly Father has endowed humans with different gifts and abilities. Man is a social creature and tends to organize in mutually-beneficial ways, each person specializing in tasks for which he is naturally suited, so that both the organization and the individual benefit. This can be seen right from the

beginning. God placed Adam in the Garden to work it and to keep it. He gave him a wife to be a companion and helper to her husband. This differentiation of gifts and roles is part of the genius of marriage. Husband and wife can accomplish more together than they could separately. Both husband and wife benefit. Adam could concentrate on his work as caretaker of the Garden, while Eve could concentrate on making their home a pleasant, welcoming place. Both husband and wife could eat the fruit that Adam cultivated and harvested, and Eve prepared; both husband and wife would enjoy loving companionship and a pleasant home environment. Both would benefit from their partner's perspective and opinions. Adam would function as spiritual leader in the home and shepherd his wife. As Eve submitted to her husband, she would flourish. This division of roles or division of labor is designed to reflect the relationship between Christ and the church, promoting harmony and unity within the body.

Some roles, such as those of ministers of the Word and ruling elders, are more public than others. Some members of the body are better suited for these public roles. Holding such an office is an honor, but criticism can be greater as well. Other roles, such as that of individual member, are more private. Yet think of the influence of an older woman who faithfully upholds her spiritual family in prayer! She may never be recognized publicly—probably, she does not even want that. But the Lord sees what she does on behalf of the body, and she will never lose her reward. Jesus said: “thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly.”³

Ideally, in the business world, every person works at a job that he loves. So it should be in church. The body is benefitted as every member works at a job that he or she loves. Every job will be rewarded at the last day.

What is the spiritual significance of electing elders? It is this: as a congregation votes to elect pastors or ruling elders, the congregation is committing itself to submit to its officers in the Lord. When many of you joined this church, you knew who the pastors and ruling elders were. You had evaluated their ministry, their personal lives and their character and had concluded that the leaders of this church were godly men, seeking to lead this congregation in a godly way according to God's holy Word. Today, as you vote to elect a new ruling elder, your positive vote is an affirmation that you believe the man examined and certified by the session to be a godly man, of good character, loving his wife as Christ loves the church, apt to teach, teaching his own son the Christian faith, seeking the glory of God in his personal and public dealings. Your positive vote is also an affirmation that you will continue to submit in the Lord to the government of this church—a government

³ Matt. 6:6

enlarged and strengthened by the addition of a new ruling elder. Christ is visibly building his church, and we all benefit.

Let us pray for today's election, that God, through his church, would reveal his will for the body, and that the decision made today would redound to the glory of our triune God. Amen.