

1 Samuel 16:1-13, Matthew 7:15-28

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"Eldership is the secret sauce of the Reformed church."

You see, there are a myriad of ways to structure a congregation of God's people. You can gather in people's homes - 10 or 15 or 30, or whatever the size of the space allows. We hear of these churches in the New Testament meeting in the homes of Lydia, Priscilla and Aquilla, Philemon, and others.

Or you can have priests like the tribe of Levi, and bishops who oversee these priests. The New Testament calls them "episkopas" from which we get the English word Episcopalian. When the organization grows, and grows, and grows, you need new levels of oversight that spawn archbishops and primates, and in some structures, cardinals and even a pope.

Over the course of church history, this system began to dominate and it was tempting for power, authority, and wealth to become concentrated in a small group and a few roles. A phenomenon that the reformers of the 16th Century called tyrannical.

So as they sought to reform the church, they lifted up the concept of "presbuteros" the Greek word in Acts that gives us our name Presbyterian, which means elders.

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Elders were appointed as far back as the Hebrew tribes of Israel, and 1st century synagogues had elders who were responsible for making decisions on behalf of the community. Rather than a clergy dominated structure of paid professionals, the reformers emphasized circles where many people participate.

Stephen Hays, in his widely circulated booklet "Eldership in Today's Church" explains that on our best days, authority in the church through eldership flows up and down. "The PCC gives Church members significant participation in decision making....Authority rises from the individual congregation through a system of church courts. However, in another sense, authority is from the top down. Every elder and every church court serves Christ and seeks God's will. The upward movement is balanced by the downward movement as church courts attempt to seek God's will through the collective decisions they make." (p11)

So we have not elected our elders as a representative democracy. We've asked them to undertake to determine together God's will, believing, not that Session or Presbytery or General Assembly will always get it right, but that God is faithful. And eldership in the church conducted in faithfulness, will be pliable to the correcting, shaping, and reforming of the Holy Spirit.

Which brings us to the task of who will serve as elders among us?

The reading from Samuel reminds us that we aren't to choose leaders by their outward characteristics. Samuel thought Eliab was chosen for leadership because of his appearance and his height of stature -

both prized characteristics in ancient Israel. Though I contend it is a good looking group that leads at St. John's, I am glad, at 5' 5", that height isn't the outward sign of God's call.

And though we laugh, we can be just as prone to look upon outside characteristics - what occupational prestige does a person carry, is there family pedigree? Do they have wealth to be able to be generous givers? Do we value those who are gregarious, directive, athletic, charismatic, or funny?

While any of such characteristics *can* be offered in faithfulness to God's will, God corrects Samuel to not measure fitness for leadership by outward traits. *"for the LORD does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart."*

God sees past any pretense of godliness, or facade of religiosity. Our submission to God and acceptance of Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour is not just words, but lived in the way that belief and faith have become trust - the risk and response of the whole person to God. (Hays p7) Not lip service, but life service.

Which changes us on the inside. Repentance, Gentleness, Loving our neighbour and enemy, Patience, self-control. God shapes, and reshapes our hearts.

It's what Jesus is concerned about in his teaching on leadership in the passage we read from chapter seven of Matthew's gospel.

You will know them by their fruits

Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven...

...hears these words of mine and acts on them...

So we aren't to start with outward traits, but outward signs will give us an indication of what's going on inside. Words can be cheap, or as James says, faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.

Jesus insists, with great warning, to not simply enjoy the sound of his words and then leave them as a memory without doing anything about them. (Wright 80) Doing what Jesus says, or not doing it: this makes the difference between a house that stays standing in a storm and a house that falls with a great crash.

"Eldership is the secret sauce of the Reformed church." This shared leadership structure is what gives Reformed churches their distinctive strength or health—even if it's not always obvious from the outside.

Shared authority: Prevents too much power being concentrated in one leader.

Accountability: Elders hold each other (and the pastor) accountable.

Pastoral care: More leaders means more people being personally cared for.

Stability: Leadership doesn't rise or fall with one personality.

Hays writes, "elders are honourable in behavior and mature in relationships. They are people who care deeply for the people of the church and the world. They trust in God. The Book of Forms quotes 1 Timothy 4:12 saying that elders are to be an example in speech, conduct, love, faith, and purity." (p14)

Some elders identify with Moses - “who me?” Feeling inadequate, unworthy and afraid, but willing to serve, answer a spiritual challenge, and a desire to make a positive difference. Others can identify with Isaiah responding with eagerness “Here am I, send me!”

And wherever we find ourselves on that spectrum—whether we feel like Moses, hesitant and unsure, or like Isaiah, ready and eager—the call to eldership, like our call to discipleship, is not first about confidence. It is about faithfulness.

Because in the end, both of our scriptures today bring us to the same quiet but searching question: not *who looks like a leader*, but *who is becoming faithfilled*.

Samuel almost missed David because he was looking for what everyone else would notice. Strength. Presence. Impressiveness. But God was already at work somewhere quieter—in a field, in obscurity, in a heart being formed long before anyone thought to look.

And Jesus warns us that it is entirely possible to sound like a disciple, to appear like a leader, even to do impressive things—and yet to be building on sand.

So what does this mean for eldership among us?

It means we are not looking for perfection. We are not looking for polish. We are not even looking for the most obviously capable. We are looking for people in whom the Spirit is already at work.

People who are learning to listen—and then to act.

People whose lives, over time, are beginning to bear fruit.

People who are being shaped, sometimes slowly, sometimes painfully, into the likeness of Christ.

And that fruit doesn’t always look dramatic. Often it looks like patience in a difficult meeting.

It looks like kindness when tensions are high.

It looks like quiet faithfulness in prayer when no one else sees.

It looks like choosing integrity when it would be easier not to.

That is the kind of life that can weather storms.

That is the kind of leadership that helps a church stand.

And so, to those being ordained today: this is your call.

Not to have all the answers.

Not to carry the church on your shoulders.

But to keep building your life on the rock.

To hear the words of Christ—and to do them.

To return again and again to prayer, to scripture, to discernment in community.

To trust that God’s Spirit is at work not only in you, but among you.

And to the congregation: this is your call too. Because eldership in the Reformed tradition is never a performance for others to watch—it is a shared life to be lived together.

You are called to pray for your elders.

To speak honestly with them.

To listen alongside them for God's leading.

To look not for perfection in them, but for faithfulness—and to pursue that same faithfulness in your own lives.

Because in truth, the health of the church is not built on a few strong leaders.

It is built on a community learning, together, to hear the voice of Christ—and to follow.

And that is our hope.

That as we trust God's surprising choices...

As we look not on outward appearance but on the heart...

As we measure not by words alone but by the fruit of a life lived in obedience...

We will become, together, a people whose foundation is sure.

So that when the rains fall, and the floods come, and the winds blow—and they will— this house will stand. Not because of us. But because it is built on the rock who is Jesus Christ our Lord. May be so in our life and in our life together. Amen.