

Outline

Chapter 2 - 8

Elders

Introduction

1. Office
2. Scripture
3. Confessions/Church Order
4. Calling to Office
5. Duties of the Elder
6. To have Supervision
 - 6.1. To visit
 - 6.2. Discipline
 - 6.3. Sacraments
7. Stewards
8. Assist the Ministers
9. Major Assemblies
10. Train themselves
11. Evaluation
12. Literature

THE ELDER

Introduction

Article 2 of the Church Order reads: "The offices are those of the minister of the Word, of the elder and of the deacon." In this chapter we will deal with the office of the elder.

1. Office

When we speak of an office we refer to an official charge received from the Lord with the view of building up the congregation. An office has three components: a calling from the Lord, authority from the Lord and, a specific task for building up the congregation. The Lord Jesus as the Head of the church, has entrusted the care of His congregation in the hands of the overseers. The overseers are therefore servants of the Lord given to the congregation to take care of the congregation. We reject a democratic model, as if the office bearers are elected representatives and the members can tell them what to do. We also reject the dictatorial model, as if the office bearers can do what ever they want. Elders serve the Lord in serving the congregation.

2. Scripture

The LORD Himself takes care of His people as a Shepherd.

Ps 23:1

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want.

Ezek 34:11-12

"For this is what the Sovereign LORD says: I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness.

In the Old Testament the LORD entrusted elders with the care for His people.

Exod 3:16

"Go, assemble the elders of Israel and say to them, 'The LORD, the God of your fathers-- the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob-- appeared to me and said: I have watched over you and have seen what has been done to you in Egypt.

Num 11:16

The LORD said to Moses: "Bring me seventy of Israel's elders who are known to you as leaders and officials among the people. Have them come to the Tent of Meeting, that they may stand there with you.

These elders had to govern the people according to God's law. They spoke on behalf of the LORD.

Deut 27:1

Moses and the elders of Israel commanded the people: "Keep all these commands that I give you today.

Deut 31:9

So Moses wrote down this law and gave it to the priests, the sons of Levi, who carried the ark of the covenant of the LORD, and to all the elders of Israel.

The Bible also uses the term watchman in this regard. The watchman's duty is to obey the one who appoints him and warn the sinner.

Ezek 3:17-21

"Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel; so hear the word I speak and give them warning from me. When I say to a wicked man, 'You will surely die,' and you do not warn him or speak out to dissuade him from his evil ways in order to save his life, that wicked man will die for his sin, and I will hold you accountable for his blood. But if you do warn the wicked man and he does not turn from his wickedness or from his evil ways, he will die for his sin; but you will have saved yourself. "Again, when a righteous man turns from his righteousness and does evil, and I put a stumbling block before him, he will die. Since you did not warn him, he will die for his sin. The righteous things he did will not be remembered, and I will hold you accountable for his blood. But if you do warn the righteous man not to sin and he does not sin, he will surely live because he took warning, and you will have saved yourself."

In the New Testament we read that the Lord Jesus calls Himself the Good Shepherd.

John 10:11

"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

John 10:3

The watchman opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.

John 10:14

"I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me--

John 10:27

My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me.

After His resurrection the Lord Jesus gives the care of His flock in the hands of His apostles.

Matt 18:18

"I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.

Eph 4:11-16

It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

The apostles in turn appointed elders in each congregation.

Acts 14:23

Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust.

Titus 1:5

The reason I left you in Crete was that you might straighten out what was left unfinished and appoint elders in every town, as I directed you.

They instructed these elders in their task, reminding them of their duties toward the Lord Jesus and the congregation.

1 Pet 5:1-4

To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder, a witness of Christ's sufferings and one who also will share in the glory to be revealed: Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers-- not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away.

Acts 20:28

Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.

The congregation has to recognize these elders as servants of the Lord.

Heb 13:17

Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you.

Because of the importance of this task the churches had to take care that overseers were above reproach. An elder who is not above reproach would harm the name of the Church of the Lord, yes the honour of the Lord Himself.

1 Tim 3:1-13

Here is a trustworthy saying: If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer, he desires a noble task. Now the overseer must be above reproach, the husband of but one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect. (If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?) He must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil. He must also have a good reputation with outsiders, so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil's trap. Deacons, likewise, are to be men worthy of respect, sincere, not indulging in much wine, and not pursuing dishonest gain. They must keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience. They must first be tested; and then if there is nothing against them, let them serve as deacons. In the same way, their wives are to be women worthy of respect, not malicious talkers but temperate and trustworthy in everything. A deacon must be the husband of but one wife and must manage his children and his household well. Those who have served well gain an excellent standing and great assurance in their faith in Christ Jesus.

Titus 1:5-9

The reason I left you in Crete was that you might straighten out what was left unfinished and appoint elders in every town, as I directed you. An elder must be blameless, the husband of but one wife, a man whose children believe and are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient. Since an overseer is entrusted with God's work, he must be blameless-- not overbearing, not quick-tempered, not given to drunkenness, not violent, not pursuing dishonest gain. Rather he must be hospitable, one who loves what is good, who is self-controlled, upright, holy and disciplined. He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he

can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it.

The task of the elders is described in terms of comforting, encouraging, instructing and admonishing.

1 Thes 2:11-12

For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory.

Acts 15:32

Judas and Silas, who themselves were prophets, said much to encourage and strengthen the brothers.

1 Thes. 5:14

And we urge you, brothers, warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone.

Elders are charged as good shepherds and faithful watchmen to be diligent in governing the church, in comforting the distressed and in admonishing the wayward. They have to take heed that the congregation abide by pure doctrine and lead a godly life.

3. Confessions, Church Order

3.1. Belgic Confession

The Belgic Confession mentions the elders in the articles dealing with the government of the church.

Article 30 The Government Of The Church

We believe that this true Church must be governed according to the Spiritual order which our Lord has taught us in His Word. There should be ministers or pastors to preach the Word of God and to administer the sacraments; there should also be elders and deacons who, together with the pastors, form the council of the Church.

Article 31 The Officers Of The Church

Ministers of the Word, in whatever place they are, have equal power and authority, for they are all servants of Jesus Christ, the only universal Bishop and the only Head of the Church. In order that this holy ordinance of God may not be violated or rejected, we declare that everyone must hold the ministers of the Word and the elders of the Church in special esteem because of their work, and as much as possible be at peace with them without grumbling or arguing.

3.2. Heidelberg Catechism

The task of the elders is referred to in the Catechism in connection with the admission to the Lord's Supper and the use of the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven.

Q. 81. Who are to come to the table of the Lord?

A. Those who are truly displeased with themselves because of their sins and yet trust that these are forgiven them and that their remaining weakness is covered by the suffering and death of Christ, and who also desire more and more to strengthen their faith and amend their life.
But hypocrites and those who do not repent eat and drink judgment upon themselves.

Q.82. Are those also to be admitted to the Lord's supper who by their confession and life show that they are unbelieving and ungodly?

A. No, for then the covenant of God would be profaned and His wrath kindled against the whole congregation.

Therefore, according to the command of Christ and His apostles, the Christian church is duty-bound to exclude such persons by the keys of the kingdom of heaven, until they amend their lives.

Q.83. What are the keys of the kingdom of heaven?

A. The preaching of the holy gospel and church discipline. By these two the kingdom of heaven is opened to believers and closed to unbelievers.

Q.84. How is the kingdom of heaven open and closed by the preaching of the gospel?

A. According to the command of Christ, the kingdom of heaven is opened when it is proclaimed and publicly testified to each and every believer that God has really forgiven all their sins for the sake of Christ's merits, as often as they by true faith accept the promise of the gospel.
The kingdom of heaven is closed when it is proclaimed and testified to all unbelievers and hypocrites that the wrath of God and eternal condemnation rest upon them as long as they do not repent.
According to this testimony of the gospel, God will judge both in this life and in the life to come.

Q.85. How is the kingdom of heaven closed and opened by church discipline?

A. According to the command of Christ, people who call themselves Christians but show themselves to be un-christian in doctrine or life are first repeatedly admonished in a brotherly manner.
If they do not give up their errors or wickedness, they are reported to the church, that is, to the elders. If they do not heed also their admonitions, they are forbidden the use of the sacraments, and

they are excluded by the elders from the Christian congregation, and by God Himself from the kingdom of Christ.
They are again received as members of Christ and of the church when they promise and show real amendment.

3.3. Church Order about the Elder

The Church Order spells out the task of the elder (Art. 22), but there are many articles in which the elder comes in the picture.

- Art. 3 Calling
- Art. 22 The Office of Elder
- Art. 24 Term of Office
- Art. 25 Equality to be Maintained
- Art. 26 Subscription to the Confession
- Art. 27 False Doctrine
- Art. 38 Consistory
- Art. 57 Baptism
- Art. 58 Schools
- Art. 61 Admission to the Lord's Supper
- Art. 63 Marriage
- Art. 64 Church Records
- Art. 67 Consistory Involvement (in Discipline)
- Art. 71 Suspension and Deposition of Office-bearers
- Art. 72 Serious and Gross Sins on the Part of Office-bearers
- Art. 73 Christian Censure
- Art. 74 No Lording It over Others

4. Calling to Office

The first question the elder has to answer at his ordination is: "Do you feel in your heart that God Himself, through His congregation, has called you to this office?" The Church Order says in the opening sentence of Art. 3: "No one shall take any office upon himself without having been lawfully called thereto." The process of a lawful call is outlined in the Church Order and the local Regulations. The combination of the question at the ordination and the requirement of the Church Order show that there is a formal aspect to the call to office (the election and appointment) as well as a personal aspect (do you feel in your heart). The second is a matter between the brother and the Lord. It is possible that one appointed cannot accept this appointment. He will have to give the reasons why, and council can judge these reasons, but in the end, he has to be able to say that he feels in his heart that God Himself has called Him.

The approach to calling and ordination shows the spiritual nature of the office in the church. We do not "run for office" and organize an election campaign. We do not push ourselves at the expense of others, but wait for the Lord to call us by means of the process the church has adopted. Humility is one of the requirements for office. At the same time this approach to the call to office highlights the obligation and comfort we have as elders. The obligation is to obey this call, unless there are weighty reasons, and fulfil this office to the best of our ability. The comfort lies in the fact that the Lord has called us and we did not push ourselves. With the call He will also give the ability to fulfil it. As office-bearers we do not defend our own honour, but the honour of our Lord. He is pleased to use our labours, though done with many imperfection, for the coming of His Kingdom. As elders we can feel incapable at times, but then our comfort is that He has called us.

5. Duties of the Elder

The Form for Ordination and Article 22 of the Church Order stipulate that elders are called:

1. To have supervision over Christ's church, that every member may conduct himself properly in doctrine and life, according to the gospel.
For this purpose they shall:

- faithfully visit the members in their homes to comfort, instruct, admonish, reprove them with the Word of God;
 - exercise Christian discipline;
 - watch that the sacraments are not profaned.
2. As stewards in the house of God to take care that all things are done decently and in good order.
 3. To assist the minister of the Word with good counsel and advice.
 - They are charged with the supervision over the doctrine and conduct of ministers.
 - They shall permit no strange teaching.
 - They must watch that no wolves enter the sheepfold of the Good Shepherd.
 4. To train themselves in godliness and diligently search the scriptures.

6. To have supervision

6.1. To visit

It is the task of the elders to see whether and how the Word of God rules the lives of God's people. They have to apply God's Word to the needs and situations in the home they are visiting. This supervision is not limited to certain areas. As our lives before the Lord includes everything, so also the care of the Lord through the supervision of the elders. Elders have to know what is going on in the lives of those entrusted into their care. The most important means in this care is the visit. The elders have to faithfully visit the members in their homes. When they visit they must have open ears.

This visiting includes

- the yearly home visit
See further 1-1 Home Visits
- the discipline visit
See further 2-1 Discipline
- the special visit
See further 2-5 Special Visits

It is not limited to these. It will be beneficial if elders visit the families in their charge in a less formal way. It is important that there is an open relationship between the families and the elders.

6.2. Discipline

Elders are charged to exercise Christian discipline. This discipline is to be exercised in obedience to the Lord Jesus Christ and His Word. This discipline is over those who either in word or deed show that they are disobedient and refuse to repent. See further 2-1 Discipline.

6.3. Sacraments

The elders have to watch that the sacraments are not profaned. This means they have to see to it that those who present a child for baptism do so for the right reason and that they admit to the Lord's Supper only those who are entitled to participate. This calling involves

- visiting parents prior to baptism;
See further 1-3 Holy Baptism
- examining those who want to be admitted to the Lord's Supper;
See further 2-6 Catechism
- accepting attestation of guests from sister-churches;
See further 1-4 Lord's Supper, 2-4 Federation
- admonishing those who live in sin and keep them from the table.
See further 1-4 Lord's Supper and 2.1 Discipline

7. Stewards in the House of God

The church is the household of God. All things must be done decently and in good order because God is a God of order. Thus the peace of the church is protected. In order to fulfil this task the elders together with the minister form the consistory and together with the deacons form the council.

See further 3 - 3 Congregation and Office-bearers

3 - 5 Council and Consistory

8. Assist the Ministers of the Word

There are differences between the elders and the minister when it comes to calling and term of office, but nevertheless elders are no less than ministers and ministers are not higher than elders. The minister is an elder too. Thus the elders have supervision over the work and personal life of the minister. As part of this task the elders visit the minister in his home twice per year, they visit the catechism classes and evaluate the preaching

See further 1-4 Preaching/Prayer

2-6 Catechism

The Form also states that the elders must watch diligently that no wolves enter the sheepfold of the Good Shepherd. The elders are to guard the pulpit. This is why in Art. 15 of the Church Order we read: "No one shall be permitted to preach the Word or to administer the sacraments in another church without the consent of the consistory of that church." The elders allow a minister to preach. They can also barr a minister from the pulpit when they believe he is unfaithful to God's Word and the Reformed Confession.

Besides supervision the elders have to assist the minister with good counsel and advice. This advice takes place at the consistory meetings, but can also be done in personal conversation. An open relationship between elders and minister is important for congregation and consistory.

The minister and his family receive an annual home visit just like all the other families in the congregation. When elders make this visit they should approach it the same way as the other visits. They have to see whether and how this family lives from the Word of God. At the same time they do well to keep in mind the special task of the minister and that the lives of the wife and children are affected by his ministry. Some of the questions that may be asked are:

- Is there harmony between the preaching and the minister's personal life?
- How do his wife and their children look at this?
- How does the minister use his time? Is there time for the family?
- How does the family of the minister function in the congregation?
- How does the minister deal with his workload? Because the work of a minister is never finished, is he discouraged when confronted with these limitations? How can the elder help him?

9. Major Assemblies

The elders are also involved in the major assemblies. Each church delegates the minister and an elder to each classis. In case the church is vacant or the minister is prevented from going, two elders will be delegated. Also at regional and general synod, half the delegates are elders. To attend regional and general synod requires more time and not all elders are able to go. As a rule council submits the names of the brothers who would be able to serve at a regional or general synod, to the assembly that has to decide on the delegation. With regard to classis, it is the best the elders take turns in going.

10. Train themselves in godliness and diligently search the scriptures

The elders must live from the Word and show the power of this Word in their own lives. Elders can only do their work well when they train themselves in godliness and diligently search the scriptures. To train yourself in godliness means to apply the will of God in your own life, to submit your life to the law of God and show fruits of thankfulness. Besides this they also have to search the scriptures. The word search is used here. This is more than read. To search is to study diligently in order to find the treasures of God's

Word. This is to be done in the elder's personal life, together with his family. The study societies are a great help here as well.

11. Evaluation

1. In having supervision over the church how does it show in the execution of the office that it is of a spiritual nature? Are there matters that need particular attention in the supervision?
2. Are the elders diligent in fulfilling their offices?
3. How do the elders train themselves in godliness?
4. Is there good cooperation between the elders and the minister? Between the elders and the deacons?
5. Are the elders involved in the major assemblies?
6. Are there items you want to bring to the attention of the meeting? Why? What should be done about them?

12. Literature

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