

CTK—an ELDER-GOVERNED CHURCH

From its inception, a doctrinal cornerstone of CTK has been that we are an elder led, or elder governed church. One of the vows which we all affirm when welcoming new members is this: “We will pray for and encourage our elders, following their leading and submitting to their oversight.” We believe that under Christ, the highest authority in the local church is the elders in their corporate capacity. This theological/cultural commitment is born out of our reflection on scripture.

The term elder, along with pastor, overseer, and under-shepherd, all carry within them the weight and import of leadership. The Apostle Paul speaks of elders as “directing the affairs of the church” (I Timothy 5:17). He exhorts the believers in Thessalonica to “respect those who work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord and admonish you” (I Thessalonians 5:12). The writer to the Hebrews instructs us as follows: “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” (Hebrews 13:17). The Apostle Peter counsels elders to “Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care, serving as overseers...” (I Peter 5:2a).

This work must all be done in submission to our Lord Jesus, who is our Chief Shepherd (I Peter 5:4). When Paul gives his moving farewell counsel to the Ephesian elders on the beach at Miletus, he urges them to “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 a price” (Acts 20:28). The relationship of a shepherd to his sheep is one of guidance, vigilance and care.

Amid Paul’s requirements for eldership comes a statement relevant to the leadership of the church: “If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God’s church?” (I Timothy 3:4). Though there are certainly differences between a family and a church, Paul makes a clear connection between a man leading his immediate family and leading the church family; an elder is charged to carefully manage both.

In God’s good providence He has created the universe with order and structure. As there is both order *and* equality (and abounding joy!) within the Godhead, so there is, derivatively, both order and equality within the relationships between persons whom He has created in His image. This is true in the family, in society, in the workplace, and in the church. While Scripture affirms the equality of all persons within the church—equality in worth, value, and in salvation through Christ—we are also instructed concerning distinctions in gifts and in roles. In each sphere of life some are called to lead, and this includes the body of Christ. Distinction in role and rich mutuality are not incompatible but complementary. Because such order can and at times is abused does not therefore render the order itself wrong, nor should it cause us to apologize for what God has established; rather, it awakens us to live within each relationship with ongoing courage, repentance, and grace.

At CTK we understand ourselves to be congregational as we have come to understand “classical” congregationalism; that is, we believe that each congregation is responsible to manage its own affairs under Christ and His word. Also, it means that the congregation ratifies or elects its leaders, who then govern the church. We do not embrace a congregationalism which functions as a democracy, leaving the direction of the church to a

vote on any given issue. While we respect many churches which adhere to this form of government, we believe that it runs contrary to the explicit and implicit counsel of scripture, and thus leads to practical consequences which are damaging to the church.

We are aware that damaging consequences may proceed from careless elders in an elder-governed congregation as well, and no doubt examples of such carelessness exist. Again: because a good, God-given structure can be misused does not therefore render it less than good, but encourages vigilance to ensure that it proceeds in a God and neighbor-loving way.

Elders are to lead with courage and resolve, always mindful and beholden to their Chief Shepherd: “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” (I Peter 5:2-3). Elders should strive to live like Jesus, who did not come to be served but to serve, and to lay down His life for His people (Mark 10:45; John 13:1-17; II Corinthians 4:5).

It is the responsibility of pastors/elders to continually acknowledge that Christ is indeed the Head and the Chief Shepherd of His church. His will—not ours—must be sovereign over all. May we always gladly acknowledge Him to be the King in our midst.

Each elder is a member of CTK, accountable to the vows like everyone else, and in similar need of encouragement and accountability. The elders are eager to celebrate and encourage the gifts and abilities of all within our body. The elders are eager to welcome and prayerfully consider the concerns, desires, and hopes of all those under our care. By God’s grace, we intend to forge a rich mutuality of purpose and service here at CTK.

When Paul describes true Christ-like leadership in the church, he strains to find words adequate to describe the depth of concern it entails, borrowing imagery from both a mother and a father: “...we were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children. We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become dear to us....For you know that we dealt with each of you like 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” (I Thessalonians 2:7-8; 11-12).

Elders must strive to be resolute and humble, courageous and gentle. Two passages in Paul’s second letter to Timothy encourage such living: “The Lord’s servant must not quarrel; instead, he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to knowledge of the truth...” (2:24-25); and: “In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of His appearing and His kingdom, I give you this charge: Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction” (4:1-2).

We believe that the Bible teaches the imperative, whenever possible, of a plurality of elders (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5) who share in the governance and oversight of the church. Though some may have greater responsibility (vocational elders, for instance), and each have specific gifts and areas of ministry focus, all share in the direction of the church. Decision

making is not unilateral. Each elder is a pastor, a shepherd of the flock here at CTK. This plurality begets mutual accountability and promotes an ongoing “iron sharpening iron” relationship (Proverbs 27:17). More light and wisdom ensue from a counsel of elders than from any one particular man.

We believe that the scriptures teach that the office of elder should be held by men. This conviction is reinforced by the language throughout the requirements given for elders in I Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:6-9. Again, the analogy of leadership in the home, where the husband and father is to lead, further clarifies the standards of leadership within the church (Ephesians 5:22-6:4; I Timothy 3:4-5). The primary teaching in the church (and the oversight of all its teaching), the maintenance, defense, and the strengthening of its doctrine, and the direction and governance of its life and mission are to be carried out by qualified men. Much of this work, including vital leadership positions, will be delegated (and thus enhanced) by other men and women within the church, yet always under the oversight and direction of the elders.

The truth that elders are to be men does not mean that women lack significance in the economy of the church. There is rich opportunity for gifted women as well as men to glorify God and bless His people within our midst. We would be immeasurably impoverished at CTK without the service which now proceeds from faithful and very able women, and we look forward to seeing more such giftedness surface in the days ahead. Again, order and freedom are not presented in opposition within scripture.

We are aware of the caricatures readily assigned to this matter of male leadership in the church and in the home, and desire to be careful to avoid any misuse of the Biblical directives regarding it. Keeping this in mind, however, we also do not want to capitulate to cultural pressures and in so doing dishonor our Lord—the fear of man is a snare (Proverbs 29:25; Acts 4:19 and 5:29). Our shared life—our sociology—must be informed by theology, not vice versa. We believe that the blessings of the gospel are often, initially, counter-intuitive to our understanding, and this is certainly true for many regarding any kind of gender distinction. It is here that we trust our gracious and wise Lord who, while being God, gladly submits Himself to His Father. In so doing He is hardly diminished! He is the Architect of the sociological structure in the church and in the home, and He has designed it in order to abundantly bless those who embrace it in faith.

Our prayer at CTK is that we will forge a culture of Godward delight—of joy and humility and mutual service and affirmation. We pray that this culture will prove to be so compelling that it will expose the caricatures prevalent in our surrounding culture and, sadly, within the culture of much of the church. The analogy of a dance is helpful in getting to the heart of how kingdom order ought to look and feel—separate persons, one leading and one following, with distinct yet complementary responsibilities, moving as one with fluency, grace, and beauty. We pray that we will be a band of men and women who find our true selves in Christ as we live out our roles; we pray that we will dance to His glory.

The standards for an elder are implied in various places throughout Scripture, but are most specifically set forth in I Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:6-9, where Paul lists the graces of character which must be substantially in place in order for a man to step into this office. While these graces must be present at the outset of such ministry, the assumption is that an elder will grow and deepen in them over time.

Since the majority of qualified men will be married with children, faithfulness in these roles is highlighted in the Scriptures. We do not believe, however, that godly and gifted men who are unmarried, or without children, cannot serve as elders. As was the case with the Apostle Paul, the lives of such men commend them to us irrespective of marital status. Beyond this, such men have unique freedom to pursue kingdom work.

We do not have term limits for elders at CTK, as we believe that such limits place an arbitrary and artificial duration on the ministry of one so qualified. A man qualified to be an elder is not one for a term, but remains an elder as long as he is physically and mentally able and, of course, remains faithful to Christ. Given the endurance of such faithfulness over time, an elder will deepen in discernment and thus ripen in his ability to shepherd. There may be circumstantial seasons where an elder ought to step back from the formal responsibilities and rigor of the work--vocational impediments, illness, or the need to ensure the well-being of his first responsibility, his family, for instance, yet such parenthesis do not alter his vocation before God and the church. We encourage periodic "sabbaticals" to promote the well-being of each elder and to enhance their ability to care for our church with greater wisdom and skill. Land allowed to lie fallow produces the finest harvests.

If an elder falls into sin that threatens disqualification, and does not recognize it as such, our Lord provides a way in which accountability can be handled within the church: "Do not entertain an accusation against an elder unless it is brought by two or three witness. Those who sin are to be rebuked publicly, so that the others may take warning" (I Timothy 5:19-21).

Men who substantially manifest the graces set forth in the Pastoral Epistles may be commended to the elders for the office. Upon consideration, a man may then be presented to the congregation, after which there will be a season of prayer and reflection, a time when the candidate may be questioned. This season will be followed by a congregational vote.

Elders are to give their attention to prayer and the ministry of the word (Acts 6:4). They have the sobering and joyful responsibility to reflect often on the Scriptures and to regularly and earnestly go to God in prayer on behalf His people. The elders must maintain purity of life and doctrine within the church, clarify and encourage its mission and purpose, teach the whole counsel of God, comfort the sorrowful and the sick, and encourage the manifold gifts within the church to flourish for the edification of all and the furtherance of the kingdom. Elders are to help themselves and their loved ones to live and to die with joy, all to the glory of God.

The elders at CTK are very grateful for the gift of serving within such a body—our work is truly a joy because of the remarkable, glad responsiveness of the members (Hebrews 13:17). We are humbled by your consistent willingness to generously give of your resources—your time, energy, gifts, and money—your very selves—to honor our Lord and to promote the welfare of our community. We believe there is much energy and ability for ministry percolating within our body, and hope to see more and more of this surface in the days ahead, so that together we can truly spread a passion for the supremacy of Christ our King in this our time and place. We covet your prayer as we continue to ascend toward heaven together.

