

**On the Distinctions Between  
Teaching Elders and Ruling Elders:**

ACCORDING TO THE NORMS OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN AMERICA (PCA)

by

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Reviewed and approved by an informal committee of pastors  
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## **TABLE OF CONTENTS**

### **Part One: Are Teaching Elders and Ruling Elders Different Offices?**

Does the PCA recognize the concept of parity in government between the two offices? ...  
P.2

Who has authority to preach in PCA pulpits? ...P.3

Who has authority to administer the sacraments? ... P.4

Does the PCA recognize one ordination to the office of elder, or two? One for Teaching Elder and another for Ruling Elder? ...P.5

What is the PCA position regarding equality of vote? ...P.5

Some have asserted that the PCA position is merely American tradition. Do these views have a history preceding America? ... P.6

What does the PCA say should be the attitude of the two offices to one another? ... P.6

Who may read the Scriptures in a PCA pulpit? ...P.7

Does the PCA recognize both classes of elder as “ministers of the Word”? ... P.7

### **Part Two: Who May Preach and Administer the Sacraments?**

Is it right to use the Old Testament as a guide to New Testament ecclesiology? ...P.8

Are we free to limit our understanding of ecclesiology to the New Testament only? ...P.9

Do we see two offices of spiritual leadership in the Old Testament? ...P.9

New Testament fulfillment of Old Testament precedents... P.12

Evidence One: The pattern in 1 Timothy 5:17...P.12

Evidence Two: The use of the word minister...P.12

Evidence Three: Timothy, Organizing Pastor...P.13

Evidence Four: The mentoring function of the pastor-teacher...P.14

Evidence Five: Teachers and administrators in 1 Corinthians 12:28...P.15

### **Part Three: Who May Preach and Administer the Sacraments?**

Does the mentoring function of the Pastor-Teacher, along with his exclusive function as administrator of the Word and sacraments, make him superior in rank to the Ruling Elder? ...P.16

What happens if the Ruling Elders refuse to accept or recognize the mentoring function of the Teaching Elders with respect them? ...P.17

It is very clear from certain texts that the Ruling Elders also have a pastoral relationship with the congregation. Does this not support the view that they are one and the same with Teaching Elders, and are also "pastors"? ...P.18

What is the Scriptural authority by which the Westminster Confession asserts that only ordained ministers might administer the sacraments? ...P.18

What is the Scriptural support for the PCA view that the two offices have different ordinations? ...P.18

## Introduction

This thesis has been reviewed by a group of pastors of the Western Carolina Presbytery of the PCA, the presbytery in which I have my ordination. Their conclusion was that I have "fairly and properly presented the PCA position on the matter of teaching and ruling elders."

Controversies arise on the mission field during the church-planting process. These occur because nationals may challenge doctrines and procedures missionaries take for granted. Missionaries find themselves defending things they never thought would come into question. Worse, they may wind up dealing with issues they considered insignificant.

Attacks of the enemy occur through divisive people who *draw away disciples after themselves*. (Acts 20:30) Although this happens in any ministry, the precarious nature of a church plant on the mission field seems to lend itself to such occurrences.

Just such a scenario developed while I was in South America. A divisive and controlling missionary from another mission than the PCA, a member of one of our churches, promoted doctrine on church government contrary to Presbyterian norms. This man, a Ruling Elder, convinced the other Ruling Elders of our fledgling Presbytery that certain aspects of Presbyterian government are wrong, and the PCA missionaries were teaching American culture rather than biblical church government.

Specifically, the points at issue were a denial of any distinction between Teaching Elders (Pastors) and Ruling Elders. He insisted that Ruling Elders had just as much right to preach and administer the sacraments as Teaching Elders; that Teaching Elders must be members of the church and under the authority of the Session, which is dominated by the Ruling Elders.

This created a dictatorship of the Ruling Elders over the Teaching Elders, led by this man. The national presbytery nearly discarded from the Book of Church Order (BCO) all references to distinctions.

I wrote a warning letter to the Presbytery, along with a brief paper, defending our Presbyterian distinctives as biblical. This temporarily stopped the drift away from reformed norms.

In the process, we were challenged to rethink our traditions and ask how solid they were. The result: I am more convinced than ever that our standards on this issue are

biblical.

The thesis is in three parts. First, statements of PCA views on the issues as found in our **WESTMINSTER STANDARDS** and in the **PCA POSITION PAPERS**, 1973-1993. Then follows scriptural defenses of the key points. Finally, a question and answer part to clarify misconceptions.

I presuppose that the reader has basic knowledge of the principles of Presbyterian government, as well as a covenantal perspective of the Bible. Otherwise, parts of the argumentation may not make sense. A recommended reading is The **APOSTOLIC CHURCH** by Thomas Withrow.

### **My letter to the presbytery in South America**

Dear Fellow Elders,

In the past it has been my privilege to address the Presbytery on one matter or another, sometimes in person and sometimes in writing, as in this case. I have been pleased to see the Presbytery has always given serious consideration to my theses and am profoundly appreciative for such a mature attitude, as is proper among fellow elders.

I therefore request serious consideration to both of the documents I am submitting, since they address the future welfare of the Presbytery.

The Presbytery is considering including in the Book of Church Order (BCO) certain points having to do with the definition of elders, their roles, and their relationship to the church courts. Though these specific points may not seem serious in themselves, nevertheless, they may reflect a tendency toward a philosophy of ecclesiastical government contrary to the continuity of Scripture as a whole, as well as contrary to 500 years of Reformed experience. This should not be taken lightly. In this letter, I will mention what has been the standard and practice of Presbyterianism for 500 years. Find attached a thesis that shows, via the continuity of Scripture, why those standards are justified.

Specifically, it appears there may be a change in ecclesiological philosophy within the Presbytery, as reflected by changes in the new BOCO, which could blur the distinctions between Teaching and Ruling Elders. This philosophy seems to be reflected in the rule that all Elders, including Teaching, must be members of a local church. Their Session would therefore be their first Court of Appeals, resulting in their submission to it.

These measures, in themselves, may not seem serious. But the consequences are long range and dangerous. The thesis that accompanies this letter will show why it is unscriptural to obliterate these distinctions, or take measures to which tend to do so. Our Presbyterian forefathers felt it necessary to institute basic rules of operation to safeguard this distinction, rather than blur it. First, I will list below several rules the Presbyterian movement took centuries to elaborate:

1. The Presbytery is defined as an association of Teaching Elders, supported by Ruling Elders.
2. Teaching Elders are members of Presbytery only and may not be members of a local church.
3. Teaching Elders are moderators of the Sessions.
4. Teaching Elders are permanent members of Presbytery. Ruling Elders are temporary members sent on a rotational basis to specific Presbytery meetings, according to limitations governed by the number of members of a church.
5. As a general principle, Teaching Elders represent the Presbytery to the church. Ruling Elders represent the church to the Presbytery.

Note it is unnecessary to find justifying verses for these particular rules. It is only necessary to show these rules tend toward the protection of biblical principles, whereas their opposites do not. I will attempt to demonstrate this in the thesis.

The **WESTMINSTER CONFSSION** says: *...there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature, and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed.* Ch.1, Art.6

This means Scripture provides a general framework of government. Within that framework, we use our reason, what our standards call the *light of nature*, to apply specific measures to ensure the principles are respected.

We need not justify every detail with a biblical text. As long as we show such a measure corresponds with the continuity of scripture, then the particular measure requires no further vindication. These rules safeguard Teaching Elders from being instructed by Ruling Elders on what to preach or when and how to administer the sacraments.

Teaching Elders would end up, in practice, as mere functionaries of a Board of Elders, as in congregationalism. Such would be neither biblical nor Presbyterian, but an ecclesiastical perversity.

While the content of the BCO is not final authority, its intent is to preserve a biblical system of government.

Respectfully Submitted,

TE Roger Smalling,

WC Presbytery, PCA

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- The manner of expression in this letter was as mild as conscience would allow. In fact, the divisive person mentioned in the introduction had already convinced the Ruling Elders that no substantial difference existed between the two orders of elder. The difference was merely a description of what the elder happened to be doing at the time. If he is teaching, he is a Teaching Elder. If he is administrating the next day, he is then a Ruling Elder.
- Our seminary-trained pastors had become mere functionaries of those elders, suffering what they called *the dictatorship* of the Ruling Elders.

The following is the entire essay that corrected the situation. For the full documented essay, including diagrams, historical citations, and extended scriptural defense, download the PDF below:

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## PART ONE

### WHAT IS THE PCA POSITION ON THESE THREE PROPOSITIONS?

#### **Are Ruling and Teaching Elders different offices?**

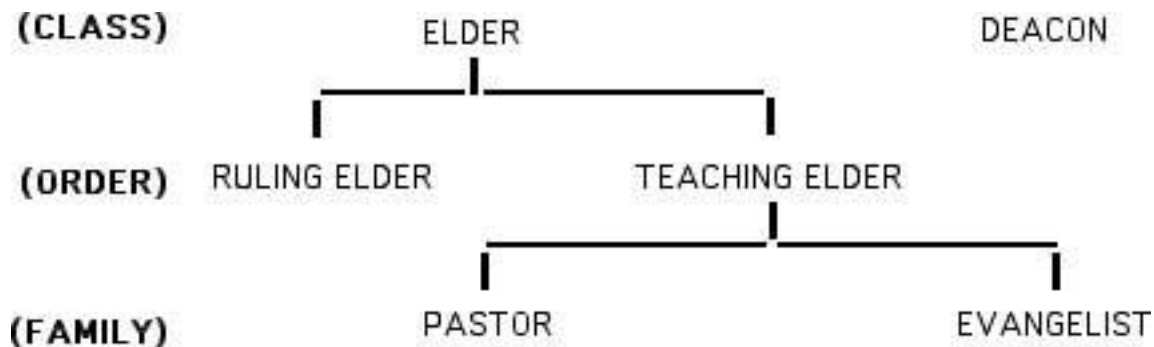


Diagram taken from **THE PCA POSITION DIGEST** Part V, P.456

The diagram shows one class of *office* called *elder*, with two *orders* of elder that are not interchangeable.

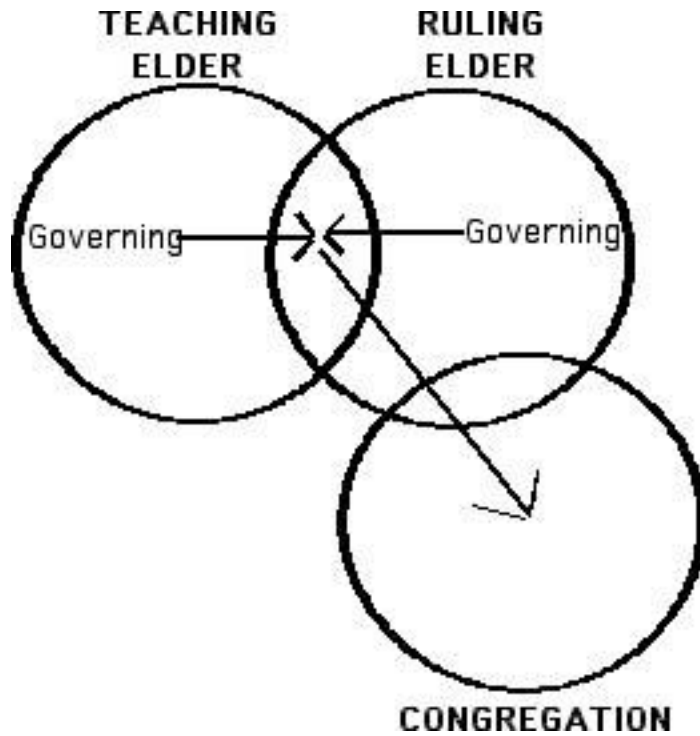
The official declaration of the PCA is as follows:

Recommendation No.1: That the General Assembly affirm that the Scriptures teach that in addition to the fundamental office of all believers, there are also special perpetual classes of office in the church, elder and deacon; and that there are within the class of elder two orders, Teaching Elder and Ruling Elder. Adopted, 7th General Assembly, 1979

**POSITION PAPERS**, Vol.5, P.457

Our standards therefore recognize one class of elder, divided into two orders: Ruling Elder and Teaching Elder. A Ruling Elder does not become a Teaching Elder merely because he happens to teach a class or preach a sermon. Nor does a Teaching Elder become a Ruling Elder because he exercises some administrative functions. The difference between them is not a particular function at a given moment. They belong to different orders, according to the PCA. (Scriptural defense will follow in Part Two.)

**Does the PCA recognize the concept of parity in government between the two offices? Yes.**



The following diagram illustrates the concept of governmental parity. Notice the two offices overlap. Together, they govern the congregation, but do not govern each other. 1 Timothy 5:17

Who has authority to preach in PCA pulpits?

The **LARGER CATECHISM** states:

*QUESTION 158:* By whom is the Word of God to be preached?  
*ANSWER:* The Word of God is to be preached only by such as are sufficiently gifted and also duly

approved and called to that office.

There appears to be a slight ambiguity in this statement. Traditionally, it has been understood the Westminster delegates meant ordained Teaching Elders, although the term "pastor" or "minister" is not used. After all, what if a Ruling Elder can preach better than a particular Teaching Elder? The 1979 PCA Assembly answers:

Recommendation No.4: That the General Assembly reaffirm the historic Presbyterian position expressed in LC 158, that none should preach the Gospel but those who are called and gifted of God; and therefore only those men who are properly ordained or licensed may preach in the pulpits of the PCA; and that Ruling Elders be allowed and encouraged to renew the historic practice of exhorting the people of God. Adopted, P.457-458

The above Recommendation links to Recommendation No.5, which deals with the relationship of the Pastor to the Session. From this we see the PCA considers the pulpit to be the habitual domain of the Teaching Elder, although the Ruling Elder may exercise whatever ministerial gifts of exhortation he may possess in other domains and circumstance.

In the PCA, it is unacceptable to program into the regular preaching schedule, those not ordained as Teaching Elders.

## Who has authority to administer the sacraments?

### WESTMINSTER CONFESSION OF FAITH:

Chapter 27, Art.4. There be only two sacraments ordained by Christ our Lord in the gospel; that is to say, Baptism, and the Supper of the Lord: neither of which may be dispensed by any, but by a minister of the Word lawfully ordained.

### LARGER CATECHISM:

*QUESTION 169.* How hath Christ appointed bread and wine to be given and received in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper?

*ANSWER.* Christ hath appointed the ministers of his Word, in the administration of this sacrament of the Lord's Supper,...

*QUESTION 176.* Wherein do the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper agree?

*ANSWER.* ... Both are seals of the same covenant, are to be dispensed by ministers of the gospel, and by none other; From these points, it is clear the position of the Westminster Standards is that ordained ministers of the Gospel, and these only, have the authority to administer the sacraments in our churches.

The official declaration of the PCA is as follows:

Recommendation No. 8: That the General Assembly affirm that in keeping with the Confessional Standards of the church, only properly ordained Teaching Elders may administer the sacraments. Adopted, 7th General Assembly, 1979

**POSITION PAPERS**, Vol.5, P.461

As justification for this recommendation, the committee made two points:

If the PCA were to make the major change of allowing Ruling Elders to administer the sacraments, it would be necessary that major changes be made to our Confessional Standards. While the Standards must never be set above the Scriptures as the rule of faith and practice, yet we have certainly given strong testimony to their lasting quality and trueness to the Scriptures, and changes should only be made when there is clear and overwhelming evidence, biblically, that they are wrong. We find no such evidence in the case of administration of the sacraments. **POSITION PAPERS**, Vol.5, P.460

Notice how the committee put the burden of proof on those who oppose our Standards, rather than on the committee to prove the validity of the Standards. The committee added:

The administration of the sacraments, by its very nature, is a proclamation of the Word of God by example and...should only be done in conjunction with the preaching of the Word. **POSITION PAPERS**, Vol.5, P.460

The committee reasoned that if Teaching Elders alone had authority to preach from the pulpit, then logically, they alone have authority to administer the sacraments.

### **Does the PCA recognize one ordination to the office of Elder, or two: One for Teaching Elder, and another for Ruling Elder?**

Recommendation No.7 says,

We affirm that the ordination of Elders is to a particular order within the class of Elders, either Teaching Elder or Ruling Elder. Both orders of Elder include certain functions which are listed in Scripture, ...[here follows a long and tedious list]...In addition, the order of Teaching Elder includes the functions of the public preaching of the Word and administering the sacraments; plus such things required in the contemporary pattern of church life and custom as performing marriage ceremonies and officiating at funerals. Adopted, 7th General Assembly, 1979 **POSITION PAPERS**, Vol.5, P.459-460

Since the office of Teaching Elder includes functions the Ruling Elder does not have, the PCA recognizes two different ordinations. The difference extends beyond the particular function of administering the Word and the sacraments. It is a calling and ordination to perform those functions.

### **What is the PCA position regarding equality of voting?**

The official declaration of the PCA is as follows:

Recommendation No.5, Point A3: church courts above the Session level seek to express parity with a numerical balance of Ruling Elders and Teaching Elders. On the Session level there is usually only one, or at most a few, Teaching Elders to a much larger number of Ruling Elders. It helps to preserve parity by giving the moderatorship to one of the minority of Teaching Elders. Adopted, General Assembly, 1979, **POSITION PAPERS**, P.458

The entire Recommendation No.5 is a long and tedious response to a suggestion of a church in Florida that a Ruling Elder may also moderate Sessions rather than the Pastor being automatically the moderator of the Session. The recommendation reaffirms the PCA practice that the Pastor is the moderator, and rejects the suggestion of the Florida church. Since the entire recommendation is long and wordy, the key reasons are summarized here:

- The Jerusalem Council of Acts 15 was presided over by a Teaching Elder, James.

This is a scriptural precedent.

- The general practice of churches from the time of the apostles has been that local churches are presided over by their ministers. This has proven beneficial. Anything else would be a break from Reformed practice for 500 years. This practice promotes parity since Teaching Elders are normally outnumbered in the Session.
- Since the Teaching Elder is a member of Presbytery, his connection with the Presbytery helps to strengthen the bonds of unity between the local church and the Presbytery.
- Were the Teaching Elder *not* moderator, he might be regarded as an *administrative secretary* rather than a minister of the Word.

The introduction to the recommendation also mentions that when a church elects a pastor, they are also electing him, automatically, as Moderator of the Session.

The PCA endeavors to preserve parity of numbers within the church courts. Where numerical parity cannot be achieved, other administrative devices, such as the abovementioned, are implemented to encourage such.

Is the PCA position on these points mere American tradition? Do these views have a history preceding North America?

While tradition is not authoritative, it has value in revealing the true nature of reformation history and practice. If the PCA position accords with reformed practice throughout time, then American missionaries have not taught mere cultural norms on such points.

The quotes below come from Confessions of Faith from various cultures and languages, dating back to the 16th century. Again, we acknowledge that the Bible alone is authoritative. References to tradition or culture are not authoritative. Yet, a review of history should give a sense of caution to those who would deviate from the established norm.

Observe the following quotes from historical Reformed Confessions, along with their dates.

**HELVETICA CONFSSION: 1536**

...that the mysteries of Scripture be daily expounded and explained by qualified ministers....

**LAUSANNE ARTICLES, Switzerland: 1536**

The said church acknowledges no ministry except that which preaches the Word of God and administers the sacraments.

**GENEVA CONFESSION, 1536 by John Calvin**

We recognize no other pastors in the church than faithful pastors of the Word of God, feeding the sheep of Jesus Christ...

We believe that the ministers of God's Word, and the elders and deacons, ought to be chosen to their respective offices by a lawful Election of the church.... (Note here the distinction made between ministers of the Word on one hand, and elders and deacons on the other.)

**FRENCH CONFESSION OF FAITH: 1559**

...we believe that the order of the church, established by his authority, ought to be sacred and inviolable, and that, therefore, the church cannot exist without pastors for instruction, whom we should respect and reverently listen to when they are properly called and exercise their office faithfully.

The practices of the PCA have their origin in a transcultural movement, 400 years old, known as the Reformation, not in American culture.

**What does the PCA say should be the attitude of the two offices to one another?**

Although the PCA has not made any official pronouncement on this point, an appendix in the **POSITION PAPERS DIGEST**, Vol.5, touches on the subject. Such articles are occasionally inserted to reflect a general feeling of the Assembly, rather than an official pronouncement.

In his article, the writer, Rev. Don Dunkerley, warns of a dangerous pendulum swing that sometimes occurs in relationships between the two classes of Elders.

See [Biblical Rights of Christian Ministers](#)

On one hand he warns that Ruling Elders may be treated as nothing more than a Board of Directors, without spiritual functions. They, along with the Teaching Elders, also have responsibilities for *nurturing and disciplining the flock*. On the other hand, Ruling Elders may consider the minister as *little more than the church administrative secretary and their hired employee*. Worse, such Elders may *see no difference between themselves and the minister...* And this attitude might develop if a Ruling Elder teaches a Bible class, or has some other teaching ministry. *He may not consider that there is any difference between the minister of the Word and himself, except that he supports himself in a secular employment and the minister does not.* P.487-489

## Who may read the Scriptures in a PCA pulpit?

The Larger Catechism:

**QUESTION 156.** Is the Word of God to be read by all?

**ANSWER.** Although all are not to be permitted to read the Word publicly to the congregation, yet all sorts of people are bound to read it apart by themselves, and with their families...

This negative answer, *all are not to be permitted*, leaves an ambiguity, since it does not clarify to whom this duty accrues. On Page 475 of the **POSITION PAPERS**, Dunckerley clarifies the point by referring to the **DIRECTORY OF PUBLIC WORSHIP**, also written by the Westminster theologians. *Reading of the word in the congregation, being part of the public worship of God...is to be performed by the pastors and teachers.*

The only exception recognized by the Westminster theologians was candidates to the office of Pastor. They said, *Howbeit, such as intend the ministry, may occasionally both read the word, and exercise their gift in preaching in the congregation, if allowed by the Presbytery thereunto.* **DIRECTORY OF PUBLIC WORSHIP**, P.375.

## Does the PCA recognize both classes of elder as ministers of the Word?

No. The PCA recognizes the Teaching Elder as the *minister of the Word*. This is evident from the very long dissertation in the **POSITION PAPERS** (Appendix B, P.471-488) too long to reproduce here. Dunkerley gives a good treatment of the scriptural evidence and logic for this position, which will be discussed below in the *Scriptural Defense* portion of this thesis. He shows both from Scripture and the entirety of biblical history from the time of Moses, that the term *minister* has never been used in any other sense than those church officers, as distinct from other kinds of church officers, who have been ordained to administer the Word and the sacraments to the people.

## PART TWO

### Scriptural Evidences for the Positions of the PCA

#### Is it right to use the Old Testament as a guide to New Testament ecclesiology?

It is obligatory, according to the Apostle Paul:

*Do you not know that those who minister the holy things eat of the things of the temple, and those who serve at the altar partake of the offerings of the altar? 14 Even so the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should live from the gospel.* 1 Corinthians 9:13,14

Paul argues for the full-time support of New Testament ministers on the basis of their Old Testament counterparts, the priests. He views the priestly service at the altar as a foretype of the Gospel ministry. As the priest lived exclusively from this service via a special calling from God, so New Testament ministers are to live exclusively from the preaching of the Gospel.

Paul, using this argument, reveals he considers it legitimate to apply general Old Testament principles as the pattern for New Testament ecclesiology. Paul uses a rhetorical question to show he considers the answer obvious. He talks to Christians as though they ought to know these things from their knowledge of the Old Testament.

As with Old Testament priests, this is a calling to the gospel ministry distinct from any other office or function.

*And no man takes this honor to himself, but he who is called by God, just as Aaron was.* Hebrews 5:4

Paul would not encourage Ruling Elders to give up their secular occupations to preach full time. His concepts support a two-officer view with distinct callings and ordinations.

Likewise, in Romans 15:16 Paul uses Old Testament ministry terminology to describe his service as a preacher of the Gospel:

*...that I might be a minister of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles, ministering the gospel of God, that the offering of the Gentiles might be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.*

The word "minister" here is "leitourgos," and the word "ministering" is "hierourgeo." Both words refer to the ministry of the priests in the Old Testament.

## **Conclusion**

We have established two facts from these texts:

- New Testament ecclesiology is based on Old Testament patterns. We are not free, therefore, to interpret New Testament ecclesiology without reference to the general Old Testament principles.
- Both Testaments indicate, as Paul shows, some are called to the ministry of the Word and sacraments, and some are not. As a rule, those who are called do it full time. Are we free to limit our understanding of ecclesiology to the New Testament only? Definitely not.

Reformed hermeneutics examines the continuity of the Bible as a whole. Though we

agree the New Testament has authority over the Old as the final revelation, nevertheless, if something seems to contradict the principle of continuity, we need to take another look. Our conclusions must always be fulfillments of the Old Testament, not negations.

This global view of Scripture in dealing with ecclesiology questions is not our own modern interpretation. The Westminster authors, in their booklet, **THE FORM OF CHURCH GOVERNMENT**, stated:

As there were in the Jewish church elders of the people joined with the priests and Levites in the government of the church, so Christ, who has instituted government, and governors ecclesiastical in the church, hath furnished some in his church beside the ministers of the word, with gifts for government, and with commission to execute the same when called thereunto, who are to join with the minister in the government of the church. Which officers reformed churches commonly called elders. (P.402) Quoted in **PCA DIGEST**, P.476

### **Old Testament Fore Types of New Testament Government**

Do we see two offices of spiritual leadership in the Old Testament?

Yes. Before going further, let's clarify a point. It has been said the elders of Israel were mere politicians, civil authorities, and governors, not spiritual leaders. Both Testaments, however, make a distinction between the elders of Israel and other leaders in Israel.

#### **In the Old Testament**

*And Jehu wrote and sent letters to Samaria, to the rulers of Jezreel, to the Elders, 2Kings 10:1*

*... according to the instructions of the leaders and elders... Ezra 10:8*

#### **In the New Testament**

*And it came to pass, on the next day, that their rulers, elders, and scribes... Acts 4:5*

*Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, Rulers of the people and elders of Israel... Acts 4:8*

**Principle one:** Two related offices of spiritual leadership existed from the beginning.

*So the LORD said to Moses: "Gather to Me seventy men of the elders of Israel, whom you know to be the elders of the people and officers over them; bring them to the tabernacle of meeting, that they may stand there with you."*  
Numbers 11:16,24,25

*So Moses went out and told the people the words of the LORD, and he gathered the seventy men of the elders of the people and placed them around the tabernacle. Verse 24*

*Then the LORD came down in the cloud, and spoke to him, and took of the Spirit that was upon him, and placed the same upon the seventy elders; and it happened, when the Spirit rested upon them, that they prophesied, although they never did so again. Verse 25*

Note the particulars:

- Both the priest, (Moses), and the elders enjoyed the same Spirit of God and manifestations thereof.
- Both shared in governmental authority over the congregation. But the priest retained the sacramental functions.

This text shows how the role of the elders was a spiritual function, not just a political appointment. Nevertheless, their spiritual participation was never regarded as making them equivalent to the officiating ministers in the functions of the latter.

**Principle Two:** The Word of God was committed to both types of leaders, first to the priests, those with sacramental authority, and then to the elders of the people.

*So Moses wrote this law and delivered it to the priests, the sons of Levi, who bore the ark of the covenant of the LORD, and to all the elders of Israel. Deuteronomy 31:9*

*So Moses came and called for the elders of the people, and laid before them all these words which the LORD commanded him. Exodus 19:7*

**Principle Three:** The elders participated in sacramental functions, under the authority and leadership of the priests. But these offices and functions were never confused.

*Now if the whole congregation of Israel sins unintentionally, and the thing is hidden from the eyes of the assembly, and they have done something against any of the commandments of the LORD in anything which should not be done, and are guilty; Leviticus 4:13-17*

*when the sin which they have committed becomes known, then the assembly shall offer a young bull for the sin, and bring it before the tabernacle of meeting. Verse 14*

*And the elders of the congregation shall lay their hands on the head of the bull before the LORD. Then the bull shall be killed before the LORD. Verse 15*

*The anointed priest shall bring some of the bull's blood to the tabernacle of meeting. Verse 16*

*Then the priest shall dip his finger in the blood and sprinkle it seven times before the LORD, in front of the veil. Verse 17*

The elders participated in the process, but the priest offered the blood. Thus, the elders participated in a way the common people could not. This, however, did not cause any confusion between the elder and the priest. No elder thought he had sacramental authority just because of this.

**Principle Four:** The elders were primarily representatives of the people. This is shown in both testaments by the repeated term *elders of the people*. Exodus 19:7; 11:16; 11:24; Jeremiah 19:1; Matthew 21:23; 26:3; 26:47; 27:1; Luke 22:66

### **The conclusions are inescapable**

- There was a congregation.
- There was a category of officials officiating at the altars whose function was to proclaim the Word of God and offer sacrifices, i.e., sacraments. These represented God to the people.
- There was a category of officials helping the above, whose primary function was governmental.
- There was some overlapping of both governmental and sacerdotal participation, but the distinctions between the two kinds of officials were never confused.

Note also it cannot be argued that those elders were merely government officials over the nation, and there is no correspondence between these and New Testament elders, because:

1. They were baptized in the same Spirit as Moses. Thus, their calling was a spiritual one, from God.
2. To them was also committed the safekeeping of the Word of God.
3. They had a limited right to participate in the offering of the sacrifices.

Therefore, the Old Testament elders who cooperated with the spiritual leaders to rule the people, could very appropriately be considered Ruling Elders.

The Jews carried this through to New Testament times. Note Luke 22:66,

*As soon as it was day, the elders of the people, both chief priests and scribes, came together and led Him into their council, saying,...*

This verse is interesting because it is one of three in which the Greek word *Presbytery*

*(Presbyterian)* occurs in the New Testament. A literal translation would be: *And at daybreak, the Presbytery of the people gathered together, both chief priests and scribes, and brought him to the Sanhedrin.*

Here the word Presbytery is defined as a body composed of priests, (those with sacramental functions), accompanied by scribes, (those without such functions.)

Obviously this Presbytery was not a Christian one. Nevertheless, it reflects the continuity through the Bible of a general concept of government the apostles adopted afterward.

Conclusion: We see from these texts there existed a category of spiritual leaders in the Old Testament, called priests, who officiated at the altar, proclaimed the Word via foretypes, and offered sacrifices. Another category of spiritual leader existed also, which had governmental functions but were not politicians. Their office was spiritual in nature, and they participated at times with the priests in sacramental functions.

## NEW TESTAMENT FULFILLMENTS OF OLD TESTAMENT PRECEDENTS

### Evidence One

#### **The pattern in 1 Timothy 5:17**

*Let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and doctrine.*

In the context and verse we notice:

1. There is a congregation called *the church*.
2. There are officials whose primary function it is to labor in preaching and teaching the Word, although they govern also. By logical extension, this must also include the sacraments, since it is the Word that authorizes the sacraments.
3. There are officials whose primary function is governmental, not preaching and teaching the Word. By logical extension, this must also exclude sacramental functions.
4. There is a clear overlapping in the way the text is worded.

What precisely is the difference between this and the Old Testament pattern? Very little in principle. Since there appears to be continuity in government between the two Testaments, applying the same principles is justified. This clears up the ambiguities in 1 Timothy 5:17, just as the continuity of the Covenant clarifies the ambiguities in the New Testament on the issue of sacraments.

### Evidence Two

## The Use of the Word *minister*

A study of this term throughout Scripture is complex since it translates various Greek and Hebrew words. The words have varied usages, many of which are figurative.

1. When used in the Old Testament in reference to ministering the Word, it is in connection with priests. The two terms, "minister" and "priest," are used together 41 times in the Old Testament. Examples: *...and with the Levites, the priests, My ministers.* (Jeremiah 33:21) *Let the priests, who minister to the LORD...* Joel 2:17
2. In the New Testament, it is frequently associated with any one of those offices in Ephesians 4:11 associated with ministering and mentoring the body of Christ.
3. **Apostles:** *That he may take part of this ministry and apostleship.* Acts 1:25  
*But we will give ourselves continually to prayer and the ministry of the Word.* Acts 6:4
4. **Pastors:** (Note: Timothy was a pastor. That is why 1&2 Timothy are called Pastoral Epistles.) *... and sent Timothy, our brother and minister of God, and our fellow laborer in the gospel of Christ, to establish you and encourage you concerning your faith, (1 Thessalonians 3:2.) If you instruct the brethren in these things, you will be a good minister of Jesus Christ, nourished in the words of faith and of the good doctrine which you have carefully followed.* 1 Timothy 4:6

Conclusion: Both Testaments support a distinction regarding those called to preach the Word to God's people versus any other ecclesiastical office.

### Evidence Three

Timothy, Organizing Pastor

In 1 Timothy 3, we see character qualifications for elders. How do we explain there exists no distinction between Teaching and Ruling Elders in this text? This question fails to account for the nature of the Pastoral Epistles. Let's keep in mind who Timothy was and what he was doing.

Timothy was an organizing pastor, sent by Paul to put churches in order. We see this in the following texts:

*For this reason I have sent Timothy to you, who is my beloved and faithful son in the Lord, who will remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach everywhere in every church.* 1 Corinthians 4:17

*...and sent Timothy, our brother and minister of God, and our fellow laborer in the gospel of Christ, to establish you and encourage you concerning your faith,* 1 Thessalonians 3:2

### **Additional clues:**

Timothy was a minister. He is called *minister of God* in 1 Thessalonians 3:2. A Presbytery had ordained him, (1 Timothy 4:14.) He had been sent by Paul to establish in the faith those churches Paul had left. He had been instructed to find faithful men, capable of teaching others. 2 Timothy 4:2 He had authority to ordain elders. 1 Timothy 5:22

From these clues we see 1&2 Timothy are instructions to a young pastor in how to organize a church. In Chapter 3, Paul gives Timothy some character qualifications for elders. It is possible, therefore, that when Paul wrote this chapter, he was thinking principally of Ruling Elders.

This may explain the use of the term "overseer" in Verse 1, rather than "teacher" or "pastor." *If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer, he desires a noble task. (NIV)* The term "bishop" here is "episcopos," meaning "overseer" or "supervisor." Supervision is primarily a governmental function.

Notice also the use of "*able to teach*" in Verse 2. A Teaching Elder must be more than just *able to teach*. He must *be* a teacher, capable of refuting and rebuking his opponents and defending sound doctrine effectively (1 Timothy 1:9). This requires he be skillful in argumentation and didactics, areas not mentioned in Chapter 3. But they *are* mentioned elsewhere in the epistles, directed to Timothy, an ordained minister.

Note also in 2 Timothy 2:2, Paul tells Timothy to find faithful men who can teach others also. It is unlikely he would bypass his Ruling Elders in this, if they existed. Apparently Paul was instructing Timothy on how to form his Session.

If this is the case, then it is difficult to see how any text in the Pastoral Epistles could support a one-office view.

### **Evidence Four**

The Mentoring Function of the pastor-teacher In Ephesians 4:11-16

In this text, we see both the titles and the functions of ministers. The long sentence in verses 12-16 describes the goals of their ministry toward all other Christians. They are to equip Christians to minister, teach them the knowledge of the Son of God, mature them in Christ, affirm them in sound doctrine, and, in general, grow them to maturity.

The word "mentoring" summarizes this. The means by which they do it is the teaching of the Word.

Notice Ruling Elder is not mentioned in this context. If it were, we would have a

contradiction, because none of us believe the teaching ministry is the primary function of Ruling Elders.

This in turn suggests a distinction in the two offices, which is a difference of office, rather than a mere coincidence of function. In verses 10-12, we see Christ has given gifts to men. What are these gifts? They are the men in Verse 11, whom Christ is giving to the church to bring them to maturity.

This cannot logically be said of all church officers in the same way. Otherwise, all would be teachers.

Dunckerley expresses this clearly:

It is not simply that he gives some men the gifts to function as apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers. The thought is more that the men who are apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors are given to the church to minister the Word and to equip the saints for other forms of ministry. **POSITION PAPERS**, Vol.5, P.484.

Who is included in this mentoring function? All members of the body of Christ, including Ruling Elders. In the Ephesians text, no one is excluded. The possession of an ecclesiastical title does not exempt anyone in the congregation from being mentored.

See [Mentoring for Christian Leadership](#)

Conclusion: From the Ephesians text alone, we deduce a distinction between the two offices.

## **Evidence Five**

Teachers and administrators

*And God has appointed these in the church: first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, varieties of tongues. 1 Corinthians 12:28*

Paul puts offices and gifts in a specific order, based on the importance of the gift relative to the edification of the church. In no way does this contradict the concept of parity of voice and vote within church courts. Paul is talking about edification of the body of Christ, not the relationship of the officers to one another in terms of government.

Notice the *third* ministry gift in the church is teacher. It could hardly be argued that pastors are not included, since we have already seen the term "pastor" is linked inseparably with "*teacher*" in Eph. 4:11 as one office. Further down, we see *administrations*. This must include Ruling Elders, since administration is their function.

This text therefore supports a distinction between the two officers by listing and enumerating them.

Important note: Using this text is not intended to support the Episcopalian notion that the Teaching Elder is superior in governmental authority over other elders. He is not. It is intended to show *distinction*, not inherent personal *superiority*. We can only speculate why Paul puts the list in this way. Perhaps it is because the correct functioning of the other gifts must be based on the Word, soundly taught.

### **Summary of Evidences**

It has been shown by the Scriptures in the section above that there exist in both Testaments two orders of spiritual leaders. One to whom the ministering of the Word of God and the sacraments has been specially committed. This is a calling, ministry, and office, not a mere description of function. In the Old Testament, these are called *priests* and *prophets*. In the New Testament, they are called *pastor-teachers*. The other office mentioned in both Testaments serves to assist in governing the people of God and to participate with the ministers. Ephesians 4:11-16

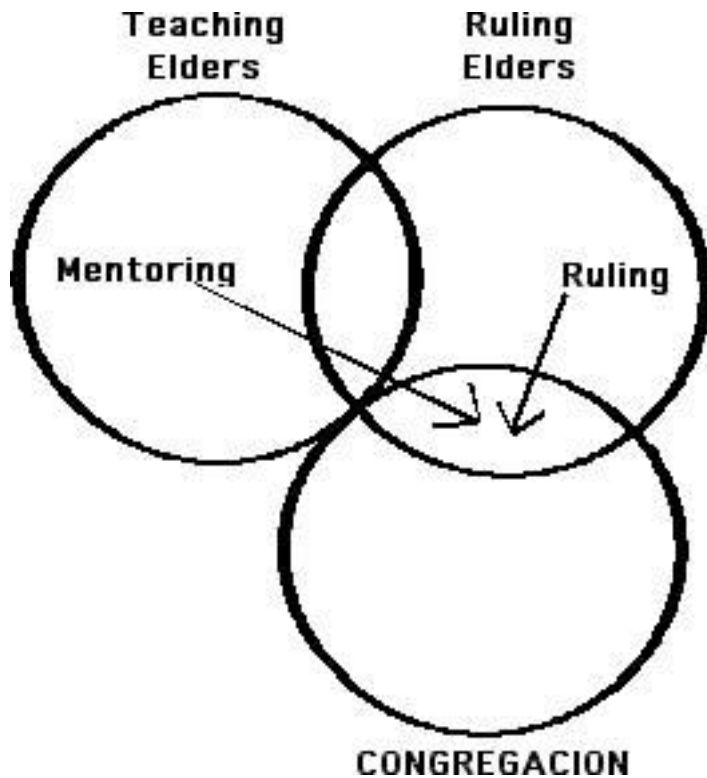
### **GENERAL QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS**

Does the mentoring function of the pastor-teacher, along with his function as administrator of the Word and sacraments, make him superior in rank to the Ruling Elder? No.

Not a single Presbyterian writer I can find asserts these duties make the Teaching Elder superior in rank or in terms of governing authority. While PCA writers consistently affirm the exclusivity of the sacramental functions of the Teaching Elder, they are all careful to assert the parity of Ruling Elders in terms of church administration. In Episcopalian thinking, the mentoring function automatically assumes a superiority of rank. This may seem natural to some people, but it is a non-rational leap. Why would the ability to teach grant a person a greater voice or vote than one who does not teach? None of the PCA writers assume any governmental superiority on the mere basis of the authority to minister the Word and sacraments.

Therefore, asserting the spiritual authority of the Teaching Elder as regards mentoring, preaching, teaching, or administering the sacraments is not, in any sense of the word, an affirmation of an Episcopalian viewpoint. Nor is there any rational reason to assume recognizing such authority must necessarily lead to a form of hierarchicalism.

See [The Dangers of Hierarchy in Christian Organizations](#)

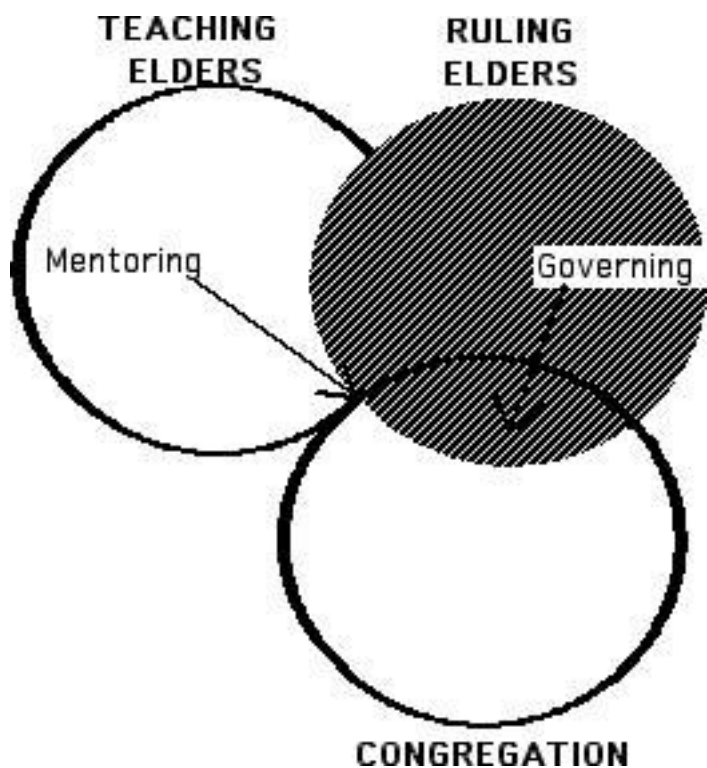


In this diagram, we notice the Ruling Elders are objects of the ministry of the Teaching Elders, because they also are members of the congregation.

Note the Teaching Elders have this relationship with the Ruling Elders, *not because of any superiority of rank*, but because the Ruling Elders are members of the congregation. What happens if the Ruling Elders refuse to recognize the mentoring function of the Teaching Elders with respect to them? The ministry of the Teaching Elders can become stagnated, to the detriment not only of the congregation, but of the Ruling

Elders as well. This happens if the Ruling Elders get confused and imagine that governmental parity means they do not need mentoring by the Teaching Elders.

It is very clear from certain texts that the Ruling Elders also have a pastoral relationship with the congregation. Does this support the view that they are one and the same with Teaching Elders, and are also *pastors*? No.



This is a logic error. The word “pastor,” meaning “shepherd,” is used in Ephesians 4:11 within the title “pastor-teacher.” Then we see in Acts 20:28 the word “feed” is the verb form of the noun for “shepherding.” This would appear to lend support to the above-mentioned view.

A fallacy is involved here. The mere

fact there is overlapping within the functions of two offices proves nothing. For example, Peter called himself a fellow elder while addressing the elders in 1 Peter 5:2. Yet Peter was an apostle. Should we conclude from this that elders are also apostles? Or there is no distinction between apostle and elder?

What is the Scriptural authority by which the Westminster Confession asserts that only ordained ministers may administer the sacraments?

This is one of those points the Confession terms a *necessary consequence... deduced from Scripture*. No text exists commanding that only Teaching Elders administer the sacraments. But the nature of their ministry forces this deduction.

Notice the Old Testament foretype of the priest. To these alone were given the combined function of proclaiming the Law and administering the sacrifices, which were foretypes of New Testament ministry, as Paul mentioned in 1 Corinthians 9. These two are inseparably joined. Administering the Law also meant administering the sacrifices. In the same way, to certain New Testament offices is committed the ministering of the Word to God's people. But the same Word cannot be ministered without also administering the sacraments, because the two are inseparably joined.

The conclusion is forced.

What is the scriptural support for the PCA view that the two offices have different ordinations? We have here another *necessary consequence* in which no clear statement from the Bible exists. We must proceed according to the overall pattern of Scripture.

The priests in the Old Testament received a special ordination, distinct from prophets or elders. In Numbers 8, we see the prescription for the ordination of priests.

## **Conclusion**

The continuity of both Testaments shows two offices have always existed within one class of elder: Teaching and Ruling Elders. Overlapping functions occur within the two offices. While these have governing authority in common, the Teaching Elder alone ministers the Word of God and the sacraments. The Teaching Elders uses these particular responsibilities to fulfill his role of pastoring and mentoring the people of God.

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