



QLD PRESBYTERIAN
ELDER TRAINING

THE ELDERSHIP PAPERS

FOR THE TRAINING OF ELDERS IN THE
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF QUEENSLAND

Eldership Paper 5



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Eldership Paper Five

The Elder and the Denomination

Introduction

There are two core principles that make us Presbyterian:

1. What we believe as Presbyterians, as described in the Westminster Confession, read in the light of the Declaratory Statement, adopted by the Federal Assembly on the 24th of July, 1901. These documents guide the way Ministers and Elders of the church read the Scriptures; our only rule of faith and practice.
2. The governing of our denomination, at every level of its structural and organisational life, is by Elder (Presbyters).

This paper looks at the structures of the denomination and the vital need for Elders not only to understand the nature and structure of the denomination, but also the importance of clearly communicating this to brothers and sisters in Christ who join our churches.

Presbyterianism and the Patterns of Australian History

On the first of January 1901, the various states and territories of Australia became a Federation, the Commonwealth of Australia.

In the constitution of Australia, to the Federal Government was given responsibility for items with national scope:

- Post, telephones and the Internet
- Money
- Immigration
- Defence



The States and Territories were given responsibility for:

- Public Transport
- Schools
- Hospitals
- Policing

Local Governments¹³ were given responsibility for:

- Rubbish collection and recycling
- Parks, sports fields and swimming pools
- Pet control
- Parking

Also in 1901, on the twenty-fourth of July, the various Presbyterian State and Territory Assemblies became federated as the Presbyterian Church of Australia. The structures of the Commonwealth of Australia and the Presbyterian Church of Australia are remarkably similar.

The Federal Assembly was given responsibility for those things of a national scope.

These are:

- Doctrine of the Church
- Worship of the Church
- Discipline of the Church
- Admission and training of candidates for the ministry and deaconesses
- Receiving Ministers from other denominations
- Overseas Mission
- Mission to remote areas of Australia at the request of the appropriate state
- Christian education
- Publication of the national journal; and
- Chaplains to the defence force

The State Assembly exercises power in three areas of the denomination's life - the administrative, legislative and judicial:

- **Administrative:** exercised through committees appointed by the Assembly to conduct its business throughout the year. The Committee submits an annual report to the Assembly for debate and approval concerning decisions and new initiatives.
- **Legislative:** Assembly can make or alter rules that concern

¹³ There is no mention of Local Governments in the Constitution of Australia.



the denomination's operations. These rules or alterations are incorporated into the Code after a process of consultation with Presbyteries and Sessions.

- **Judicial:** The Assembly can review decisions by Presbyteries through complaint, appeal or petition.

The Presbytery is responsible for:

The superintending of all matters relating to doctrine and discipline in the charges (churches) within its bounds.

- The acceptance, supervision, and annual review of candidates for the ministry, including deaconesses.
- Deals with all matters in relation to the appointment, ordination, induction and resignation of Ministers.
- Deals with all matters affecting the teaching and character of all workers ordained or otherwise under the Presbytery's jurisdiction.
- Ensures the instruction of the state and federal Assemblies are observed within the bounds of the Presbytery.
- The establishment of new churches within its bounds.

The Session is responsible for:

- Oversight and promotion of the spiritual health and fruitfulness of the Church in regard to public worship, teaching and discipline.
- Supervision of all ministries and groups within a church, including of all employed staff within the church, according to the rules and practices of the Presbyterian denomination, as well as ministries of the church.
- Determining the time, date and place of public worship, the Lord's Supper and Baptism.
- Admitting persons to membership of the church.
- Disciplining erring members and restore them to fellowship.
- Calling Congregational meetings.
- Examining the suitability of persons for Eldership and membership of the Committee of Management.
- Ordaining and inducting Elders.
- Appointing leaders and group leaders of ministries such as Sunday Schools, Youth Groups, Growth Groups etc.
- Nominating special offerings in agreement with the Committee of Management.



- Receiving and discussing petitions from members of the church.
- Providing for the care of the poor.
- Ensuring the sending and receiving of appropriate documents to Presbytery, state and federal Assembly.
- Ensuring secure holding of congregational records.

There is a similarity of shape between the structures of Government in Australia and the Government of the Presbyterian denomination in Australia. The main difference is that our denomination has an extra level of 'government:' the Session.

The Role of a Denomination

The local church is fundamental to the denomination in all aspects of governance. All other Courts and committees primarily exist to serve the local church and not the other way around. In the New Testament, there is no mention of a formal denomination. The closest thing we have to a denomination or denominational organisation is Paul and the Pauline Circle, a large group of fellow-workers, fellow-servants and fellow-soldiers who served with Paul and often under his direction. We see in Paul's letters and in Acts an organism that at times behaves in 'denominational' ways.

Some of these are:

- The selection of and training up of suitable persons for ministry
- Church planting and appointment of Elders and Deacons (1 Timothy and Titus)
- The public endorsement of gospel workers. This often occurs at the end of Paul's letters (Romans 16)
- Opening up of new fields of mission - Romans and Paul's intention to spread the gospel in Spain.
- Dealing with conflict and discipline (1 & 2 Corinthians)
- Organising mercy ministries – the Jerusalem Collection for the poor (1 & 2 Corinthians, Galatians)

These are some of the aspects of Paul's ministry that approximate to some of the functions of a denomination. And like Paul, the denomination and denominational agents and agencies, should be servant-like. Also like Paul, they need to avoid the exercise of their power, except in truly extreme circumstances, as well as resisting centralising power and initiative for the sake of efficiency. The drive for efficiency can all too easily justify forsaking the pursuit of spiritual



Question

What have you noticed about the structure and responsibilities of the of the different Courts of the Presbyterian denomination?



and relational maturity. Like our reason, the denomination is a good servant and a terrible master.

A denomination is an association of churches who agree on many things both doctrinally and governmentally. By formally associating, there are many things they are able to do together that they could not do individually:

- A theological college to train candidates for the ministry
- Support for planting churches or giving to churches in need
- Develop mission strategies at home or abroad
- Oversee the spiritual and temporal resources of churches and ministries
- Develop specialised support ministries or resources around age-specific groups

Tim Keller on the Value of Belonging to the Presbyterian Denomination

On July 1, 2022, Mike Cospers interviewed Tim Keller for the *Rise and Fall of Mars Hill* podcast.

Early in the interview, Tim Keller reflected on the value of belonging to a denomination that takes what a pastor does and says seriously enough to hold them accountable; something that was missing at Mars Hill. Tim reflected how he had to answer questions put to his Presbytery by another Presbytery about the orthodoxy of his teaching about creation. Tim was presented with a question to answer through his Presbytery on five different occasions. Keller saw this accountability by the Presbytery as fundamentally helpful for both the Pastor and his church.

You can listen to the episode or read the transcript at:
www.christianitytoday.com/ct/podcasts/rise-and-fall-of-mars-hill/tim-keller-mike-cospers-mars-hill-bonus.html.

When Tim Keller visited Australia in 2014, he met with representatives of the Presbyterian Church of Australia. David Jones interviewed Tim and at one point asked the question, “What is the nature of Eldership in a large church like Redeemer?”

As I remember it, he talked about how mature Elders, alongside a Minister, keep him from being authoritarian. This, he said, was

Listen to Tim Keller on the Rise and Fall of Mars Hill podcast





because the Session has power to make certain decisions and not the Minister; the Minister presents an idea or concept and then seeks to persuade the Session members as to its soundness. Tim told a story about wanting to start another church and taking the idea to the Session, which discussed it, considered it, and eventually said they didn't think that this was the right time for a new church plant. I remember Tim reflecting that he still thought planting the church was the right idea and the right time; thus, the situation presented him with a choice. This wasn't a gospel issue, so would he remain a good Presbyterian or go rogue? He submitted to the wisdom of his brother Elders. The church was planted eventually, at a later date.

Tim did identify a danger for Elders in the use of the Session's power: the need to be careful to avoid micro managing.

The Spiritual Discipline of Belonging to the Presbyterian Denomination

There is a spiritual discipline in belonging to a denomination as a Minister or an Elder. This discipline is articulated in a promise made by Ministers and should, in my opinion, be made by Elders:

“ *vii. Do you promise to give conscientious attendance upon the Courts of the Church, and to direct your best attention to the business thereof, doing all in the spirit of faithfulness, brotherly kindness, and charity?* ”

The first part of this promise is covered in the sixth promise Elders make, but it is the second half that I believe is significant, '... doing all in the spirit of faithfulness, brotherly kindness, and charity'.

A denomination is an association of people whom we have not chosen, nor have they chosen us, but what we do have in common is eternally important: we share in a life in Christ. This is true of all Christians, but what those who belong to the Presbyterian denomination share is not only a framework of belief, but also a way of ordering our churches that is both Biblical and Christ-honouring. But here is the real point: it is easy to say we share a life in Christ, and this is true of all Christians, but the need to exercise kindness and love (charity) becomes increasingly difficult with people we know and rub shoulders with. We can regularly rub each other up the wrong way! That is why belonging to a church family and



Question

What strikes you most in Tim Keller's comments about belonging to the Presbyterian Denomination?



a denomination is a spiritual discipline. It is easy to have warm feelings towards people I do not know and who do not know me. It is the people closest to me that I struggle with, and am tempted to ignore or belittle. Belonging to a denomination as an Elder or a Minister provides a way of growing up spiritually, emotionally and relationally.

I take it that what this will mean in practice is that when we disagree with a person in our denomination, we seek to engage them - rather than disengage, avoid and dismiss them. It will mean seeking clarity about the position of another, and being prepared to reconsider our own. It may even entail repentance and forgiveness! Above all, it leads to humility.

Eldership All the Way Up

Elders are represented at every level of the denominational 'tree'.

A principle of Presbyterianism that is observed at the level of the General Assembly of Australia (meeting every three years), the State Assembly (usually meeting once a year) and the Presbytery (usually meeting once a month) in which the local Church is placed, is the parity between Elders and Ministers. That is, equal numbers of Ministers and Elders meet to conduct the business of these three Courts. It is only at the local level of Session that there is a lack of parity. In most churches there is one Minister and a number of Elders, or a couple of ordained Ministers and a number of Elders.

This representation must be embraced by the Elders of a church; it is both a privilege and a responsibility.

Eldership promise vi. says:

“ Do you engage through Divine Grace to discharge with diligence and faithfulness the various duties of your office, watching over the flock, showing yourself a pattern of good works, and giving a conscientious attendance on the meetings of Session, Presbytery, and Assembly, when duly called so to do?

Fundamental to healthy Presbyterianism is the engagement of Ministers and Elders in the Courts of the denomination, making committees accountable to serve the churches in the most effective way. If we are disengaged, or lack courage in lovingly asking



Question

What is helpful for you in thinking about belonging to the denomination as a spiritual discipline?



appropriately difficult questions and pursuing answers in brotherly kindness and charity, we only have ourselves to blame when things go wrong. In our Presbyterian denomination, responsibility and healthy accountability leads to the health of the whole.

Presbyterianism: Neither Fish nor Fowl

One of the blessings of the excellent biblical training we receive at our theological college (QTC) is that Christians who are looking for a church that teaches the Bible well, will often find a Presbyterian church home to settle in to. There is however, at times, a down side to this blessing. People from other church backgrounds can't seem to understand how we operate; we are neither fish nor fowl! Those from a congregational background expect that most decisions will be made by a majority vote of the church. Those from a hierarchical background wonder why the Minister doesn't just get on and change what he likes.

We often do a pretty bad job of explaining the Presbyterian rationale of why we do things the way we do, and why do some people get a say and others don't at different times.

For those from different denominational backgrounds, this can be frustrating at best, and at worst can lead to conflict.

We would serve God's people well if we explained the value of a system where the Minister has limited power, while the Session has significant authority, and where Communicant members of the church - those who are followers of Christ and have declared that this particular church will be their spiritual home - have a significant say in who will be an Elder or a Minister to the congregation.

One way of doing this is: whenever decisions are being made, an explanation of the process and the different responsibilities of different people is given. It would also be helpful to explain that becoming a Communicant member of the Presbyterian denomination, is not a commitment to all things Presbyterian, but is a commitment to living as a child of God in Christ. This level of clarity and ownership of how we make decisions must lead to greater understanding, and hopefully deeper, vital ownership in the local church.



Question

What do you feel is the greatest impediment for Elders and Ministers engaging in the structures of the denomination?



Question

If a person who had been attending your church for four months asked you what was different about how Presbyterians made decisions, compared to other denominations, name three key differences.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Consider developing a document in Session explaining the structure of decision making in your church and what helpful principles underlie that structure.



