



QLD PRESBYTERIAN
ELDER TRAINING

THE ELDERSHIP PAPERS

FOR THE TRAINING OF ELDERS IN THE
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF QUEENSLAND

Eldership Paper 6



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Eldership Paper Six

The Elder and His Promises

Introduction

In this paper we will firstly consider the place promises occupy generally in the Presbyterian denomination, particularly in the local church. Secondly, we will look at and explore the promises Elders, in particular, are required to make.

Promises lead to Responsibilities of Privilege

In our denomination, promises lead to the responsibilities of privilege. This phrase means that people in particular roles are required to make promises when they are given significant responsibility for the health and fruitfulness of the church - which is described as a privilege in Scripture.

In the local church these are:

- Ministers
- Elders
- Communicant Members

Ministers, after a significant period of training, supervision, testing by his Presbytery and finally, on many occasions, the call of a congregation to be their Minister, they are ordained by the Presbytery of the church to which they are called or appointed. The service of ordination includes promises on what they believe, how they will live, what their motivations are for ministry, and how they will depend on God's grace in fulfilling this ministry.

Elders, are required to be trained in the role of Elder. This training includes requirements of Eldership, the promises they will make, and their understanding of the Westminster Confession of Faith as amended by the General Assembly of Australia, read in the light



of the Declaratory Statement. Like marriage, Eldership should not be entered into lightly or hastily. There are a number of ways a candidate for Eldership can be nominated either by a Communicant Member or by the Session. After nomination, the date is set for the election of the nominated persons, or a postal vote is conducted. Once a date is set for voting, there is an opportunity for the members of the congregation to raise with the Session, in writing, issues of belief, behaviour and character that they may feel either disqualify a candidate for Eldership or perhaps put a pause on the candidate moving forward at this point in time. Once the date is set for voting, Communicant Members of the congregation and Adherent members¹⁴ vote for those nominees they believe should be Elders. The votes of Communicant Members and Adherents are recorded separately. The Session then considers the results of the vote at its next meeting and determines the outcome. The Session has the ultimate say as to whether a person will become an Elder of the Session¹⁵. The outcome of this process is announced by the Session and events move forward to the ordination of the Elder/s. An Elder is not ordained by the Presbytery. He is ordained by the Session of the church, and it is at a church service that he is required to answer questions and promises.

Communicant Members are fundamental to the overall health of the congregation in our denomination. When Ministers are being called to a congregation, or Elders voted on, a distinction is made between the votes of the Communicant Members and Adherents. Perhaps the best way of describing the difference is to say that the votes of Communicant Members on an issue are determinative¹⁶: they determine the outcome of the votes, normally; whilst the votes of Adherents are indicative: their votes indicate their preference, which is taken into consideration. In the majority of all votes I have observed, the Adherents' votes have aligned with the votes of Communicant members.

¹⁴ **1.5** Adherents are people who have attained the age of sixteen (16) years and over and who:
 (a) are baptised people who make such profession of their faith as would entitle them to become Communicants, but who choose not to become Communicants of the Presbyterian Church of Australia by virtue of membership of another Christian Church, or by reasons of conscientious objection, and
 (b) worship regularly in the congregation, and
 (c) contribute to its support, and
 (d) apply to or are invited by the Session to be enrolled. (BB 1996 48.8)

¹⁵ This is one of those moments when we see that the Presbyterian form of government is not purely congregational (democratic).

¹⁶ The exception to this rule is voting for anything where the Session ultimately determines the outcome which includes who becomes an Elder.



Unlike the promises made by Ministers and Elders, the promises of Communicant Members are not prescribed by the General Assembly of Australia¹⁷. There is a significant distinction between the roles of Ministers, Elders and Communicant Members. Whilst Ministers and Elders make promises that refer to the denomination's doctrine, government and principles that shape worship services, no such responsibilities are laid on Communicant Members. The promises Communicant Members make most often include:

- a belief in God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit
- a declaration that Jesus is their Lord and Saviour, acknowledging repentance from sin
- That they seek to love him, confess him and serve him in all of their life,
- that they will make use of God's means of grace – reading the Bible and prayer and
- will regularly attend church
- will give of their means in supporting the physical needs of the congregation
- will respect the authority of the Session as they pastorally oversee the congregation

Increasingly, those who are accepted into membership are invited to give their testimony.

There was a time in the 1980's and 90's when many people who attended our churches were indifferent to membership. Not only is that changing for those attending, I believe Sessions need to increasingly clarify what membership means and especially what the privileges and responsibilities of members and leadership are towards one another.

Questions and Promises for Elders-Elect

The service of ordination for an Elder, including the questions and promises are quite formal. This style declares the significance in both the life of both the congregation and the Elder, as well as a degree of solemn joy and thankfulness as is appropriate.

There are seven questions or promises that an Elder makes. My aim is to briefly describe the substance of each of the questions.

¹⁷ Promises are recommended by the General Assembly of Australia through the GAA Public Worship and Aids to Devotion Committee (pwad.org.au.)



Question 1

The Congregation assenting, [to the questions they have previously been asked] the following questions are put to the Elders-elect¹⁸:

“ ii) *Do you believe the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be the Word of God, the only rule of faith and practice?*”

The question identifies that the Scriptures - those histories, laws, wisdom, songs, prophecies, gospels, and letters which make up the Old and New Testaments - are the Word of God. This embraces the idea of their divine origin, but in no way discounts the role, background and abilities of the human authors.

Further, the first question identifies that these Scriptures are sufficient and authoritative for faith and practice.

Faith and Practice:

Faith identifies the substance of who and what we believe. Who God is, and how Christ is the fulfillment of the Father's plans and purposes to bring salvation, through the enlivening of the Spirit. The pivotal role of Christ's life, cross and resurrection, and our response of faith and repentance. Our adoption into God's family and the purpose of the Church for the glory of God. Jesus' return to judge the world and gather his resurrected people in a new heaven and new earth.

Practice includes all of who we are and is demonstrated in our living; and how the Church is Christ's creation for the glory of God and the sake of the world. Practice includes the response of all of who we are as individuals, and who and how we are when we are together.

Sufficient means that we do not need anything else besides the Scriptures for faith and practice. What this doesn't mean is that the Scriptures are sufficient for space travel or how to do an appendectomy.

Authoritative means that this Word of God is to be received as the authority over all other authorities – reason, tradition and experience. This does not mean that God's Word is antithetical to these helpful tools. Rather, reason, tradition and experience cannot be used to trump the Word of God.



Question

Identify an issue that is a little contentious. What do the Scriptures say on this issue? What place do reason, tradition or experience play in your thinking?

¹⁸ <https://presbyterian.org.au/gaa-code-book/>



Question 2

“ ii. *Do you own and accept the Westminster Confession of Faith¹⁹, as amended by the General Assembly, and read in the light of the Declaratory Statement contained in the Basis of Union adopted by this Church on the 24th day of July, 1901, as an exhibition of the sense in which you understand the Holy Scriptures and as a confession of your faith; and do you engage firmly and constantly to adhere thereto, and to the utmost of your power to assert, maintain and defend the same?*

This is the longest question and also the most complicated; thus, some background will be helpful.

The Westminster Confession of Faith (1 July 1643 - 22 February 1649)

During the English Civil War (1642-1651) between Charles I and Parliament, the Parliament was committed to reforming the Church in England so that it would be closer to the Word of God and aligned more with Reformed churches in other countries - especially the Church of Scotland, which was Presbyterian. The Parliament called ‘an Assembly of learned, godly and judicious Divines (*theologians*) to advise and consult of such matters and things as should be proposed unto them...’

The Assembly consisted of 121 theologians, ten lords and twenty commoners with the rights of assessors, as well as four Ministers and two Elders appointed by the Church of Scotland.

Essentially, the Parliamentary brief for the Assembly was to rewrite the confessional document of the Church of England, the Thirty-Nine Articles, so that it better represented a Reformed outlook. The Assembly, in response to this brief, developed five documents:

1. The Westminster Confession of Faith
2. The Larger Catechism
3. The Shorter Catechism
4. The Form of Church Government, and
5. The Directory of Public Worship

Only the Westminster Confession of Faith has a role in the promises made by Elders and Ministers of the Presbyterian denomination in Australia. Essentially, the Westminster Confession is a statement of systematic theology, as is seen by the content of its thirty-three chapters:

¹⁹ <https://presbyterian.org.au/gaa-code-book/>



- I. Of the Holy Scripture.
- II. Of God, and of the Holy Trinity.
- III. Of God's Eternal Decree.
- IV. Of Creation.
- V. Of Providence.
- VI. Of the Fall of Man, of Sin and the Punishment thereof.
- VII. Of God's Covenant with Man.
- VIII. Of Christ the Mediator.
- IX. Of Free Will.
- X. Of Effectual Calling.
- XI. Of Justification.
- XII. Of Adoption.
- XIII. Of Sanctification.
- XIV. Of Saving Faith.
- XV. Of Repentance unto Life.
- XVI. Of Good Works.
- XVII. Of the Perseverance of the Saints.
- XVIII. Of Assurance of Grace and Salvation.
- XIX. Of the Law of God.
- XX. Of Christian Liberty, and Liberty of Conscience.
- XXI. Of Religious Worship, and the Sabbath-day.
- XXII. Of lawful Oaths and Vows.
- XXIII. Of the Civil Magistrate.
- XXIV. Of Marriage and Divorce.
- XXV. Of the Church.
- XXVI. Of Communion of the Saints.
- XXVII. Of the Sacraments.
- XXVIII. Of Baptism.
- XXIX. Of the Lord's Supper.
- XXX. Of Church Censures.
- XXXI. Of Synods and Councils.
- XXXII. Of the State of Men after Death, and of the Resurrection of the Dead.
- XXXIII. Of the last Judgement.



The Confession is a systematic exposition of Calvinism, and as such, the sovereignty of God in all things is stressed - and particularly with regard to salvation. Which leads us to the Declaratory Statement²⁰.

The Declaratory Statement re-emphasises a biblical balance at particular points of the Confession. In doing this it does not contradict the Confession; rather, it qualifies it either by quoting additional texts²¹ or enunciating that a position stated in the Confession does not lead to a particular outcome²².

Clause 5. in The Declaratory Statement concerns liberty of opinion²³. Liberty of opinion is different to liberty of expression. In essence, Clause 5 is an encouragement for Ministers and Elders to major on the major elements of The Westminster Confession of Faith and not the minors²⁴. Liberty of expression that creates division within the denomination is not guarded in this clause at all.

Clause 6. in The Declaratory Statement²⁵ acknowledges that the situation in which the Confession was written, concerning the relationship between Church and State, has significantly changed. There is now a separation between Church and State, such that The Declaratory Statement acknowledges in Clause 6. that Christ is the only Head and Ruler of our Church, and that the rule of the State is limited by his rule when it is in conflict, while still acknowledging the appropriate acknowledgement of monarchs and governments according to God's Word.

Question 3

“ iii. *Do you own and accept the purity of worship as practised in this Church?*

Purity of worship was a significant issue at the time of the Confession's composition: Bishops were being imposed on the Church of Scotland, as was the Prayer Book. This was seen as the thin edge of the wedge of Roman Catholicism, and the undoing of the Reformation.

²⁰ See the text of the Declaratory Statement on the last two pages of this Paper.

²¹ Part 2. Of the Declaratory Statement, when referring to Chapter III, Section 1.

²² Part 3. Of the Declaratory Statement when referring to 'those who dies in infancy'.

²³ 5. That liberty of opinion is allowed on matters in the subordinate standard not essential to the doctrine therein taught, the Church guarding against the abuse of this liberty to the injury of its unity and peace.

²⁴ Ultimately, it will be the General Assembly of Australia that will determine what is a major or minor issue.

²⁵ 6. That with regard to the doctrine of the civil magistrate and his authority and duty in the sphere of religion, as taught in the subordinate standard the church holds that the Lord Jesus Christ is the only King and Head of the Church, "and Head over all things to the Church, which is His body." It disclaims, accordingly, intolerant or persecuting principles and does not consider its office-bearers, in subscribing the Confession, as committed to any principles inconsistent with the liberty of conscience and the right of private judgement, declaring in the words of the Confession that "God alone is Lord of the conscience".



This question articulates a position called the Regulative Principle. The Regulative Principle in essence affirms that, in corporate worship, only those things affirmed by Scripture are to be practiced and so, nothing should be done that does not have specific Scriptural warrant.

Key components of worship are singing, praying, the reading of God's Word, preaching the Scriptures and the appropriate celebration of The Lord's Supper and Baptism.

Question 4

“ iv. *Do you own the Presbyterian form of government to be founded on the Word of God and agreeable thereto; and do you promise that through the grace of God you will firmly and constantly adhere to, and to the utmost of your power, in your station, assert, maintain and defend the same?*

Once again, there is a historical context to this question. King Charles I was claiming to be the head of the church and seeking to impose Bishops. For Presbyterians, only the Lord Jesus Christ is the Head and Ruler of His Church, and His Word identifies that the normal practice of Church government was the Eldership.

Examples of asserting, maintaining and defending the form of government of the Presbyterian denomination would be:

- Clearly explaining the strengths of the Presbyterian system to church members.
- Making yourself familiar with other Courts of the denomination.
- Attending the different Courts of the denomination when asked.
- It would also entail lovingly identifying failures of the Presbyterian system when they came to your attention.

What this promise doesn't **require** is that you tell everyone from either a congregational or hierarchical system of church government that they are **wrong**.

Question 5

“ v. *Do you adhere to your acceptance of the Call of this Congregation, to exercise among them the office of Ruling?*

This question simply asks whether, given the process of congregational election and prayerful confirmation by the Session, you will serve the Lord and the congregation as a Ruling Elder.



Question 6

“ vi. *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?*

In many respects this question describes the duties of a Ruling Elder. These are:

- Watching over the flock – pastoral care (Eldership Paper 2)
- Showing yourself a pattern of good works – being a model of Christian maturity (Eldership Paper 1)
- Giving conscientious attendance on the meetings of Session (Eldership Paper 4)
- Presbytery, and Assembly, when duly called so to do (Eldership Paper 5)

The first part of the question is significant. The office you are to discharge is to serve God’s people as God’s person and so must be done depending on God’s grace. Depending on grace promotes humility and grace towards other people and dependence on God to serve with diligence and faithfulness.

Question 7

“ vii. *All these things you profess and promise through grace, as you shall be answerable at the Coming of the Lord Jesus Christ?*

The last question catches up all the other question/promises. First of all, it reminds us that this will only be done by depending on God’s grace, strength, power and Word in your life. And secondly, you are accepting the Call to care for and serve the Household of God, the Body of Christ, the Bride of Christ, the Temple of the Holy Spirit. This is both a privilege and a responsibility. A responsibility for which all who serve God’s people are accountable to the Lord Jesus, the only Head and Ruler of the Church.

For myself, ministry is a means of grace. It’s the place where I grow, because in ministry I see the grace of God in Christ, and I see my sin and God’s power to forgive and renew. In the crucible of serving God’s people, I am invited to grow to be more like my Lord and Saviour, with my brothers and sisters in Christ.



The Scheme of Union including the Declaratory Statement under the Basis of Union

THE SCHEME OF UNION

The Presbyterian Church of New South Wales, the Presbyterian Church of Victoria, the Presbyterian Church of Queensland, the Presbyterian Church of South Australia, the Presbyterian Church of Tasmania and the Presbyterian Church of Western Australia, holding the same doctrine, government, discipline, and form of worship, believing that it would be for the glory of God and the advancement of His Kingdom that they should form one Presbyterian Church, as hereinafter provided, to be called the Presbyterian Church of Australia, and under authority of Christ alone, the Head of the Church and Head over all things to His Church, agree to unite on the following basis and subject to the following articles to be subscribed by the Moderators of the respective churches in their names and on their behalf.

BASIS OF UNION

- i. The Supreme Standard of the united church shall be the Word of God contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments.
- ii. The Subordinate Standard of the united church shall be the Westminster Confession of Faith, read in the light of the following declaratory statement:
 1. That in regard to the doctrine of redemption as taught in the subordinate standard, and in consistency therewith, the love of God to all mankind, His gift of His Son to be the propitiation for the sins of the whole world, and the free offer of salvation to men without distinction on the grounds of Christ's all sufficient sacrifice, are regarded by this Church as vital to the Christian faith. And inasmuch as the Christian faith rests upon, and the Christian consciousness takes hold of, certain objective supernatural historic facts, especially the incarnation, the atoning life and death, and the resurrection and ascension of our Lord, and His bestowment of His Holy Spirit, this Church regards those whom it admits to the office of the Holy Ministry as pledged to give a chief place in their teaching to these cardinal facts, and to the message of redemption and reconciliation implied and manifested in them.
 2. That the doctrine of God's eternal decree, including the doctrine of election to eternal life, is held as defined in the Confession of Faith, Chapter III, Section 1, where it is expressly stated that according to this doctrine, "neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creature, nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established"; and further, that the said doctrine is held in connection and harmony with the



truth - that God is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance, that He has provided a salvation sufficient for all, and adapted to all, and offered to all in the Gospel, and that every hearer of the Gospel is responsible for his dealing with the free and unrestricted offer of eternal life.

3. That while none are saved except through the mediation of Christ and by the grace of the Holy Spirit, Who worketh when and where and how it pleaseth Him; while the duty of sending the Gospel to the heathen who are sunk in ignorance, sin and misery is imperative; and while the outward and ordinary means of salvation for those capable of being called by the Word are the ordinances of the Gospel, in accepting the subordinate standard it is not required to be held that any who die in infancy are lost, or that God may not extend His Grace to any who are without the pale of ordinary means, as it may seem good in His sight.
 4. That in holding and teaching, according to the Confession of Faith, the corruption of man's nature as fallen, this Church also maintains that there remain tokens of man's greatness as created in the image of God, that he possesses a knowledge of God and of duty - that he is responsible for compliance with the moral law and the call of the Gospel, and that, although unable without the aid of the Holy Spirit to return to God unto salvation, he is yet capable of affections and actions which of themselves are virtuous and praiseworthy.
 5. That liberty of opinion is allowed on matters in the subordinate standard not essential to the doctrine therein taught, the Church guarding against the abuse of this liberty to the injury of its unity and peace.
 6. That with regard to the doctrine of the civil magistrate and his authority and duty in the sphere of religion, as taught in the subordinate standard the church holds that the Lord Jesus Christ is the only King and Head of the Church, "and Head over all things to the Church, which is His body." It disclaims, accordingly, intolerant or persecuting principles and does not consider its office-bearers, in subscribing the Confession, as committed to any principles inconsistent with the liberty of conscience and the right of private judgement, declaring in the words of the Confession that "God alone is Lord of the conscience".
- iii. Any proposed revision or abridgement of the subordinate standard of the Church, or restatement of its doctrine, or change of the formula, shall, before being adopted, be remitted to the local assemblies, and through them to the presbyteries, and no change shall be made without the consent of a majority of the local assemblies, three-fifths of the presbyteries of the whole Church, and a majority of three-fifths of the members present when the final vote of the General Assembly is taken.



- iv. On any change being made in the Basis of Union in accordance with Section III, if any congregation thereupon refuses to acquiesce in the change and determines to adhere to the original basis of union, the General Assembly is empowered - (1) to allow such congregation to retain all its congregational property; or (2) to deal in such other way with the said property as to the Assembly may seem just and equitable.
- v. proposed change in either of the two preceding Sections III and IV shall be made only under the provisions contained in section III.
- vi. Formula to be signed by Ministers and elders at their ordination or induction, and by probationers on receiving licence:

I own and accept the Subordinate Standard of this Church, with the explanations given in the articles contained in the declaratory statement, as an exhibition of the sense in which I understand the Holy Scriptures, and as a confession of my faith. I further own the purity of worship practised in this Church, and the Presbyterian government thereof to be founded on the Word of God, and agreeable thereto; and I promise that through the Grace of God I shall firmly and constantly adhere to the same, and to the utmost of my power shall in my station assert, maintain, and defend the doctrine, worship and government of this Church.

ENDNOTE:

1. The power under Section III has been used twice. Due to the shortage of ordained Ministers during the First World War, the GAA in 1916 (BB 1916 Min. 70) amended the Confession of Faith Chapter XXVII, Section IV to allow for administration of the Sacraments by other than ordained Ministers (see Chapter 4.2 of Constitution, Procedure and Practice)
In 1928 (BB 1928 Min. 57) the GAA amended the Confession of Faith Chapter XXIV Section IV to permit marriage of a man with his deceased wife's sister, or of a woman with her deceased husband's brother (see Chapter 5.1 of Constitution, Procedure and Practice)
2. When these amendments were made under Section III, no congregation exercised the right under Section IV to adhere to the original basis of union.



