

## Some Thoughts on Ecclesial Leadership: How Presbyterianism Works

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*I wrote this in email form for my elders shortly after arriving at Trinity Presbyterian Church in Birmingham, AL. I figured other sessions might benefit from seeing it as well so I am sharing it here. It is a short explanation of a few aspects of "practical Presbyterianism" that are sometimes not well understood.*

Elders,

In light of our recent discussions, I thought this might be a good time to share some thoughts on the nature of leadership in the church.

I want to reflect primarily on how we make, implement, and explain/defend decisions. When the session makes big decisions, what happens in the meeting itself is only the half of it. The other half is how we present and enact that decision in the life of the congregation, especially if the decision is going to face controversy or criticism.

In particular, I think it is vital for us as elders to understand and remember how sessions rule (though much of this applies to deacons as well). In traditional presbyterian jargon, *elders rule jointly, not severally*. In other words, *sessions* as such make decisions, and when a decision is made it belongs to each elder as a member of the session. The decision is not the *majority's* decision, it is the *session's* decision, and so even those in the minority have to get on board with it. This means an elder is bound to own and support a decision of the session even if he voted against it behind closed doors. If an elder is on the losing end of a decision, he can resign if his conscience demands it (e.g., if he believes the decision involves serious sin), or he can publicly support the decision the session has made (even if he continues working to overturn it behind closed doors). This is simply a matter of mutual submission to one another – and remember, we each promised mutual submission in our ordination vows. We should avoid a public airing of our private disagreements. Think of an analogy from family life: A husband and wife may have their disagreements over some parenting issue, but as far as the kids are concerned, the parents should speak with a single voice. They can

continue to work out their differences in private, but before the children, they should present a unified front. If they don't, the children will quickly learn to play off mom and dad against each other, with predictably disastrous results.

Suppose Elder Bob argues in a session meeting against the elders making decision X, and in favor of making decision Y. He presents arguments A, B, and C against X and for Y. At the end of the day he is outvoted, and the session adopts decision X. The next Sunday, a non-officer hears of the decision and wants to talk to Elder Bob about it. He says to Elder Bob, "I think you guys made a mistake when you chose to do X. Did the session even consider arguments A, B, and C? You should have done Y instead." At that point, Elder Bob can respond in one of two ways. He can say, "Yeah, I actually made arguments A, B, and C in the meeting. But they voted against me. I can't believe it. I agree with you -- the session made a terrible mistake. Due to this bad decision, our church is going down the tubes. If only they had listened..." Or Elder Bob can say, "Yes, the session did consider all those arguments, and they do carry weight. I sympathize with what you're saying, and it wasn't an easy decision. But at the end of the day, the session prayerfully chose to go a different direction with this decision and now we're asking for your support in it." Elder Bob can either make hay of his disagreement with the other elders or he can hide his disagreement out of respect for and submission to the session as a whole. The right path -- the path of unity and peace for the church -- is obvious. [Sidenote: I do think elders have the freedom to speak frankly about what goes in session meetings with their wives, including ways they may have been outvoted. That's part of being "one flesh" -- husbands and wives will share things with one another that they cannot share with others. But even then we need to take great care, and remind our wives that they are privy to privileged information that should not be passed along. We also have to consider how knowing certain things might affect the way our wives relate to others in the congregation and not burden them with things they really can't do anything about.]

Presbyterians do not believe in one man rule (the way, say, Episcopalians do). Rather, we believe that multiple elders should rule "as one man." In Presbyterianism, the many are one (sound familiar?). Presbyterianism insists on a plurality of elders in a local church (cf. Hebrews 13:7, 17), but not a plurality of voices -- the several elders should speak with a single voice to the congregation. *It is a*

*commitment to mutual submission that makes plural leadership possible.* The congregation cannot "obey its leaders" (Heb. 13:17) if those leaders contradicting one another. If a session has as many voices as it has elders, the whole church is going to be divided against itself. For us as elders, that means each of us must submit to the session as a whole, or separate from it for conscience's sake. Either submission, or separation -- there is no third alternative, in which you are allowed to be a free-wheeling elder, publicly criticizing the session while remaining part of it. Doug Wilson addresses this point in an article about Christian school boards, but what he says is just as applicable (in fact more so!) to church sessions:

Most Christian schools operate under plural leadership – usually under the authority of a school board. Now Jesus taught that no man can serve two masters. How can this be reconciled with plural leadership? The pattern of plural, corporate leadership is certainly biblical (it is required in the church, for example). So how is it possible for administrators, teachers, staff and students under this plural authority to keep from being pulled in different directions, and all by people equally “in charge”? Tragically, in many schools this pulling in different directions is a pulling apart.

In order to remain biblical, all forms of plural leadership must speak with a single voice. Several examples should serve to illustrate the principle. Suppose a school board is in the process of selecting a line of textbooks. Suppose further there have been vigorous and thorough debates in the board meetings about the value of this publisher versus the value of that one. The day comes, however, when the vote is taken, and the school board has made its decision. Now, the board member in the minority must not only submit to the decision (which he obviously has to do anyway), he must also *support* it....

There are times when submission to human authority does constitute disobedience to God. No human authority is absolute; no human authority legitimately commands unquestioning obedience. But if it is impossible to submit to a school board, then it is impossible to stay on that school board. If it is legitimate to stay, then it is required to submit. We cannot take a middle ground and say that this is a big enough issue to allow us to be noisy and unsubmitive and small enough to allow us to remain.

Now, to say each elder has to submit to the authority of the session as a whole and that we must speak with a single, unified voice to the congregation is *not* the same as pretending that our decisions are infallible or above criticism. No human authority is absolute or inerrant, and that certainly goes for us. When we make a decision that proves to be controversial, we can certainly sympathize with those in the congregation who criticize it (though hopefully we will also defend it!). We can admit there are good counter-arguments and patiently hear them out (though hopefully we'll also explain the session's rationale!). We can even say we'll reconsider (and we've proven a willingness to do that!). *But it's still crucial for us to present a united front.* As has been pointed out before, the congregation will never be more united than its leadership, and if we are divided against one another, there is little hope for holding the congregation together. If the congregation sees us as officers dividing into factions, unwilling to support the decision we've supposedly made together, then any hope for moving forward as a church body is lost.

So a few practical points to consider. This means officers need to be careful about "thinking out loud" when it comes to discussing decisions that have already been made. An elder's private speculations in conversation with a member can do a lot of damage if that member thinks that particular elder is speaking for the whole session, or criticizing the session as a whole. Elders also need to do their best to patiently listen to folks (that's part of shepherding, after all), but cannot hesitate to defend the decisions the session has made (that's part of leadership, after all). We might also need to gently remind our wives that they hold positions of prominence in the congregation by virtue of being married to an officer, and so they also need to choose their words carefully. Quite often, the comments of an elder's wife will carry "official" authority for people who hear her speak, whether she realizes it or not, and she can do unintentional damage by not realizing how powerful her words are in the context of the congregation. If an elder's wife criticizes a decision of the session, the members at large might not only see her as unsubmissive to the session, but also as out of fellowship with her husband -- never a good thing!

Further, it's important for leaders to actually lead. That sounds radical, I know. Actually, what I'm getting at is the dreaded tendency of leaders these days to "lead from behind" -- which, of course, is not leading at all. If we think the congregation "knows best" then we

should be a congregational church and put everything up for congregational vote. But we're not a congregational church. We're a Presbyterian church. Presbyterian means "elder ruled." We were chosen to be officers precisely because we have qualifications and callings that stand out from the rest of the congregation. We are expected to "know best." That doesn't mean we can't glean all kinds of insights from interactions with non-officers, who often have tremendous wisdom to share. It doesn't mean we can't do things like surveys and straw polls to gauge the will of the congregation on a non-theological issue (as we have done and continue to do). But it does mean the burden of leadership -- of making the decisions that will shape the future of our congregation -- rests on us. *There is no escaping that burden.* Presbyterianism is intrinsically opposed to an egalitarianism that would give everyone's opinion in the church equal weight. Presbyterians are committed to rule by presbyters (= elders).

When we accepted the call to leadership, we took on the sacrifices it would bring -- sacrifices of our time, sacrifices for our families, financial sacrifices, etc. We also took on the challenge of having to make difficult, complex, and often controversial decisions for the congregation. Leadership in this arena is not like that in the business or political arenas. On the one hand, while many of our decisions are relatively mundane, others have a real bearing on the spiritual health, and thus eternal destiny, of souls entrusted into our care. That's never the case in business or politics. On the other hand, we don't have the same kinds of leverage that leaders in some other spheres have, so our power is primarily exercised through service and suasion. If an employee displeases his boss, he can get his pay docked or lose his job. But if someone in the congregation goes against our counsel, we usually have no recourse at all except to plead and pray, until and unless an issue rises to the level of church discipline (which is obviously rare), and even then our only weapon is excommunication which looks foolish in the eyes of the world. So there are unique challenges and stresses that come with leadership in the church. Church leaders are vulnerable in unique ways compared to other types of leaders; church leaders are simultaneously powerful and powerless. But our sufficiency is found in the Lord. Leadership in the ecclesial arena is not for the faint of heart or thin-skinned. It's not for the impatient or short-tempered. It's not for those who cannot handle conflict in a constructive way, who cannot take criticism

without striking back, or who cannot work through disagreements in a mature fashion.

What are leaders supposed to do? It is up to leaders (particularly elders) to cast the vision for the church, and then execute it. It is up to elders to shape the overarching philosophy and direction and culture of the church's ministry and community life. Leadership is responsible for Spiritual care / shepherding, for seeing to it that the Word is faithfully preached and the sacraments appropriately administered (including discipline that removes the unrepentant from the table). In all, church leaders are responsible for a wide range of tasks, and we are accountable to God for how faithfully we perform them (Heb. 13:17). Of course, our TPC Constitution spells out the duties of various officers in more detail -- that's not really my purpose here, I'm just giving general reminders and context. The main thing I want to stress here is that we have a responsibility to *lead* the flock in whatever course of action we believe is best for the congregation. We have to be proactive, not merely reactive, in dealing with the issues that confront our congregation. Even if we do not act at all, we have acted, and that action has consequences for which we are responsible. Whatever decisions we make send a message to the congregation and shape the life and culture of the church community for which we bear responsibility.

Look at the personality of our session (and diaconate as well, for that matter, since I think it's similar). We're the type of guys who want to be liked, want to avoid conflict, and don't want to rock the boat. Those are great qualities in many ways and have served us well as far as keeping the peace in the congregation. At the same time, I think we're vulnerable to "leading from behind." Instead of really charting out a course we believe God wants us to take, even if it means wrestling through some differences with folks in the congregation for a while, we are prone to default to a perceived majority (or to the loudest complainers as the case may be) and function more like a congregational church. *If we're only going to do what is evident to most everyone in the congregation, why are elders needed at all? Why not become a congregational church?* We have to make decisions *and own those decisions*. Sometimes, the congregation will find these decisions hard to accept, but part of our work is shepherding folks through those difficulties.

Maybe an illustration will help. This is from Tom Wolfe's classic book, *The Right Stuff*. If you've been around TPC for a while, you've heard me use it before to talk about suffering, but it fits here as well. Chuck Yeager was an up and coming test pilot when the biggest aviation challenge was to break the sound barrier. The problem was that when it had been tried, it had proved fatal. At close to Mach 1 speed, planes would start to do funny things. Controls would freeze up. Instruments would go haywire. Some planes shook so bad they fell apart. Engineers began to speculate that there must be some kind of "sonic wall" or "sound barrier" that couldn't be crossed. Well, along came Yeager, a young man blessed with a extra helping of "the right stuff." Not being an engineer (in fact, he had hardly finished high school), Yeager was free of any complicated theories about a sonic wall. He had a hunch that hitting the speed of sound would be volatile, but after you crossed through Mach 1, things would settle down and become placid on the other side. So, working for base pay of a mere \$283 per month, Yeager took his life and the controls of the Bell X-1 into his hands, and went on a supersonic speed test flight. On October 14, 1947, he took his plane close to Mach 1 and he began to experience all the usual instabilities....but then he blasted through them to break the supposed "sound barrier," on to a speed of Mach 1.05. What did he find on the other side of the speed of sound? It was incredibly serene and beautiful. His hunch had proved correct. A lot of shake and rattle gave way to calmness for the pilot with the courage to push on through the perceived barrier.

As elders, we cannot be afraid of pushing our congregation past Mach 1. My hunch is that if we're willing to press forward, if we're willing to push through any perceived "wall," to accomplish our vision, we will find it placid and peaceful on the other side. We might have to endure some momentary shaking and craziness on the way, but it'll be worth it if we stay the course.

Blessings,  
RL

