

## *“The Noble Task”*

*1 Peter 5:1-11*

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX  
Rev. Charles S. Blackshear • September 13, 2015

As a church, what would you say is the most important day in the church year? What event, what worship service would be the most significant? Easter Sunday? It's obvious that many people see Easter as the most important because that's the only day they come. In most churches Easter is the largest attended worship service all year. But Easter is NOT the most important. In fact, it's only relatively recently that Presbyterians celebrated Easter at all. In the Reformed tradition, every Sunday is Easter Sunday. The Reformers were concerned that if one day were considered more important than others that people would have an excuse not to come every week.

So if it's not Easter, maybe it's Christmas Eve? That's another popular service and would seem very important. If you said Christmas you would be wrong again. You might be interested to know that in the parts of Colonial America that were dominated by Calvinists it was against the law for businesses to be closed on Christmas Day. This may explain why, in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, protestant churches began celebrating Christmas Eve.

So if it's not Christmas or Easter, what IS the most important event in the life of the church? I suggest that one of the most significant things we do as Presbyterians is ordain elders to lead the church, as we have done this morning. In the Presbyterian tradition, the office of elder, or presbyter, is the highest office and the most important job. It's so important that we name our churches after them. The word Presbyterian comes from the Greek word *presbuteros*, which means elder. Presbyterian means “ruled by elders.” So this morning I want us to take a few moments to talk about the important role of elders in the church by looking at the 3 Rs. I'm not talking about reading, riting, and rithmatic. I'm talking about the *reason*, the *requirements*, and the *responsibilities* of elders in the church.

First of all, the *reason*. Why do we go through this process of electing and then ordaining elders? The primary reason is the Bible. We find the origins of the office of elder in the Old Testament. For example, in our reading from Numbers we find God instructing Moses directly to appoint elders from among the people to help lead the Israelites. God tells Moses, “Go get 70 people that are already leaders and I will put some of my Spirit on them so they can bear the burden of leadership with you.” We find the same principle in the New Testament. In the Apostle Paul's letter to Titus He says, “This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you.” In other words, he gave Titus the job of identifying people to serve as elders to bear the burden of the people.

Ultimately, though, the reason for elders is Christ himself. As we look at this passage from 1 Peter we get some guidance on the office of elder. And the reason given for serving well is verse 4: “when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.” The church—the flock—belongs to Jesus. For generations Presbyterians have explained it this way: “All power in heaven and earth is given to Jesus Christ by Almighty God, who raised Christ from the dead and set him above all rule and authority, all power and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come. God has put all things under the Lordship of Jesus Christ and has made Christ Head of the Church, which is his body.

Christ calls the Church into being, giving it all that is necessary for its mission to the world, for its building up, and for its service to God. Christ is present with the Church in both Spirit and Word. It belongs to Christ alone to rule, to teach, to call, and to use the Church as he wills, exercising his authority by the ministry of women and men for the establishment and

extension of his Kingdom.” The reason for elders is to point people to the Chief Shepherd, Jesus.

That brings us to the *requirements*. You know, we don’t really require anything for someone to come worship with us and participate in much of the life of the church. We don’t insist that you have to believe a certain thing or accept any particular doctrine in order to worship. Even if you don’t believe in Jesus. ESPECIALLY if you don’t believe in Jesus. Everyone is welcome. If you decide to join our church there are some basic beliefs required that are common to most Christian churches. You must recognize that you are a sinner in need of a savior, you must trust Jesus alone as your savior, and you must promise to live as a follower of Christ and an active member of the church.

But for those called to serve in leadership there are higher standards. Ordain means to consecrate, to set apart for God. Elders are called and set apart by God and it’s God who requires more. 1 Peter shows us the reality of the way of life for elders, which all of us should be striving to live. Elders are to be firm in their faith, casting their anxieties on God, whose “mighty hand” is able to deliver us from our troubles. Peter tells us in verse 8 to be “sober-minded,” meaning mature, clear-thinking; and to be watchful. Elders are not to seek any kind of self-serving gain, they are not to be domineering, and they are to be humble toward one another.

Paul’s letter to Titus gives us an even clearer understanding of the requirements. “For an overseer, as God’s steward, must be above reproach. He must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or a drunkard or violent or greedy for gain, but hospitable, a lover of good, self-controlled, upright, holy, and disciplined. He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give

instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.” Maybe the best “requirement” is to be an example to the flock. As we see in these passages, the everyday life of an elder should inspire others to get closer to Jesus.

That brings us to the third R, the *responsibility*. Verse 2 says, “shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock.” Elders are essentially assistants to Jesus. They are to help lead the church the way Jesus would lead it. As part of that, elders are responsible for the care of the members of the congregation. They are to show God’s love, forgiveness, and sympathetic understanding toward the people that God has entrusted to their care. Elders are to help people become firm in their faith by teaching the Bible, and they are to encourage people during times of suffering.

Finally, I want to point out that ordination is for life. Once you have been called and set apart by God you don’t simply quit at the end of a term of service. You never stop being an elder, a leader of the church. You might not be actively serving on the Session but you are still responsible in God’s eyes for the spiritual leadership of the church.

So elders are to lead, but they are to lead by example. They are to be humble, firm in their faith, able to teach the faith of the Church and able to love the people of the church. In return, we need to support them in that and respect their work. 1 Timothy 3:1 says, “The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task.” Indeed, to serve as an elder in Christ’s church is a noble task.

*Amen*