
BACKGROUND ON ELDERS IN THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH (DISCIPLES OF CHRIST)

In order to help Wake Forest Christian Church understand the significance that Disciple churches today place on the office of Elder, here are a few observations on the tradition and development of that office among Disciples. We must acknowledge first of all that, as in most other issues regarding church life, Disciples will approach this topic in their own unique ways and there is no one model for the Eldership that completely encompasses all congregations. However, our history and traditions are relatively unified, even when our expressions may differ widely.

EARLY VIEWS OF THE DISCIPLE MOVEMENT

The Disciples were born on the frontier of our country in the early 1800s, primarily in Kentucky and western Virginia, lead by men such as Thomas and his son Alexander Campbell, Barton Stone, and the evangelist Walter Scott. From the beginning, these early leaders saw a need to re-establish the role and authority of congregations above the more confining denominational traditions of the Old World. One of the approaches that they promoted was a form of church government that recognized the authority of the congregation to manage its disciplines and practices without control from larger organizations, especially from denominational control. In order to provide a model for the congregation, they proposed three types of leadership which they believed were ordained by the New Testament:

1. Bishops (also called Pastors or Elders), whose functions included teaching, presiding, shepherding members, and ruling in “matters of discipline” – there always being a “plurality” (more than two);
2. Deacons who were to serve the secular needs of the congregation, including keeping the treasury of the church and seeing to the needs of orphans and widows, and provide what other services might be needed by the congregation – there should also be a plurality of Deacons, according to Alexander Campbell;
3. Evangelists who were commissioned to travel, preach the Gospel, establish congregations, and move on to the next field of service.

All officers were elected by the congregation and had no authority beyond that congregation – except for Evangelists who were sent as church-planters. All the officers were expected to be ordained by the congregation. The Elders were expected to be in full time service and compensated (almost never happened). The Evangelists were to be ordained or commissioned and would be compensated by the new congregations established. The Deacons were given such complex duties that it was presumed that several people would serve in that role. None of these offices were carried beyond that congregation (except for the work of the Evangelists).

Obviously, in this scheme, the Elders rose to an elevated position, often expected to enter courses of study to develop skills in Biblical Studies, languages, and public speaking. Also, in this scheme, there were no clergy. They believed (somewhat accurately at that time) that clergy were typically under the authority of denominational structures and would serve those structures more than the needs of congregations. An important part of the mental and cultural makeup of those early frontier people led them to be anti-authoritarian and committed to personal freedom above all else. This state of affairs held sway among the congregations up to the years following the Civil War.

HOW WE HAVE CHANGED OVER THE LAST TWO CENTURIES

As the fastest growing religious movement started on American soil, congregations began to grow dramatically in size and influence. The office of Elder began to undergo enormous changes as congregations sought out well-educated religious leaders to serve the growing needs on a full-time basis. Preachers were expected to have serious theological training, often added on to a four-year college degree. They expected to be compensated by the congregation they served. Elders were still held in high regard and expected to guide the work of the congregation. Their role often became more constricted. The expectation that Elders be preachers (or even teachers) was diminished by the presence of “professionals” in the leadership. Gradually by the mid-1900s, Elders were often seen primarily in conducting the Lord’s Supper, often expressly without the involvement of the preacher, as well as providing oversight to the preacher and moral guidance to the members. However, in many congregations they continued to hold the powers of governance, although even this role was often diminished by the introduction of governing boards and functional committees.

Two historic branches of the Stone-Campbell movement (the Independent Christian Churches and the self-named “churches of Christ”) maintain the traditional role almost intact, especially in regard to congregational governance and oversight of the preacher. Because these “churches of Christ” (who separated from Disciples in 1906) never recognized the role of “paid preacher”, many of their congregations are still served by their elected Elders for all preaching and teaching duties.

TODAY’S DISCIPLES OF CHRIST ELDER

The Eldership in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) has no real counterpart in other denominations, presenting us with a problem as larger percentages of our membership come to us from other traditions. It has even posed some communications issues in our ecumenical work (quite often resulting in expressions of gratitude for the insights that Disciples bring to these dialogues).

Many of today’s Disciples of Christ congregations have often become more denominational in organization and perspective. The Eldership in our congregations went through a period of declining esteem where their duties were almost exclusively limited to offering prayers at the Lord’s Table on Sunday mornings. But, since late 1970s, congregations and denominational leaders began to call upon congregations to develop the office of Elder as a much more Biblically significant part of congregational life. Regions and the General Church have provided materials and training events for congregations seeking to revitalize this Biblical office. The many books written about the role of Elder in the Disciples has provided an explosion in resources for and about Disciple Elders. For further information and study, these books and resources are readily available:

Scripture references: 1 Corinthians 12:4-7, 27-28; Romans 12:3-8; Acts 20:17-38; Ephesians 4:11-12; 1 Timothy 3:1-7; 5:17-22; Titus 1:5-9; James 5:15; 1 Peter 2:25; 5:1-11

Resources:

Available from Chalice Press:

Peter Morgan, *Disciples Eldership: A Quest for Identity and Ministry*, (2nd edition; Saint Louis: Chalice, 2003)

Gary Straub, *Your Calling as an Elder*, (Saint Louis: Chalice, 2003)

Available from the General Church:

Many resources available in various units of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) at:
<http://www.disciples.org/?s=elders>:

See especially resources available from Disciples Home Missions at:

<https://www.discipleshomemissions.org/congregations/elders/>