

Elders as Lay Theologians in the Contemporary Church

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Abstract: Theology is often regarded as a task best left to professionals, but there are both biblical and historical precedents of lay theologians playing an active role in local churches. Lay elders may have some formal theological education or be mostly self-taught; churches nurture those gifts by discerning, expanding, and honing the skills needed to equip lay leaders for the task of shepherding the Body of Christ. Educational opportunities and resources for dedicated amateur theologians abound today and churches are an ideal context for taking advantage of this development.

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Introduction

The lay theologian has a historic pedigree, especially in the Evangelical and Anabaptist tradition, and should be the norm in church eldership. Never before have there been so many opportunities for theological education or better access to resources than in the internet age. Churches can and should develop theological training ministries to equip lay leaders while providing scaffolding frameworks that not only build up amateur scholars but also rein in the pitfalls of autodidacticism. Traditionally, many free church movements have eschewed formal study for their pastors and elders, especially in their early years, not only out of necessity—often having

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been excluded from established theological schools—but also by choice. It is a common perspective of many reform-minded churches that seminaries and theological colleges eventually begin to, at best, grow distant from the concerns of their front line parishes and, at worst, drift theologically and then perpetuate that drift amongst their students. A confident and theologically well-equipped board of lay people can act as a bulwark against such tendencies while still benefiting from those who have dedicated their professional lives to the study of the Scriptures.

Historic Approaches to Church Governance

The Mennonite Brethren Confession of Faith, to which Northview Community Church subscribes, does not often speak on matters of church governance and polity; when it does, it notes that the New Testament Scriptures do “not prescribe a specific form of church organization.”² Nevertheless, patterns of lay leadership and the role of elders have always figured prominently. The pietist “brethren” movement that emerged within the larger Mennonite community in southern Ukraine in the mid-nineteenth century was initially governed entirely by lay elders. Early Mennonite Brethren “established a multiple lay ministry polity model, which, though hierarchical, was tempered by shared authority.”³ This remained the norm despite mass emigration from Europe in the ensuing decades and endured well into the mid twentieth century.⁴ By the 1950s, that model gave way to church councils in which local lay people oversaw programs within the church, but spiritual leadership increasingly “shifted from a recognised group of ministers within a community to a single salaried

² *Confession of Faith: Commentary and Pastoral Application* (Winnipeg, Man.: Kindred Productions, 2000), 71.

³ Doug Heidebrecht, “Preacher, Teacher, Pastor, and Elder: Mennonite Brethren and McClendon’s Portrayal of Church Authorities,” *Direction* 47, no. 2 (Fall 2018): 254.

⁴ Heidebrecht, “Preacher, Teacher, Pastor,” 254.

pastor, often hired from outside the church membership.”⁵ The transition from that council model back to a team of lay elders who had spiritual authority alongside the senior pastor did not take place until the 1990s in churches like Northview, which has retained an eldership structure ever since.

This late twentieth century return to church governance by lay elders represented a broader attempt by Evangelical churches to try to recapture the spirit of the governance of the early church. Alexander Strauch, whose 1995 book *Biblical Eldership* was a significant text in this movement, challenges what he calls “the hardened soil of long-standing, clerical traditions”⁶ that had largely professionalized Protestant church leadership in the centuries since the Reformation. Strauch’s passionate call was for churches to be led by well-educated and spiritually qualified elders instead of being “reduced to temporary church board members.”⁷ *Biblical Eldership* helped define a contemporary view of church leadership that neither perpetuates the antagonistic board versus pastor relationship of the past, nor relies passively on professional and formally credentialed ministers, but rather seeks balanced leadership that incorporates the best of both approaches.

The Challenges in Developing Leaders

Biblical elders in this model, however, do not usually emerge fully-formed, so churches need to play a scaffolding role in the recruitment, development, and ongoing education of effective lay leaders. The first task is to emphasize that church leadership is not an inaccessible “holy of holies” of spirituality, nor is it an esoteric club reserved only for those with specialized training. These misconceptions can, unfortunately, be perpetuated by leaders with

⁵ Heidebrecht, “Preacher, Teacher, Pastor,” 254.

⁶ Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership: An Urgent Call to Restore Biblical Church Leadership* (Littleton, CO: Lewis and Roth, 1995), 11.

⁷ Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, 10.

some theological education who flaunt academic jargon, implying that elders' tasks are so complex and impenetrable as to be totally out of reach by common church members. This strategy may garner a degree of superficial respect, but it can easily perpetuate the view that unschooled congregants could never attain the lofty heights of church leadership. Instead, church leaders should model the Apostle Paul's approach to discipling and mentoring Timothy.

In Acts 16:1-3, the evangelist Luke documents Paul's first encounter with Timothy, a young man with no more theological pedigree than that the "believers at Lystra and Iconium spoke well of him."⁸ Though a believer in Jesus, Timothy is descended from a mixed family in which his "mother was Jewish and a believer but whose father was a Greek."⁹ Paul—with all his Pharisaic credentials and a student trained "under Gamaliel"¹⁰—chooses Timothy, who has no such storied intellectual heritage, to train for church leadership. Over the course of the New Testament, Paul's affection for and confidence in his protégé becomes apparent from both those epistles he wrote directly to Timothy and others in which Timothy's help and support is acknowledged. Near the end of his ministry, Paul writes to the church in Philippi that "Timothy has proved himself" and that "I have no one else like him."¹¹ This profound relationship that shaped the early church came about because Paul, in the providence of God and under the oversight of the larger church, "recognized the value of developing Timothy into a more effective minister of the gospel."¹²

⁸ Acts 16:2. Unless otherwise stated, all biblical quotes are taken from the ESV translation.

⁹ Acts 16:1.

¹⁰ Acts 22:3.

¹¹ Phil. 2:20-22.

¹² Stacy E. Hoehl, "The Mentor Relationship: An Exploration of Paul as Loving Mentor to Timothy and the Application of This Relationship to Contemporary Leadership Challenges," *Journal of Biblical Perspectives in Leadership* 3, no. 2 (2011): 34.

Having encouraged congregants in their potential for spiritual leadership by building mentoring relationships, churches can further facilitate the development of theologically-equipped elders by providing access to high level biblical studies tools. The days when carefully curated and professionally staffed specialized seminary libraries were a necessary component of a theological education are mostly gone thanks to recent developments in electronic theological resources. In the early years of the web-based internet, the only commentaries available online were often centuries-old public domain texts. Despite the quality of those texts, they were not especially accessible to unschooled lay people; furthermore, those authors did not have the benefit of the past hundred years' incredible archeological finds like the Dead Sea Scrolls and other textual variants. Today, professional resources like Logos Bible Software have made extensive theological libraries available to even the smallest churches, and every year new smartphone apps put powerful and effective Bible study tools in the palms of anyone's hands.

The Role of the Local Church in Developing Leaders

As important as resources are for the development of godly lay theologians, churches have a crucial training role to play as well. There are two typical risks in the pursuit of higher education: one is an "ivory tower" syndrome by which academics over time become out of sync with the needs of local congregations and even with the truths of Scripture. The other is the counterweight problem of becoming so critical of higher education that churches celebrate ignorance of higher learning as an essential criterion for genuine "grassroots" leadership.

The professionalization of theological study has some obvious advantages insofar as scholars can devote themselves full-time to study, including learning biblical languages. However, when academia becomes an industry unto itself and scholars seek personal fame and influence, the value of their scholarship can

quickly diminish. In the nineteenth century, theological liberalism emerged first in flagship denominational seminaries and eventually prompted heresy trials that “charged preachers and seminary professors with violating ordination vows or confessional standards.”¹³ In the present day, it is easy for theologians with promotions and tenure on the line to gradually compromise their doctrine in order to be published more often or to maintain their comfortable professorial positions in the midst of shifting political climates. Academic success is also often achieved by novelty, since book publishers look to capitalize on theological trends in order to have their work stand out amidst mainstream orthodox doctrine. These pressures and myriad others can easily lead professional theologians astray over time. Left unchecked, they can influence local churches by planting seeds of error from the pulpits their students fill.

Radical distrust of academic theology, on the other hand, while not totally unwarranted, can be taken to extremes that can cause problems of a different sort. The church that wants to support lay theologians also needs to be committed to facilitating training that guards against the kinds of tendencies that can emerge among self-taught scholars. One of the benefits of a formal seminary education is that defined programs of study can compel students to consider a wide range of approaches. Left to their own devices, students often choose to deeply investigate personal and idiosyncratic “hobbyhorse” topics to the exclusion of all others. Since so many heresies are simply old errors dressed up in contemporary expressions, the lay theologian can be susceptible to misperceiving the problems inherent in their particular approach. Furthermore, if there is a generally dismissive attitude in the church against the academy, an enthusiastic, self-trained lay person might become

¹³ Andrew Hoffercker, “Liberal Theology,” *The Gospel Coalition*, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/liberal-theology/>. A relatively recent example of this process occurred at the Mennonite Brethren Seminary when a professor published statements that eventually led to a demanded retraction by the school’s supporting churches. Laura Kalmar, “MB Seminary Professor Apologizes for Remarks,” *MB Herald*, April 1, 2010, <https://mbherald.com/mb-seminary-professor-apologizes-for-remarks/>.

especially resistant to theological correction. Any church that seeks to facilitate the training of its own lay theologians must preserve some mechanism of internal critique in order that tendencies either to intellectual unorthodoxy and doctrinal drift or the naive confidence of intentional ignorance be kept in check.

Conclusion

The biblical example of the relationship between Peter and Paul is instructive in outlining the tension churches will feel when they embrace a theologically-equipped laity. Peter was an uneducated fisherman who, perhaps incongruously, became the leader of the early church. Paul came to Christian faith later and was not a direct disciple, but was expertly trained in the Law as a Pharisee. The relationship between the two was not always smooth. As Paul points out in Galatians, they sometimes clashed vigorously, with Paul noting that when Peter “came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face.”¹⁴ Peter, for his part, also comments briefly on his relationship with Paul in his own epistle claiming that Paul’s “letters contain some things that are hard to understand.”¹⁵ After all, however, Peter enjoins his readers to adhere to the teaching of “our dear brother Paul [who] also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him.”¹⁶

In a way, these two giants of the church epitomize the tension in the modern church between education and experience, lofty argument and pragmatic preaching. There are gifted Christian leaders today who are being overlooked because they have not gone through formal schooling or otherwise simply feel unqualified. Like Peter, who “astonished” the leaders of the Sanhedrin when they realized he and John were merely “unschooled, ordinary men,”¹⁷ these leaders need guidance and support so that they can fulfill the potential God

¹⁴ Gal. 2:11.

¹⁵ 2 Pet. 3:16.

¹⁶ 2 Pet. 3:15.

¹⁷ Acts 4:13.

has called them to. Similarly, highly educated and scholastically-minded church members must also be welcomed into leadership, disciplined away from pride in their own intellect, but encouraged, like Paul, to make the very best of their academic talents. As in the earliest days of the church, local congregations today have a crucial role to play in the training and ongoing development of lay theologians.