

Foreword to the Reprint of Samuel Miller's *The Ruling Elder*<sup>1</sup>  
by  
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One of the great causes of the weakness of the contemporary church is its failure to understand, accept and implement the biblical form of church government. An essential element of that form is found in the scriptural office of the ruling elder. While it has often been thought that the word "presbyterian" in the name of a denomination or local church may obscure the biblical witness of that church, it should be remembered that the word itself is pre-eminently biblical. "Presbyterian" comes from the Greek word *presbuteros*, which means "elder." (In various forms, *presbuteros* occurs 70 times in the New Testament.) To lament the low state of doctrine and morals in the church today, while at the same time neglecting and, perhaps, disdaining one of the chief means which God has appointed to correct these problems, is reprehensible and foolish.

Not only does Christ, as the Head of the church, have the right to institute an office such as the ruling elder, but as the Good Shepherd, who laid down his life for the flock, he has instituted the office of ruling elder for the spiritual health and welfare of his people both now and forever (Hebrews 13:17).

Why, then, has this good office been largely abandoned by the church in our day? I believe that there are two major reasons.

First, in battling the liberals over the past century, conservative Christians have tended to minimize doctrinal differences and theological precision in favor of a broad coalition based on certain "fundamentals." It thus becomes convenient<sup>10</sup> to dismiss biblical doctrines which are not under attack as unimportant or even "divisive." This reduction of the church's confession of its beliefs has been aided and abetted by the anti-intellectualism of our century, leading to an emphasis on emotion at the expense of clear thinking.

Pragmatism has never been a friend of careful thought, either; and the modern church often seems more interested in getting things done than in considering the biblical warrant or theological foundation for a given activity. Why waste precious time discussing church doctrine when souls are going to hell? Besides, assuming that evangelism is the central task of the church, then careful oversight and feeding of the flock might get the church off track. Hence, it has become generally accepted by religious leaders and laity alike that church government is not only secondary to but outside the scope of biblical concern.

Second, the minimizing of doctrine has combined with another unbiblical ingredient — individualism — to thwart the exercise of biblical church government. The spirit of the Enlightenment has blossomed in the twentieth century. Each man is his own master, accountable to no one but himself. In the church this individualism translates to: "All I need is my Bible and my God. Anything and anyone else is a threat to my freedom." Pastors may preach, but they had better not meddle. The idea of a body of ruling elders ruling and shepherding the flock of God has fallen on hard times.

It is perhaps somewhat understandable that secular man in Western democracies should overreact to the spread of totalitarianism in our century. What is sad, though, is that

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<sup>1</sup> "Forward," to *The Ruling Elder* by Samuel Miller. Dallas TX: Presbyterian Heritage Publications, 1987 (1832 Reprint, 1987) iii-vii. © Copyright 1987 by Gregory E. Reynolds. The text of this edition was taken from the second edition of Samuel Miller's *An Essay, on the Warrant, Nature and Duties of the Office of the Ruling Elder, in the Presbyterian Church* (New York Jonathan Leavitt; Boston: Crocker & Brewster, 1832).

Christians often fail to realize that both totalitarianism and individualistic egalitarianism are children of the same diabolical parent: autonomous freedom. To live in absolute independence from God has been the agenda of fallen man ever since his rebellion in Eden. This autonomous freedom is the essence of secularism. In fact, pure democracy and the resultant chaos of everyman rule have often paved the way for totalitarian control. The "one-man show" syndrome in most baptistic churches offers a case in point.

The other side of this secular cycle is revolution against the dictator or ruling class. Strict Plymouth Brethrenism, in which there are *no* officers, along with the general disdain for official authority in the church at large are cases in point of this reaction.

Both the abuse of God-ordained authority and the failure to respect that authority are equally unbiblical. Only a biblical view of eldership will enable the church to avoid this Scylla and Charybdis. The church will steer a safe course in this and every area *only* if she consciously charts that course according to the inspired map and compass of Scripture.

Positively speaking, when delegated authority in the church is respected by the people and exercised faithfully by the officers, it will bring glory to God and good to his flock (Ephesians 4:11-16). In the church, unlike the world, authority is exercised in service not to self but to God and his people. The ruling elder is called to be an undershepherd of his self-sacrificing Lord (Acts 20:28). His regard is chiefly for the glory of his Lord and the welfare of his blood-bought flock.

In the present climate of the tyranny of the cults, the impersonal manipulation of the mega-churches and mass-media ministries, and the general malaise of leadership in the average church, a return to biblical church government is desperately needed. The doctrine of the ruling elder must be a Keystone in any reform.

*The Ruling Elder* is not being reprinted as the last word on the subject. A nineteenth-century book could hardly be that. However, it is an excellent "first word," especially for American presbyterians. In Samuel Miller's day, this work proved foundational for all subsequent debate on biblical eldership. Hence, we will make progress as we regain our historical moorings. Though Miller's work was an American first, it was explicitly tied to careful biblical and church historical research. For example, Miller demonstrates that the ruling eldership is not a New Testament innovation, but harkens back to Mosaic times. Neither is eldership the ecclesiastical invention of John Calvin. It was recognized by the earliest sixteenth-century reformers; and, in turn, they simply rediscovered and amplified what the ancient church had once known.

The richness and relevance of Miller's work will be apparent to all. As a man of his age, Miller was not entirely free of a few unbiblical customs then current. The most glaring example of this fault concerns his approval of the practice of allowing noncommunicating, unbaptized tithers to vote in the election of elders. He believed this was a practical necessity, the abuse of which would be safeguarded by the jurisdiction of presbytery. Fortunately, due to the lack of salary, the election of ruling elders was not subject to the same corruption of patronage as was the salaried teaching eldership. The book, however, is remarkably free of this sort of anachronism.

Presbyterian Heritage Publications and its director, Kevin Reed, have provided an inestimable service to the church in reintroducing the writings of Samuel Miller. We must also gratefully acknowledge the support of John Dowling and Ivars Fridenvalds, an elder and deacon, respectively, in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. Their practical assistance in

this publishing project gives ample evidence of their spiritual concern for the church in general and her officers in particular.

Today, the church must remember her true identity. In returning to her biblical roots, she will do well to consult the men who have best guided her in the past. In the area of church government, Samuel Miller should be among the first on the list. As the church seeks reformation in our day, it is our prayer that the reprint of *The Ruling Elder* may play some part in the process.

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