

The Officer's Calling

by Charles D. Elliott

It is said that someone once asked Woodrow Wilson to name the greatest honor ever bestowed upon him.

The reporter who asked the question expected Wilson to name his election to the presidency of Princeton University in 1902; his election to the governorship of New Jersey in 1911; his election to the presidency of the United States – in which he served two terms, from 1913 to 1921 – or perhaps his winning the Nobel Peace Prize in 1919. The reporter was surprised, therefore, when Wilson thought for a moment, then said, “The greatest honor ever bestowed upon me was my election to be an officer in the Presbyterian Church.”

It is a great honor to be an officer in the Presbyterian Church for it speaks well of you and your abilities and it testifies to the high regard in which you are held by your fellow church members who elected you. But if you regard your election to office in the church to be an honor and nothing more, then you ought to think again.

First and foremost, the call of God to an office in the church is a call to service. It is not a call to glory. It is a call to responsibility. It is not a reward for your faithful attendance at church functions or for your generous financial support of the church's program. It is not a commendation for being a good Sunday School teacher or a recognition of your work with the United Way, the Rotary Club or the Volunteer Fire Department. It is a summons to duty, an appointment to hard work.

Far from being a license to sit back and take it easy, to rest on your laurels, it is a command to move ahead, to get busy with the work which is committed into your hands. We are called to be the servant disciples of a Servant Lord.

Then once you are ordained to an office in the church, you must remember that you are no longer a layman, as we commonly understand that term. You are elected, trained, examined and set apart by a duty constituted governing body of the church to fulfill an important function. You take vows similar to those taken by your minister. You are called out, set apart, authorized and empowered to get a job done.

From that time forward, your relationship to the church, to its work and its life, is not a matter of choice or convenience. It is a matter of covenant. You have entered into a covenant with God, with the Presbyterian Church (USA), with your congregation and with your fellow officers.

Because you are men and women of your word, people of integrity, people who say what you mean and mean what you say, you are forever bound in that covenant and you are obligated to do what you say you will do when you assume your ordination vows.

You must remember also that, as an officer in the church, you represent the Church of Jesus Christ to your congregation and to the rest of the world. The way you conduct yourself in business, at home, in the church, in every area of life, is part of your service and witness to the One whom you are chosen to serve.

Whether you like it or not, your congregation and your Lord will be judged by the way you live and by the way you serve. Yes, I know you have rights, privileges and freedoms as a person and as a Christian. But remember the example of Christ who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men; and, being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross (Philippians 2:6-8).

He did not boast of his rights, his freedoms, his privileges; he did not complain that the work to which he had been called was too hard or that it took too much time. He joyfully submitted himself to

the service of his Father in heaven, and he did that which he was commissioned to do. Nothing less is expected of us.

BEING A CHURCH OFFICER, therefore, has many implications for you. By virtue of your office, you are obligated to participate actively in the life of the church, to attend regularly the services of worship, to participate in Sunday School, to attend and to support the programs of fellowship, information and inspiration.

You are expected to support the church with your material gifts and to set the example for the congregation by making regular, proportionate gifts. Of course, you know that the biblical standard is the tithe and that we really do not begin to “give” in the strict sense until we get beyond the tithe.

It is incumbent upon officers in the church to set the example, to lead the way, to provide evidence to the people that giving can be regular, proportionate, generous and joyful. Don’t say it can’t be done until you’ve tried it, because it can be done and you’ll feel good about it.

You are expected, as a church officer, to be willing to teach in Sunday School; to pray with and for the people of the congregation; to assist with the leadership of worship; to visit the sick; to minister to the troubled; to welcome the stranger and the newcomer; and to seek those who have fallen away from the church’s fellowship, that they may be restored and that the community of faith may be whole again.

You are expected to do your committee work faithfully and well. It is not enough simply to attend the regular meetings of the board on which you serve. In most churches, committees are the bodies which plan and carry out the work of mission and service. If you are to be faithful to your call, you must participate responsibly in the work of the committee to which you are appointed.

You should endeavor to keep your pastor informed of situations in the church and in the community that need the pastor’s attention. Remember that you are not the bosses, though you are partners in ministry. Work with your pastor(s) as a partner and protect their time so that it may be used to the best advantage of the church. Make sure the pastor knows what a minister needs to know in order to function effectively.

I believe a good church officer is one who looks for work to do in the church and who does it joyfully, without being prodded or coddled, bribed or threatened. The officer does it because of love for Christ, love for the people of Christ and deep personal concern for the spiritual welfare of those who belong to Christ.

A great church is one that got that way not because it had a good pulpiteer – of course, it doesn’t hurt to have a great preacher, but there aren’t that many of them around – but because it has had great officers, officers whose priorities are right in line with the great ends of the church and whose commitments to the service of Christ are deep and sincere.

IN SUMMARY, to be a church officer is no light responsibility. It demands and deserves the best you have to give in the service of God, in the life of your congregation and through the life of the presbytery. It will require of you time, faithfulness, application, diligence, discretion, wisdom and imagination. Yes, it is hard work. But, as someone once said, when God calls us to labor in his vineyard, he calls us not to eat the grapes, but to use the hoe.

The Presbyterian Church is a great church. It is a great church because, through the years, Christ has used committed officers to make it so. It is great because its form of government, ordained by God and set forth in Scripture, provides a channel through which officers and people can work together under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Our form of government does not burden us with hierarchy; it binds us to God and to each other in a covenant of service.

Within this great church, we are officers who have a high and holy task to accomplish as under-shepherds of the Master. Hard work? Yes, it is, but the goal for which we strive is worthy of our very best effort. May God give us all grace that we may labor as workmen who have no need to be ashamed.