

Presbytery Presentation: Assessment

I. Preliminary Comments:

Thankful to have this opportunity, with the hope that open communication and conversation will help us understand one another more clearly and minister together more effectively.

Too often in areas where there is disagreement, it is easy to place others in a category with a label, assume we know what they think, and the simply dismiss their position.

When we communicate openly even in areas where there are real difference of opinion, it tends to foster better understanding and often we find there are more areas of agreement than we might think.

Our topic for discussion is that of the assessment of ministerial candidates: what is the proper process by which we evaluate an individual's qualifications for gospel ministry, which assessment ultimately leads to ordination and installation in a local congregation?

In particular, what we are seeking to assess [pun intended!] is the propriety of employing what is in effect a para-church ministry, in the assessment of ministerial candidates for the church.

What I mean by that is simply that the "assessment center" is not a court of the church. It is not a joint committee of presbyteries.

Some have rightly asked why this particular issue has become a sticking point? Or more pointedly, why would you want to die on this hill?

That is a very good question; and the answer in part is, I would not want to die on that hill in and of itself.

I want to be clear at the outset that I do believe that the assessment of a candidate for ministry is of vital importance. I would say it is a clear biblical requirement given to the church along with her leaders.

1 Tim 3:10 a man is first to be tested, before the presbytery lays hands on him.

I would go further and say that I think it is also a biblical requirement for non-ordained members of the church, not just elders, to have a vital role in the assessment process.

That too is an important principle of Presbyterian practice, based on Scripture.

In **Acts 5**, the people of the church at large were to recognize the gifts of those who were to serve as “proto-deacons.” **Acts 14:23** Paul and Barnabas “had elders elected” in the churches.

So, what then is the problem? Why are we having this discussion?

The problem, as I see it, is the proposed *requirement* of the presbytery to mandate assessment by a para-church organization in order to receive funding from the Presbytery.

My concern is a very narrow one, but, I do think it is a very important one.

My concern is that by mandating assessment outside the presbytery as a condition to receive financial support from our presbytery, we are over-stepping the bounds of our authority by requiring that which is not mandated by Scripture, nor by our constitution.

At the same time, I believe that we MAY be simultaneously abdicating our responsibility as presbyters to assess candidates who will serve within our bounds.

With that narrow concern in view, let me explain where I see our current practice to be inconsistent with our better principles, principles to which I do believe we are all committed in theory.

II. The Principles at stake

1. The Regulative Principle

Christ, as King, has given to His Church officers, oracles and ordinances; and especially has He ordained therein His system of doctrine, government, discipline and worship, all of which are either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary inference may be deducted therefrom; and to which things He commands that nothing be added, and that from them naught be taken away (Preface to *The Book of Church Order*).

Broadly speaking, this is the “regulative principle.” And though we often and rightly connect the regulative principle to matters of worship, it applies more broadly to “government and discipline” as well.

And, it is critical to keep in mind that the regulative principle historically is always been discussed in the context of the question of church power.

What are the limitations of ecclesiastical power? And here our forefathers were clear:

Christ alone, as sole head and King, through his word, can order the life of the church.

Stated positively, our authority as elders is only ministerial and declarative. We minister the Word of the king and head of the church and declare his gospel.

We would all agree with WCF 25.3:

Unto this catholic visible Church Christ hath given the ministry, oracles and ordinances of God, for the gathering and perfecting of the saints, in this life, to the end of the world: and doth by His own presence and Spirit, according to His promise, make them effectual thereunto. (*Westminster Confession* 25.3)

Biblical Presbyterianism has always affirmed that Christ has ordained both the ends *and the means* for ministry in his church.

For every part of our system of government we claim Scriptural support. We condemn inventions and additions to biblical government and worship as being forbidden by Scripture.

I am suggesting that this extends to the process of the ordination of church officers as well. The Book of Church Order affirms,

the character, qualifications and authority of church officers are laid down in the Holy Scriptures, *as well as the proper method of officer investiture.* (Preface to *The Book of Church Order*)

Christ has delegated his authority to men whom he has gifted for service in his church as elders. It is the calling of the elder to promote and protect the purity and peace of his church. One of the critical ways in which elders are called to protect her purity is by overseeing the ordination of other elders.¹

2 Timothy 2:2 (and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.) places the responsibility on elders to raise up other elders.

¹ Throughout I am assuming a definition of ordination that includes both the admission to office and the appointment to a definite work in the church (BCO 17:2-3).

Timothy received the gifts of his office by way of the laying on of hands by the presbytery. (**1 Tim 4:14**)

The great wisdom of the Presbyterian system here is the provincial character of such a process. It is the local elders who know the needs of the local churches. Hence it would be best for local ministers to assess candidates for local ministry.

Local government is better government...

We all defend these principles with zeal. But, it is a chronic temptation to usurp in practice what we guard in principle.

We believe that Presbyterian government is not an option, but a biblical necessity for the well being of the church. It seems to be incumbent upon us to apply to our practice, that which we defend in principle.

The courts of the church established by Christ have the responsibility to assess and place candidates for the ministry; and such courts are sufficient for this task.

2. The governed have the right to a voice in the election of their own governors.

Our *Book of Church Order* affirms this principle when it states, “Though the character, qualifications and authority of church officers are laid down in the Holy Scriptures, as well as the proper method of officer investiture, *the power to elect persons to the exercise of authority in any particular society resides in that society.*” (*Preface*).²

² The *Form of Church Government* (1645) adds, “No man is to be ordained a minister for a particular congregation, if they of that congregation can shew just cause of exception against him.” They further state that the candidate “is to be sent to the church where he is to serve, there to preach three several days, and to converse with the people, that they may have trial of his gifts for their edification, and may have time and occasion to enquire into, and the better to know, his life and conversation.” The congregation was required, “to give their consent and approbation to such a man to be their minister, or otherwise, to

This is a long established principle of Presbyterian government. Stuart Robinson *The Church of God*, stated in 1858,

“The power vests in the body as such; the administration of the power is in office-bearing members of the body whom the Great Head selects, calls, qualifies, and commissions to rule ministerially in his name. The Holy Ghost makes them overseers. But yet the vocation to the exercise of the office is in the people, who must try the spirits, and judge whether they be men full of faith and of the Holy Ghost.”³

In those cases where the seed of a new congregation exists (core group), it seems that we must seek to preserve the rights of the governed. The delegation of assessment to an outside authority at best limits their rights, and at worst removes them altogether.

I am concerned here with our common practice of assessment taking place outside both the local Presbytery and the local congregation (or core group), such that only those approved by some body removed from the local situation are allowed as candidates for a particular call.

This functionally removes assessment from the local body. The governed are no longer given a voice in the election of their own governors.

3. Ordination is the responsibility of a presbytery (1 Timothy 4:14 Do not neglect the gift you have, which was given you by prophecy when the council of elders laid their hands on you).

put in, with all Christian discretion and meekness, what exceptions they have against him.”

³ Robinson, Stuart *The Church of God as an Essential Element of the Gospel* (Philadelphia: Joseph M. Wilson, 1858) 81.

If ordination includes the appointment of a man to a particular work in the church, then this includes the responsibility to “assess” men for particular church plants.

The *Form of Church Government* produced by the Westminster Divines, 1645, reminds us that candidates are, “to be *examined and approved* by those by whom he is to be ordained” (1 Timothy 3:7-10; 5:22).

The “testing” required in 1 Tim 3 is a prerequisite to the laying on of hands (1 Tim 4:14).

Because the divines understood that “the work of ordination is to be performed with all due care, wisdom, gravity, and solemnity” they provided specific procedures for the ordination process.

They go so far as to state that such care would demand “an examination in the premises two several days, and more, if the presbytery shall judge it necessary.” This may not be convenient for the presbytery, but convenience is no measure of responsibility.

4. Liberty of conscience

Again, one of our most cherished principles is that “God alone is Lord of the conscience.” In light of our commitment to this vital biblical principle, I do not believe we should ever require a man to participate in a para-church process in order to take up his calling in the church of Christ.

It may well be the case that we are *requiring* men to participate in a process that violates their conscientious commitment to Presbyterian polity. Out of love for our brethren we must guard such liberty.

III. Delegation

Many say all we are doing is delegating one aspect of our responsibility to others who are more qualified or have more time to do the work. I would respond in a couple of ways.

First, the calling of the elder to assess and ordain other elders is not peripheral, but essential to the office. To delegate this responsibility to others is akin to delegating the ministry of the word. We would never do so because that is of the essence of our calling, and so too is the ordination process.

It is, in the Words of Samuel Miller, “the highest act of ecclesiastical power.” Why would we want to delegate such a high privilege to others?

Second, I do not believe the “assessors” are in fact more qualified than the men in this room for the task. It may well be the case, that our processes have much room for improvement, but, this is a task to which we have been called by virtue of our own ordination as elders.

If our current processes are inadequate in some way, then lets work to improve them rather than delegate our responsibility to others.

Our willingness to employ “experts” to help us assess the fitness of men for ministry, may be a manifestation more of American pragmatism, than of biblical church government.

The centralization and incorporation of the church will not be good for the health of the church over time and should be resisted.

Local government is *always* (if I may be so bold) better government.

One of my broader concerns here is the process of bureaucratization in the church. The structures of the institution reflect her values, and in fact, work to create her values.

I fear that the values of “success,” efficiency, specialization, and centralization have come to the fore more and more in the life of the church.

Louis Weeks in his excellent work titled *the Incorporation of the Presbyterians*, admits,

“How to balance necessary organization with self-conscious distance from a complex, pervasive atmosphere of incorporation will itself be a complicated task.”

But, he adds, “It seems one worth the effort...if a Presbyterian identity remains important within the Christian family.”⁴

Third, it is a myth to say the assessment center has no real authority. When denominational funding is tied to assessment, that constitutes authority. There are few presbyteries who will move forward with a man who has not been “approved” by assessment, that is *functional* authority.

Or, in our current situation where many of our churches are now channeling funds through the Florida Church Planting Network- funds which can only be accessed by those who have been to the Assessment Center- that constitutes a functional authority.

Fourth, the centralization of evaluating candidates is dangerously close to a return to prelacy. The mark that distinguishes the Presbyterian form of government from the Episcopal, is our persistent defense of the authority of the elder to oversee the great calling of ordination.

Samuel Miller says in this context, “We maintain, that all ministers of the Gospel who are empowered to administer the

⁴ Louis B. Weeks, “The Incorporation of the Presbyterians” 54.

word and sacraments, are *officially equal*, and authorized to perform the highest acts of ecclesiastical power.”

The highest act he has in view is that of ordination. To centralize the process of evaluating candidates for the ministry is a move away from biblical Presbyterianism.

Fifth, It is often said that delegation to the Assessment Center is not different than delegating the education of ministerial candidates to the seminary. We delegate academic training to the seminary, why not delegate assessment?

Response - This is a poor comparison. Seminary training is not mandated. What is mandated is knowledge of Greek, Hebrew, Bible, History, Church Gov't etc. Many viable paths are open to receive that training, including self study, mentorship, and many different seminaries. *IF YOU MADE IT MANDATORY FOR PCA PASTORS TO ATTEND COVENANT SEMINARY, THAT WOULD BE A MUCH CLOSER COMPARISON TO THE MNA ASSESSMENT CENTER.*

In a similar way, I would like to preserve more than one path to assessment- internships, presbytery committees, and at times, the input of the assessment center as well, particularly in cases where we have little personal knowledge of a candidate.

Conclusion:

I have no doubt that those assessed and trained through the center are well equipped for service in Christ's church. But usefulness is not the issue here, the issue is one of principle.

I would still suggest that we seek to bring the knowledge and skills gained through the work of the assessment center into the work of the local Presbytery.

In short, I agree with J. H. Thornwell,

*“The Church, as organized by her Head, is competent to do all that He requires of her. He has furnished her with the necessary apparatus of means, officers, and institutions, in Sessions, Presbyteries, Elders, Pastors, and evangelists. Let us take Presbyterianism as we have it described in our Form of Government... and if we do not intend to execute the form, let us cease requiring our ministers to assent to it.”*⁵

Conclusion:

In light of these concerns I would humbly ask the presbytery to direct the MNA committee to refrain from making attendance at the Assessment Center a *requirement* for all candidates to receive funding for new works in our presbytery.

⁵ James H. Thornwell, quoted in Craig Troxel, “Charles Hodge on Church Boards: A Case Study in Ecclesiology,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 58 (1996) 193-194.