

“What About Those Ordination Questions?
1 Corinthians 12 (selected verses)
January 11, 2015, Ordination & Installation of Elders
W. Glenn Doak, Preaching

Today, in a little while, we are going to ordain 4 new elders and install 7 others who have served as an elder previously either in this church or in another Presbyterian church. It is a time of orderly transition, (we call it decently and in order) with 10 retiring from office and 10 elders newly elected and 1 replacement for one who moved away. All of them were and are called to service by God and the voice of this congregation. Part of the process in being ordained and installed is to confess what it is you believe. The questions they will answer in a few minutes leads them through declaring what they believe about Jesus, God, the Bible, the Creeds and to examine their own life.

In the scripture of the morning Paul finds himself in the middle of a fractured group there in Corinth. We can romanticize and think that back at the beginning of the church everyone was on the same page and they all were eager to spread the good news and everyone was pulling together after all they had only been the church for about 10 years ... but in fact they were splintered. Paul finds himself in a debate over the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Some thought their gift was the best and the others played minor roles. The major issue was over the gift of speaking in tongues. Some said it was the only gift that showed you had been chosen by the Holy Spirit.

Paul approaches their issues by listing the gifts of the spirit. For some the gift is being an apostle or being a prophet or being a teacher for others it is the gift of the mind in wisely speaking or knowledge and still others the gift of leadership or the gift of faith or healing or hospitality. Last on his list is the gift of tongues. He then says all are of equal importance. God has given each of us at least one of the spiritual gifts. They are given when you and I are baptized. It's up to each of us to discern what our gift is and how to use it in the service of the church.

“There are a variety of gifts, but it is the same Spirit which gives them, and there are a variety of services, but the same Lord; and there are a variety of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.”

A little girl was sitting on the steps of a large cathedral that was newly built. A man who was passing by paused for a moment to admire the beautiful architecture. He was surprised to hear the little girl speak up: “do you like it?”

“Yes, I think it is very beautiful,” the man answered. “I’m glad you like it, she replied, “because I helped build it.” The man smiled and said, “You are awfully small to have had a part in the construction of such a large building. Tell me what did you do?” The little girl proudly announced, “My father is a bricklayer. He worked on this church; and every day he worked, I brought him his lunch.”

In this great body of Christ all of us are important all of us are givers and receivers. There is a place for every one of us and no one can occupy anyone else's place. It is as though if one of us were not here, the whole structure would collapse. Jesus came to tell us that each is valuable. It is like a birthright ... waiting to be claimed. Are you willing to carry a lunch pail?

Today we are here to ordain and install 11 individuals who have answered the call of God and the voice of this congregation to pick up the lunch pail for the next 3 years and serve the congregation in a unique way, as officers of this church serving in a servant leadership role. We call them elders not because they are necessarily old; "we call them 'Ruling Elders' not because they will "lord it over" the congregation, but because they are chosen by the congregation to discern and measure its fidelity to the Word of God, and to strengthen and nurture its faith and life." (Book of Order G—2.0301)

We do this by first asking them a series of questions that reviews for them the essential teachings of our church and then by praying over them in a tradition called "the laying on of hands" when former ordained persons, laity and clergy, come and lay hands on the new officers to strengthen them for their service by the power of the Holy Spirit and as a reminder they will continually pray for and support them in their work.

So what are these questions? You may hear them each time we have a service installing ministers or elders. Those who are being asked the questions go over each question during their training time. So they have a better sense of what each question means.

The first question is similar to the question that we ask of all people when they join the church. It is a question of what we believe about Jesus Christ. The question is worded around three strong verbs: trust, acknowledge and believe. "Do you **trust** in Jesus Christ your Savior, **acknowledge** him Lord of all and Head of the Church, and through him **believe** in one God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit? Do you trust in Jesus as your Savior ... the word trust is the first form of faith. Who do we trust first? We trust mom first, the first trust relationship is mother/child, how that works out determines how we approach trust all of our lives. The opposite of trust is ... despair not doubt. You are still working on your healthy trust when you have doubts. Do you trust in JC as your Savior, acknowledge him Lord of all and Head of the Church, one of the essential Presbyterian beliefs is that Jesus is the "Head of the Church" so you are asked to acknowledge that and then believe in one God, expressed in three ways Father, Son and HS. Some have called belief, "humankind's final reach of faith." Belief is standing on "tip toes to see what's around us." What do you believe? I believe in one God expressed some mysterious way in Father, Son and HS.

Question 2 is about the Bible, what do you believe about the Bible? It asks "Do you accept the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament to be, by the Holy Spirit, the **unique and authoritative** witness to Jesus Christ in the church universal, and God's word to you?" Presbyterians grew out of the Reformation movement which in large part was about giving the Bible to the laity. Scripture alone ... became one of the phrases that propelled the church forward. We use the words "unique and authoritative witness" meaning we believe that the HS inspired the writers in a unique way backed by the authority of God to write these human words to express extraordinary God-events.

Question 3 is about the confessions of the church like the Apostles' Creed, the Scots Confession and the Brief Statement of faith. The Book of Confessions is Part 1 of our denominations Constitution, it is the expression in human written terms of what scripture leads us to believe. The confessions also express the culture into which they were written. The question asks, "Do you sincerely **receive and adopt** the essential tenets of the Reformed faith as expressed in the confession of our church as authentic and reliable expositions of what Scripture leads us to believe and do, and will you be **instructed and led** by those confessions as you lead the people of God?" The Reformed faith is the family of believers of which Presbyterians are a part and it means we rely on scripture as our final authority in matters of faith and practice and we confess regularly what we believe when we gather in worship.

Question 4 is a review of the first three questions in case you didn't get it. The question asks, "Will you fulfill your ministry in obedience to **Jesus Christ**, under the authority of **Scripture**, and be continually guided by our **confessions**?"

Question 5 begins to get a little more personal. When you are installed in office how will you act? Is what it is asking! Will you be instructed by the Book of Order or will you ignore it and make your decisions some other way. Will you be a friend among your colleagues i.e. the others serving on the session with you or do you plan to start as a contrarian? You know someone who disagrees just because he/she thinks someone should be disagreeing for no apparent reason. There is plenty of room on the session for disagreement but not just for the fun of it or because you think you oughta. The question asks, "Will you be governed by the **church's polity** and will you abide by its discipline? Will you be a **friend among your colleagues** in ministry, working with them, subject to the ordering of God's Word and Spirit?"

Question 6 gets very personal. It asks the question as to how you are living and will live your life. It asks, "Will you in your own life seek to follow the Lord Jesus Christ, love your neighbors and work for the reconciliation of the world." If I follow Jesus do I really have to love my neighbor who sends me nasty emails about how my yard looks? Is that the neighbor the question has in mind? We might ask as the lawyer did to Jesus, "who is my neighbor?"

Question 7 is asking about your religious behavior in the church. The question asks, "Do you promise to further the peace, unity and purity of the church?" Today when splinter groups are forming around the country and some churches are thinking they are more important individually than the body of Christ this should be the question that holds the center together: peace, unity and purity. I guess some would ask who's priority are we talking about?

Question 8 is just about everyone's favorite question. The question asks, "Will you pray for and seek to serve the people with energy, intelligence, imagination and love?" It is the only question that asks the new elders to pray maybe we should have more of that in the questions. And it is the only question that asks about energy, elders need plenty of that; intelligence, we assume they have that when we elect them right; imagination, I think it is a two way street some people are uniquely equipped with lots of imagination and others have the gift of recognizing an imaginative vision or idea when they hear one, and love isn't that what the ministry of Jesus is all about?

If you have been paying attention and haven't dozed off you know we are at the last question, if the person next to you has dozed off you might give them a slight nudge as we are almost through ... Question 9 ask, "Will you be a faithful ruling elder, watching over the people, providing for their worship, nurture and service?" That is what they are to do watch over the people like you and you and you, provide for worship making sure someone is here leading worship each Sunday, nurture (education) teaching themselves and making sure others are and service opportunities like MLK Day and IHN. One person wrote having ordained elders is like having 10 extra ministers that you don't have to pay. The question ends by asking, "In your ministry will you try to show the love and justice of Jesus Christ?"

These 11 individuals who are answering these questions today are signing up for service in a servant ministry are representing you all. They also will be calling upon you to help them in this common ministry to which we all are a part. We all belong to this place, Christ's ministry right here on Hancock Avenue and throughout the larger Athens community. We all belong in this work together some are set apart by answering these questions BUT we all are set apart too; for all of us were given the gift of belonging at baptism, when that happened, our baptism, we were given not only a gift of belonging but we also signed up for the responsibility of functioning as part of the body of Christ.