

‘ELDERSHIP IN THE SCRIPTURES’

1. Introduction

It becomes very clear, when we study the matter of eldership that it involves the terms, ‘bishop’ (overseer), ‘pastor’, and ‘ruler’ or ‘leader’ as well as the idea of ‘service’. Also related to this general term ‘service’ which is not confined to elders or bishops, is the mention of gifts and manifestations of the Spirit. For this reason a study of eldership will involve an understanding of the nature and function of the church. Obviously we cannot cover this fully within this present study. Nevertheless, we must briefly consider the context in which we find the operation of eldership.

Secondly, we will have to trace the origin of eldership, and then decide whether it is of the esse or the bene esse of the church. By this we mean that we need to know whether it is of the full functional nature of the church, or is dispensable. If eldership is part of the essential nature of the church, then we will need to examine its functions with a view to the use of it within the Body of Christ today.

2. The Context of Eldership

(i) Service or Ministry

The term ‘service’ or ‘ministry’ (diakonia) is applied across the whole church, and is by no means confined to elders or pastors. A quick glance at a concordance will show who were those involved in ministry. Jesus had said, ‘Whoever would be great among you must be your servant’ (Mark 10:43-45). The verb ‘to minister’ means ‘to serve’. When believers worship they ‘minister to the Lord’ (Acts 13:2). To look after the widows is ministry (Acts 6:1), and at the same time the apostles have ‘the ministry of reconciliation’ (11 cot. 5:18). So we could go on. The varieties of service are many.

Linked with this service or ministry are two things (a) The ministries of those appointed and (b) The gifts of charismata.

(ii) The Gifts

The church must be understood as the Body of Christ of which all who are joined to Christ by faith are members. This joining is generally signified by the act of baptism. According to I Cor. 12:4-30 each member of the Body receives a gift or gifts. These derive from the Spirit, and can also be called manifestations of the Spirit. At the same time there are services or ministries, these deriving from the Lord (Christ), whilst there are operations or acts and

effects which come from God (the Father). All of these gifts, services, acts, are for the common good of the members of the Body. Since all members are inter-related within the Body, their diversity of gifts, far from being divisive is the basis of true unity.

Various students of Scripture have divided the gifts into different categories. We need not go into this matter. What we do see, however, is that some members of the Body are themselves gift-ministries or ministry-gifts to the Body. This is particularly seen in Ephes 4:7-11. Here the ministries or gifts are 'apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers'. In I Cor. 12:28 they are, roughly speaking, repeated, and to then are added other gifts, e.g. healings, helps, administrations, etc.

As the gifts or manifestations of the Spirit operate, then ministries and acts (effects) are effected. In this way the Body does its work, both of ministering internally to itself and its needs, and also externally to the world in its act of proclamation or evangelism. None of these gifts or operations is arbitrary. All members should be led by the Holy Spirit (Rom.8:14, Gal. 5:16-18,25). All uses of gifts and services should be in an orderly fashion since God is not the God of confusion (I Cor. 14:33). Hence persons who are apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers will minister in the church, and those possessing gifts (or, manifesting the Spirit's actions) will make their contribution. In this way the Body will grow up into its full maturity (Ephes. 4:12-16).

(iii) The Hierarchy

Early in Acts we see the church has elders. At Jerusalem it was the elders who led the church. We will see that, roughly speaking, these constitute the bishops or overseers later mentioned in the Epistles. They are also called 'leaders' or 'rulers'. They care for the flock of God, and they keep order and discipline within it. The church was not a democracy as such. The figures of Body, Family, Temple - amongst others - tell us that there was an hierarchical order of ministry. The Head of the Church is Christ, and the apostles have direct authority from him, to be followed by prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers. In the Acts and the Pastoral Epistles the elders give form and order to the church, and must be respected and obeyed.

(iv) The Plan or Purpose

The church is to obey its Lord, led by the Spirit, and is to do the will of God. The commands given to proclaim the Gospel to all nations, and every person, and to teach the believers is its clear work. However, it is also the medium by which the Kingdom is proclaimed, and nations brought to obedience (Rom. 1:5, 15:18, 16:26). This is parallel to the defeat of the powers of evil (I Cor. 15:24-28), so that members of the church can be said to be fellow-workers with God, and builders of that which is to be (I Cor. 3:6-15). In other words, the church is there to fulfil the plan of God, under Christ and His Spirit.

Our conclusion then is that in the service of God and the church, the gifts, manifestations and hierarchy all combine to be the means by which God works out His will, in time, space and history. Whilst eldership may seem to be but a small part of this, it is in fact a part which is most significant, as we shall see.

3. The Concept of Eldership

(i) Celestial Eldership

Deeply fascinating is the picture we have of celestial eldership. In regard to fatherhood, we have true Fatherhood in God, true Sonship in Christ, true Brotherhood in Jesus, true Marriage in the Bride and the Lamb, and so on. From these sources must flow the earthly. We mean that the orders referred to are not analogical with human orders, but that human orders are homological of the heavenly. When Jesus said repeatedly ‘My heavenly Father’, or, ‘My Father who is in heaven’ he meant that in order to understand true Fatherhood (or, true fatherhood), we should not work from the earthly to the heavenly, but rather the reverse. When we understand the true Fatherhood we can come to understand what true (earthly) fatherhood really is, even though we may never see it demonstrated in practical fact.

Could this be so with celestial and terrestrial eldership? The answer is, ‘Possibly.’ Since there can be no proof that the earthly is homological with, or of, the heavenly eldership, this does not mean that both would not have their parallels. What is valuable is that we can examine the heavenly, and then proceed to see what its earthly counterpart could be. What then are the elements of the heavenly eldership? They are as follows:-

First of all we see that celestial elders are not met for the first time in the book of the Revelation. In Isaiah 24:23 we read,

‘The moon will be confounded, and the sun ashamed;
for the Lord of hosts will reign
on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem
and before His elders He will manifest His glory.’

What then are these elders? The Jewish Targum said they were the elders of Israel. Here in the Revelation they are in heaven. In Daniel 7:9ff., there is a vision of heaven, and there are many thrones, the main one being that of ‘The Ancient of Days’. With him are ‘the saints of the Most High’. These could be either the redeemed saints who are men or the ‘holy ones’ who are angels (or both).

In the Book of the Revelation the elders each occupy a throne. Also it is clear they are men. It has been variously surmised as to whom they are. Some see them as priestly leaders because they are undoubtedly worshipping God and do this kind of worship-service (e.g. Rev. 4:10f., 5:8ff., etc.). They have therefore been identified with the 24 priestly orders set out in I Chron. 24:4ff., which were under the authority of the ‘heads of their father’s house’. In I Chron. 25:1 there were also twenty-four orders of Levites whose duty it was to ‘prophesy with lyres, with harps and with cymbals’. The behaviour of the elders in the Revelation certainly accords with this.

Nevertheless from the Book of the Revelation itself comes the explanation of the twenty-four. In 21:12-14 we read of the twelve manes of the tribes of Israel being inscribed on the twelve gates of the celestial city, and the twelve names of the apostles being inscribed on the twelve foundations of the city. It is reasonable, then, to see the elders as being representative of ‘old’ Israel, and the ‘new’ Israel, that is, together, of the ‘true’ Israel, the full Israel, the elect, the redeemed of God.

Now we are free to note the elements this eldership represents:-

- (a) They have authority; they wear crowns of gold.
- (b) They are pure; they wear white robes.
- (c) They are closest to the throne of God of all creatures except the four living creatures. They are even nearer than are the angels (7:11).
- (d) They have great knowledge of God, hence they sing the song of God the Creator, and the new song of the Lamb the Redeemer.
- (e) They are adept at worship. In their worship they humble their own authority before that of God Himself, i.e. they cast down their crowns before Him. Hence they are submissive.
- (f) They are able in some sense to bring the prayers of the saints before God (5:8).
- (g) From time to time they come forward to say something (5:5, 7:13). This indicates they know the intimate things of heaven, as also of the counsels of God.

Generally then we can conclude that in heaven the place of eldership is one of great authority, great knowledge, great service, worship and obedience. The elders have intimacy with God, although not without deep reverence and awe. So high is their authority that the 144,000, and the harpers sing before the elders, who themselves are situated next to the living creatures and God. That is, the elders are included in this high celestial office. An examination of their praise songs is one which in itself demands close study. These can be seen in 4:11, 5:9-10, 11:17-18. Doubtless the elders are also involved in the songs of 19:1-3, and 19:6-8. These songs deal with God and creation, Christ and redemption, God and the vindication of His righteousness, and the ultimate defeat of all evil. In Rev. 7:13-17 the statement of the elder concerning the redeemed and their place in heaven is uttered in rich poetical terms and may even be a song in itself. As we have said, the truth and theology contained in these utterances is not only beautiful and transcendent praise, but is also deep theology.

What then of eldership on earth? Is it like this? Is it intended to be of the same order, i.e. to have authority, purity, wisdom and understanding? Surely this is of the nature of eldership within the church. Let us then trace the origin, rise and development of such eldership.

(ii) Creational Eldership

The term 'elder' is a simple one. In the Old Testament it refers to those men who are generally the oldest or eldest in tribes, and who by virtue of their age, wisdom and experience have authority in leading their people, deciding matters of justice, and giving wise counsel to those who need it or require it. It is noticeable that generally speaking this authority is exercised by a corporate body of elders. Hence we should, strictly speaking, always think in terms of eldership rather than examine what an elder is. In the whole matter of authority and obedience¹ we see that the wife is subject to the husband and the children are subject to them both. In this sense the father is

¹ See Living Faith Studies No. 5 'The Nature of Authority & Obedience' for a fuller treatment of this aspect of our studies.

the elder of the home, and in his absence or death the elder son. The younger always serves the elder.

It appears that from time immemorial there have been elders amongst all peoples. In some cultures the eldership is patriarchal, and in others matriarchal. In Genesis 50:7 we read of the elders of the Egyptians, and in Numbers 22:4-7 of the elders of Moab and of Midian.² Israel's elders are referred to many times. In Exodus 3:16 it is clear that Israel had had elders in all its time in Egypt. There is no need to see anything exceptional about Israel's elders. All peoples have them, as we have observed, and their presence seems functional to the true working and life of any community. Clans and tribes need some kind of informed and wise council, and such elders have always provided.

Some theologians still debate whether man should have had any form of government. Creationally man was to live, they say, without government, and government of any kind was brought about by man's fall. This would be difficult to prove. Man obviously had authority over his universe, and there was a leadership-helpmeet relationship between man and woman. There is no cause to believe that children were intended to live on a par with their parents. Hence a patriarchal system, and the enlargement of families would lead to some form of clan or tribal government. It must not always be thought that the principle of Romans 13:1-7 is simply for the maintaining of law and order. Authority, rightly understood, is primarily for the development and maturing of the people under its aegis.

(iii) The Eldership in Israel

(a) In Egypt

We have noted that Israel had an eldership whilst in Egypt. The passage of Exodus 3:16-22 shows the importance God placed upon the elders. They were to hear the news of their imminent liberation from Egypt. The elders were to go to Pharaoh and to represent Israel to him, begging the opportunity to go to worship their God. Moses had to bring the very message of the nature and purpose of God to them - the elders.

(b) In the Exodus

From there on we can trace their importance. In Exodus 12:21ff. we see the fact that elders were over households, and had to supervise the slaying of the offering for the families for the Passover. In Exodus 18:8-12 it is the elders who share a worship feast with Jethro the father-in-law of Moses. In Exodus 18:13-26 Moses accepts the advice to appoint subsidiary judges to try certain cases, thus relieving himself of the total burden. It could scarcely be that these judges were chosen from others than the elders. In Exodus 19:5f. Moses communicates to the elders the selection of Israel, by God to be His special people. The election of the seventy elders of Israel is described in Numbers 11:16ff. This was in response to Moses' complaint about the burden he had to carry, i.e. the whole people of Israel. He was ordered to select seventy elders from among those who were already elders within the tribes. Doubtless this was not difficult as they probably had gathered in roughly this

² For further evidence of non-Israelitish eldership see Joshua 9:11 (Gibeon) Judges 8:14,16 (Succoth), Judges 9:2 (Shechem).

order when crises arose before and during the exodus from Egypt. It is also interesting to note that they were invested with the same Spirit as was Moses. Indeed their anointing is like an O.T Pentecost, including the unique fact that they prophesied.

The seventy are probably those who were at Sinai with Moses, and who in Exodus 24 are involved in the making of the covenant, and then ‘going up’ to see ‘the God of Israel; and there was under his feet, as it were, a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness. And he did not lay his hand on the chief men of the people of Israel; they beheld God, and ate and drank’. This indicates their high calling, and their need, as elders, to know God in this intimate way.

In Numbers 16 we read of the elders going with Moses when he punishes Dathan and Abiram. Here they represent the people, but they also stand with Moses, i.e. with God, in the disciplining of the whole nation. In Deut. 1:9-18 Moses in his final discourse refers back to the choice of those who shared government with him, and extols them as worthy persons, and gives dignity to their office. Because they were at Sinai and also in the covenant-making had received the message and vision of God, therefore some have ascribed the text we examined above - Isaiah 24:23 ‘Before his elders He will manifest His glory’ (or, ‘Before His elders is glory’) - to the time of their seeing Him on Sinai. It does not much matter what interpretation we make. Eldership, whether in heaven or on earth, is highly attested to by God. An old Jewish commentary on Numbers 11:16 was ‘Not just in one place, and not just in two, does God give honour to the elders. But in every place where you find elders God gives honour to the elders’.

(c) In the Promised Land

Following Moses we find mention of the elders. In Joshua 7:6 the elders stand with the leader Joshua as the family of Achan is destroyed for its evil. When Joshua leads the attack on Ai (Joshua 8:10) the leaders are with him. Finally when Joshua calls the people for a national assembly the elders also are called (Joshua 24:1). In 23:2 we have another occasion in which Joshua called all Israel, including the elders. When it comes to the times of the Judges and the Monarchy we find elders in localised situations such as the city and district of Gilead (Judges 11:3-11), Jabesh (I Sam. 11:5-10), Bethlehem (I Sam. 16:4) and Judah (I Sam. 30:26-31). We have evidence for believing the elders ‘sat in the gate’, i.e. it was the place where they conferred concerning the well-being of the city. (Cf. Deut. 22:15, 25:7)

Finally, when we trace the activities of the elders through Israel’s history we find they relate to many of the decisions and changes which occur in their nation. It is they who decide to use the ark against the Philistines (I Sam. 4:3), who ask for a king (I Sam 8:4), and when that king, Saul, is disgraced he wishes to be honoured before them, the elders (I Sam. 15:30). It is through the elders that David is ultimately made king (cf. II Sam. 3:17, 5:3). It is contingent upon the elders that David regains his rulership following the rebellion of Absalom (cf. II Sam. 17:4,15, 19:11). The elders are present and part of the ceremony of the dedication of the Temple under Solomon (I Kings 8:1ff.). The elders of the Northern and Southern kingdoms of (former) Israel still continue following the division of the nation (cf. I Kings 20:7f.) Each nation, now, has its own elders. The place, position and authority of these elders was understood by Solomon (I Kings 8:13), Ahab (20:7), Jezebel (21:8), Jehu (II Kings 10:1), Hezekiah (19:2), and Josiah (23:1).

In Deuteronomy the ministry of elders is set out. It relates to blood avengement (19:11-13), atonement for unsolved murder (21:1-9), judgement of a rebellious son (21:18-21), of a husband against his sinning wife (22:13-21), levirate marriage (25:5-10), and the gathering of the people for special occasions (29:10, 31:28).

(d) Exilic and Post-Exilic Times

Elders continued to be amongst the people, even during the time of exile. We gather from Jer. 29:1, Ezek. 8:1, 14:1, 20:1,3, that the elders sought to lead the people. In Ezekiel 14:1 these elders are, unfortunately, evil. However their power is not in doubt. They are there to lead the people, whether for good or evil. In Jeremiah 26:17 they are presented as pleading for the prophet, opposing the previous judgement of the priests and the prophets. In this they succeed. They possess a godly understanding of their history as the people of God.

The actual term 'elders' is not greatly used in Ezra-Nehemiah, but the principle is still there. The elders represent and lead the people. See Ezra 5:9, 6:7,8,14. In Nehemiah 2:16, 4:14,19, 5:7, 7:5, Ezra 10:7-17 we find that there are still elders of the cities. In Ezra 10, not only city elders are mentioned, but leaders of the whole people, and they gather to correct the things which had been done wrongly, things not in accordance with the law.

We conclude then that in O.T times the office of an elder was an important one. We see that whilst in some cases the elders may have been judges and thus exercised some executive ruling power, yet on the whole they were simply wise leaders of the people, giving good and helpful council, and representing the people to God, to the monarchy, and generally maintaining law and order in local situations.

(e) In Palestine During the Time of Christ

The structure of the 'council of the elders' known as the Sanhedrin is a somewhat complex matter. Whilst it was composed primarily of lay elders, i.e. not those from priestly families such as the priests and Levites, it was greatly influenced by the priestly leaders of the time. These were mainly Sadducees. From Persian times there had been a governing body known as the Gerousia, and it had related to the internal government of the Jews, even under captors. Gradually this group had changed to the Sanhedrin current in N.T times. Often we read of 'the chief priests, scribes, and elders' (cf. Mark 11:27, 14:43), and it may well be they composed the whole Sanhedrin. However for our purposes, in seeking to understand eldership in every respect, the same thing obtains as in O.T times; these elders determine the pattern and manner of life of the nation.

It is interesting to note that the elders ultimately sided with the priests and Sadducees against Christ. They visited him a number of times, and showed hostility. It is they who finally took him to Pilate and had him judged. With them of course, were the chief priests. In Mark 7:3 we read of 'the tradition of the elders'. Jesus sharply criticises this tradition and its legalistic hypocrisy. Ritual cleansing may not be a bad thing of itself, but wrongly used it covers up the moral impurity of man. Other passages show us that the elders had not really fulfilled their role as leaders of the people. Jesus does not, however, criticise the fact of elders, as such. It is the wrong use of their authority that he condemns.

In the book of the Acts we find the Sanhedrin faced with the outcome of its previous decision to crucify Christ. The disciples, very emboldened, are claiming Christ to be risen from the dead, and the accounts show that the Sanhedrin should logically have seen Jesus to be the Messiah. The new dynamic of faith stuns this ruling group and on two occasions they seek to prevent the apostles proclaiming the risen Messiah. Acts 4 and 5 show the definitive rejection of Christ by these elders, thus proving the Council to be wrong in its role of leading the nation. It is the Sanhedrin which has spoken officially for Israel.

Again, in the Gospels, we find there are other elders, namely those of the synagogues. The rich young ruler is one of these. In John chapter nine the blind man is cast out of the synagogue (cf. 9:22,34) by those who were its rulers. In Luke 4:16 we have a picture of worship in the synagogue, and we know that it was controlled by the elders. In Acts we see the apostles preaching in the synagogues, and their message polarises the listeners, so that some believe on Messiah and others oppose the message. Typical is the statement in Acts 13:45 where a ruler of the synagogue (Crispus) believes, but has to leave the synagogue. From these fragments we gather that elders played a large part in the life and worship of the Jews, that is in both temple and synagogue, and also, of course, in the affairs of the whole community.

(f) Conclusion

Having traced the history of eldership from patriarchal times to the times of the early church we are in a better position to understand what would be the nature and function of elders within that church. If we add to this general background of eldership that which is contained in the book of the Revelation concerning celestial eldership, then we are in a position to study the role and operation of elders within the church.

Before examining this let us remind ourselves that the elders, generally speaking, were men of wisdom, having attained this by reason of experience and maturity. They carried great authority, yet their interests primarily concerned the welfare of their people. They were a functional necessity to the community. As we have said, their office was not necessarily a religious one, as such, but in Israel they were expected to be godly men, understanding the principles of the theocracy in which they lived and for which they worked. It is of no great moment that some were not good elders. Their weakness or wrongness does not alter the principle of their office. Let us also remember the corporate nature of the eldership. Together they formed that group which could best exercise authority and personal help. There was no such thing as a single monarchical elder exercising a lone and individualistic ministry.

4. The Eldership Within The Church

(i) Eldership in General

Let us remind ourselves of the charismatic nature of the early church. Let us remind ourselves also of this context of eldership. Some see two areas of operation, the first being a totally charismatic ministry in which all members of the body were involved with evident authority and leadership by the apostles, and then to some lesser degree by the other ministries of the prophet, evangelist, pastor and teacher. In this department there were no official church leaders such as we now regard as clergy. Others see a second area of

operation, namely a systematising of the charismatic, and a formalising of the ministry of elders. It is often thought that this last system spelt the end of the charismatic ferment, and that this charismatic element was, after all, a sort of initial launching of the church, a kind of enthusiasm which carried it through to its true formation, after which it was not greatly necessary, and finally, not necessary at all. It is to be doubted whether the latter idea can be sustained. Nor is it likely that the charismatic was intended to give way to more formalised 'offices' of eldership. In fact there was no real contrast (or conflict) of the charismata and eldership.

In the book of the Acts we have a rich expression of the charismatic, in that Peter and the apostles exercise a ministry that is not merely institutional. Paul speaks of these things being 'the marks of an apostle'. 'The signs of a true apostle were performed among you in all patience, with signs and wonders and mighty works' (11 Cor. 12:12, cf. Romans 15:18ff.). At the same time, men such as Stephen and Philip, not being apostles, performed similar works, and the summaries of the charismata in I Corinthians chs. 12-14, Romans 12:3ff., and I Peter 4:9f., cf. Hebrews 2:4, 6:4, I Peter 1:12 all tell us that the early church worked in a charismatic way. Nevertheless there is no need to think of it as simply yeasty, as though it were in a temporary ferment. Paul is therefore careful to say that in all the charismatic operations there must be order and not confusion (I Car, 14:33). In no sense does he seek to terminate charismatic operations. Nor for that matter does he oppose them to eldership.

There is, therefore, no need to think of the charismata and the eldership as alternatives in the church's life-style. They are complementary elements. Hence when in Acts 14:23 the churches in Galatia have elders ordained, Paul can write later to these (or, similar) churches and say, 'He who goes on working miracles among you, and goes on supplying the Holy Spirit...' meaning that the charismatic operations proceed as normal (Gal. 3:1-5).

(a) Eldership in Acts

The elders are first mentioned in Acts 11:30 in regard to receiving the collection for the needy saints at Jerusalem. Here there is no mention of the apostles. The elders evidently had the oversight of the Jerusalem church, and not, primarily, the apostles. At the same time, in I Peter 5:1 Peter can call himself a 'fellow-elder'. It is even possible that he does not see himself as an elder of the local church at Jerusalem (or anywhere) but simply of the church of God in general. In Acts 11:30 and 21:18 it is evident that the apostles are not present at Jerusalem whilst the elders are. Paul also indicates this in Galatians 1:19. The apostles must have been generally on the move, founding new churches. The elders had the day-ta-day oversight of the people.

The elders of the Jerusalem church are again mentioned in the 15th chapter of Acts. Here they are with the apostles. Both, together, consider the matters of importance concerning the Gentiles, the church, and the law. It is James the leading elder who makes the final pronouncement. He never belonged to the original group of apostles, and whilst he may be said to be an apostle in some sense, yet he is primarily the elder of the church at Jerusalem. (cf. Cal. 1:19, 2:9. Was James an apostle in any sense?) The fact that the apostles and elders are together in Acts 15 (cf. 16:4) means the elders were of considerable importance. Not only do these two, i.e. apostles and elders, make a pronouncement for the local church at Jerusalem, but in fact for the whole church, wherever it may be (cf. 15:22). In Acts 21:17-26 we see the

importance of the council of the elders, as they offer personal advice to Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles (cf. Gal. 2:8-10). Paul, far his part, accepts their advice and acts upon it. Their advice relates to the local situation.

In Acts 14:23 we see that the norm for churches was the formation of elders. This was not done by an election as such. In this case the apostles Paul and Barnabas appoint the elders, although along with the new disciples whom they strengthen. Titus 1:5 seems to indicate that Titus was a sort of apostolic delegate, delegated by Paul to appoint elders. Incidentally this seems quite an important event. Certainly the appointment of elders is the consolidation of the apostolic work of proclamation and the resultant formation of churches. Initially, it seems, elders are appointed by the one who brings the Gospel to the locality. Following this, possibly the elders appoint other elders where the need arises.

Acts 20:17ff. is the account of the calling of the elders of the Ephesian church to Miletus, where Paul meets them, and gives them further instructions in regard to their eldership. Doubtless these elders were appointed on his initial visit and ministry at Ephesus, and now he has further words to say to them. We will later examine how he regards elders. We can see that, all in all, that eldership is of functional importance to the church.

(b) Eldership in the Epistles

This is quite a study in itself, since there are significant terms which are either synonymous or interchangeable with the term 'elder'. They are 'overseer', 'leader', 'ruler' or are 'those who are over you'. We will have reason to look at these. In I Tim. 3:1-7 we have descriptions of a bishop (**episkopos**). In I Tim. 5:17-19 we read of elders (**presbyterois**). In I Tim. 4:14 we read of the practice of elders laying hands, and perhaps a cross-reference to this is I Tim. 5:22. It seems that II Tim. 1:6 may well refer back to I Tim. 4:14, although Paul speaks only of his (single) laying hands on Timothy.

In Titus 1:5-16 are instructions regarding elders and bishops. Verse 5 speaks of elders and verse 7 of a bishop. The conjunction 'for' must mean that here elders and bishops are the same. It is often claimed that there is one bishop ('overseer', **episkopos**) but that there can be many elders, the bishop being one of these, but having oversight over all elders and (so) over all the church. However, in Philippians 1:1 Paul greets 'the bishops and deacons' which seems to mean there was more than one bishop.

If we pursue this matter we find that in I Tim. 3:1f. Paul is speaking of bishops. In the same epistle (5:1,17) the elders are in honour, and must rule the church well. In Titus 1:5 and 7 the elder and the bishop are the same. Again in Acts 20:17 Paul calls for the elders of the Ephesian church, and when they came he tells them that God has made them guardians (R.S.V.) or overseers (N.A.S.B.) which are the same, although it may well be that from the elders a bishop was appointed who would be *primus inter pares*, i.e. 'one amongst equals', so that the eldership had a definite leadership.

Again in I Peter 5:1-5 we have a picture of the elders. They are to tend the flock, but not dominate it. They are to rule, but not arrogantly. This accords with I Thess 5:12-12 where the church is exhorted to 'respect those who labour among you, and are over you in the Lord, and esteem them very highly because of their work.' This also accords with Hebrews 13:7 'Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God; consider the outcome of

their life, and imitate their faith.’ In 13:17 it exhorts, ‘Obey your leaders, and submit to them, for they are keeping watch for your souls, as men who will have to give account. Let them do this joyfully and not sadly, for that would be of no advantage to you’. We have already seen in I Tim. 5:17 that elders ‘rule’, so that we may conclude that the leaders of I Thess. 5 and Hebrews 13 are elders. This does not disagree with I Peter 5:1-5. Whilst in this passage the leaders are not to dominate, yet they are to rule. In James 5:14ff. we see that elders, as a body, are to be called where required by a sick person, and the elders are to anoint and pray for the one who is ill, that he may be healed.

We have one more detail to note before we leave the subject of elder- bishop-ruler categories. It is that of the diaconate. In I Tim. 3:1-7 we read of another order. The term ‘deacon’ means ‘servant’. In Acts 6 the seven who take over the care of the widows are those who serve at tables. They are not actually called deacons. Nor should we think that they merely serve food. They serve the widows, and this must include a ministry of solace and care. Hence we must not read back into the New Testament the present-day order of deacons any more than we should read back any present order of elders. They may or may not prove to be congruent. The deacons had tasks which the elders did not do. Nevertheless their calling was a high one.

We can conclude from Philippians 1:1, as also I Timothy 3 that bishops (elders) and deacons are two orders which exist at the same time. It may even be that together they constitute the rulers of I Thess 5 and Hebrews 13. It does not matter. Having distinguished between elders and deacons, we are in a position to study the nature of the eldership, having reasonably established the fact of its existence.

5. The Nature and Function of The Eldership

We may now assemble the passages concerning eldership, and draw from them the principles of their ordination, their office, and their functions. Seeing these, and noting their significance, we can apply what we know to our current church situation and practice. This would be reasonable.

(i) Ordination of Elders

We see how this was done in Acts 14:21-23. First the brethren who had believed were strengthened by the ministry of the apostles, and shown that suffering was inevitable. The selection of the elders was by the apostolic band, but the prayer and fasting, was, presumably, by all the church. We would gather from the custom of the early church that elders were appointed with the laying on of hands. This could possibly be shown from I Tim. 4:14 and II Tim. 1:6.

In Titus 1:5ff., Titus is first to mend what is defective in the church, and then to appoint elders. He is to do this, and not the local church. We must remember that would be an initial act of ordination, and probably from that point onwards the church would ordain other elders when necessary. It could even be that there was some prophetic ministry which discerned those who were to be elders, or a prophetic ministry confirming their ordination, and then indicating the kind of ministry ahead.

(ii) Qualifications for Elders

It is doubtful whether elders were chosen out of either a short or a long list. It seems that the discernment of the apostle, or the prayer and application of the church would be the mode of choice. Presumably if there were none of the calibre of an elder then none would be chosen, although it would be difficult to imagine that no one would be of that ilk. What we mean is that the qualifications which Paul states to both Timothy and Titus would be necessary in order for a person to qualify for eldership.

What then, were these qualifications? The answer to this leads us to the heart of our study. If first we see the reasons for these qualifications it will help us better to understand the need for the qualifications.

(a) The Duties and Ministry of Elder-Bishop-Leaders

1. I PETER 5:1-5. In this passage the fellow-elder, Peter, is a witness to the suffering of Christ. This gives him deep insights into true eldership. He says 'Tend the flock of God'. The word 'tend' means 'be shepherds'. In Ezekiel 34 God is the true Shepherd, and Jesus claims this for himself in John 10. Peter himself had been told to tend the flock, both sheep and lambs (John 21:15-19). Peter means, 'Have the heart of a shepherd. Don't look after the flock to get gain, as a hired shepherd. Be an under-shepherd of the Great Shepherd. Love the flock. Pastor and keep it'. This echoes what Paul says in Acts 20:28 'Take heed to yourselves and all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you guardians, to feed the church of the Lord.' Christ suffered. An elder understands suffering. He as a shepherd will suffer for the flock. All are to do this willingly. They are themselves to be examples to the flock. One day they will see the Chief Shepherd. With this in mind they must minister. They must never be harsh and cruel.
2. ACTS 20:17-35. In this passage Paul is showing what a shepherd he has been to the flock. All that he has been they should note for their own ministries. However, as we have seen, they are to tend the flock, and to guard it. That is the meaning of guardian or overseer. In John 10 Jesus spoke of the thieves that came, and also the wolves - to tear the flock. In Ezekiel 34 the careless shepherds allow the sheep to stray, to be killed, and even to be used, mercilessly (cf. John 10:1f.). Now see these elders, these true shepherds. Even out of these elders will arise fierce wolves, let alone those from the outside! One of the qualifications of an elder is that he must be alert, astute, capable of defeating the enemies of the flock of God. No place for a mere office-seeking spirit!
3. JAMES 5:14-18. In this passage we see that a member of the flock, on becoming ill would look to the elders to pray over him, anointing him with oil, so that the prayer of faith would actually save him, and this would be a sign that his sins were forgiven. So the Lord in healing the paralytic made it clear to him that his sins were forgiven. Let us note that the word 'if' is exceptional. Not all who need healing have necessarily sinned. However, we can see that the elders would have to be men of the Spirit, in order that their ministry of healing be effective.

4. I THESSALONIANS 5:12-13. In this passage we see that the leaders (elders?) are over the church. This means they exercise authority - a principle at which we will look later. Exercising Authority is not simple. Also they admonish. This word is quite a significant word in the N.T (cf. I Cor. 10:11, Ephes 6:4, Titus 3:10, Heb. 8:5, Rom. 15:14, Gal. 3:16, II Thess 3:15) and carries with it the idea of rebuking, instructing, directing. Hence it equates to a ministry of counselling.³ Note in I Thess 5:14 (two verses lower) that the brethren are expected to admonish the idle. Perhaps Paul is primarily addressing the leaders in this regard.
5. HEBREWS 13:7f. and 13:17. The leaders or 'the ones leading you' are to be remembered (in v.7), obeyed, and submitted to (in v.17). It is quite clear that these leaders would be the elders. They are the ones who had spoken the word of life. The outcome of their life is exemplary, and they keep watch over the people as those who will have to give account to God for their labours.

When these passages are studied closely then, eldership takes on quite a significant, important, and responsible character. It is no small matter to be a leader or elder. Hence when now we look at the passages in the pastoral epistles, concerning the selection and ministry of elders, we can see the reasons for demanding the qualities set out there. As we have said, it is not simply men of character and ability who are required, although this would be natural enough. Men are required who will be able to meet the needs of the flock, who will have love, care and concern, but also who will be equipped to meet the problems which confront human beings, and in particular those human beings who are redeemed and members of the household of God.

(b) Elements Required of Elders, or Bishops

1. I TIMOTHY 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9. We will have to use both the passages of I Tim. 3 and Titus 1 together. We will also need to advert to the other passages discussed above. The following then are the qualities required to qualify one for the office of bishop. Such must not be seen as mere moralistic demands, but rather as elements which will enable these men to effect, together, a corporate care of the flock.

In I Tim. 5:2 the bishop-elder must be above reproach. This means he must be clear of any accusation which would call his office in question. In v.7 (below) it says he must be thought well of, not only by believers but by outsiders. He must be the husband of one wife. This could have a number of meanings, such as being married- and not single, not being married a second time, and not being a polygamist. Probably the principle is that this person must have a controlled and good moral character. Any weakness here would pose danger in having oversight of others. The term temperate (A.V. 'vigilant') means sober, cool, unimpassioned. (In v.11 the women are also to be this way).

³ Jay E. Adams has built up a whole system of counselling which he calls 'nouthetic' counselling. It stems from this word in I Thess. 5:12, 'admonish' This counselling system is contrary to some systems of psychology which are non-directive, and which do not confront people with their problems. Adams sees people as responsible for their own actions, feelings, etc. and believes they should be admonished and act in accordance with the admonition, thus becoming liberated from the problem.

Sensible and dignified speak of a gracious maturity in which people can have confidence. Hospitable does not speak merely of social generosity but of a ministry which would be a dire necessity. Hebrews 13:2 and Romans 12:13 indicate that hospitality would be to aid those who were strangers, refugees, even prisoners, and people who were poor. In short, this would have to be a kind and loving person with a fatherly (or, brotherly) heart. Sometimes such hospitality might even prove to be dangerous, as in the case of sheltering a persecuted Christian.

An apt teacher is a phrase which should be closely considered. In Titus 1:9-10 we read, 'He must hold firm to the sure word as taught so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to confute those who contradict it. For there are many insubordinate men, empty talkers and deceivers, especially the circumcision party; they must be silenced, since they are upsetting whole families by teaching for base gain what they have no right to teach.' We see from this that teaching is not merely a sideline of an elder, but the central core of his ministry. In Acts 20:28 'to take heed and to feed the church of God', is the same as I Peter 5:2 'to tend the flock of God', that is, to feed it, to teach, and to protect. Almost all of this would be by teaching which was protective, instructive and corrective, a ministry that is more than hinted at in Ephes. 4:7-16. We will need to return to that passage later. I Tim. 5:17 also refers to this teaching qualification:- 'Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honour, especially those who labour in teaching and preaching...' We can see then that one who teaches must be consistent with what he teaches. Indeed what he is flawed in what he teaches; hence the qualities demanded above. Likewise he must not be a drunkard, not only because it is not fitting, but because the very Gospel is that which destroys the drive for inebriation (cf. I Cor. 6:9-11, Ephes. 5:18). The elder must not be quarrelsome, that is because of wine, nor must he be violent, short-tempered and easily angry with people to the point of striking them. The nature of these qualities needs to be spelled out. The early church lived in an immoral society. Hence men who were lacking in these qualities of maturity could easily have been chosen, and in fact could as easily be chosen today. Spelling out the qualities is always essential.

In I Timothy 6:10 Paul says that love of money is the root of every kind of evil. It can be seen from I Tim. 5:17f. that elders were often assisted financially, probably in proportion to the time they were able to give to the work. This could mean some would not be able to earn as much as others. Hence there could be a temptation to become professional, and a weakness for money would prove devastating. Hence in verse 3 the elder is called to be 'no lover of money'. By contrast in Titus 1:8 he is to be a 'lover of God'. It adds to this 'a master of himself, upright, holy and self-controlled.' These qualities we saw above:- 'Temperate, sensible, dignified'.

Finally we see the domestic qualifications required. We have already seen there must be moral uprightness. To be the husband of one wife, and to relate to her in soberness and affection, necessarily determines the next requirement, that of being one who can manage his own household.⁴ His children must be 'kept submissive and respectful in every

⁴ Where there is a moral deficiency and weakness in relationship to the wife there will also be weaknesses in the whole family relationship.

way'. Doubtless this refers primarily to the age when a child is under the father. To be 'well thought of by those who are outsiders' (I Tim. 3:7) must mean that his family presents a good appearance. There are other passages of the N.T which speak about family situations, but what is clear is that the relationships between husband and wife are good, hence within the family these relationships should also be good. The wider issue of rebels within an otherwise fine family we will not, for the moment, discuss. Later we will see that there are reasons far demanding an excellent home.

Having set out the qualifications Paul then proceeds to warn against making a man who is a new convert into an elder. Such a person lacks experience, and to be given so high a position may prove altogether too heady for him. He must not be subjected to the temptation of pride. It is neither fair to him, nor the church. It seems Paul is saying that those outside must see him in the light of his humility first of all, and not only in the light of his attainment to an elder's office. Again, the sudden and premature elevation may cause him to fall into pride, the very thing into which Satan fell, he too being unable to remain humble in the office which God had given him.

2. REMAINING PASSAGES. Under 5 (ii) (a) above we saw the duties and ministry of Elder-Bishops, and we do not need to repeat these points. Yet from them we can support the demands made by Paul in the I Timothy 3 and Titus 1 passages. We gather from I Thess 1:5 that the true elder is a man who works hard for those whom he serves. Such have the courage to admonish. In Hebrews 13:7 it is evident they had taught the saving word to their converts, and had built them up, consequently, in that word. From Hebrews 13:17 it is evident that the elders watch over the flock, and see this as a responsible stewardship. This is the thrust of Paul's charge to the elders in Acts 20. They 'guard the church of God'. Likewise in I Peter 5 the elders are shepherds, caring for the sheep, and eagerly ministering to their needs. From other passages we gather that in their ministry of the laying on of hands they were men who were filled with the Spirit, ready to hear and utter prophecy. From all the passages we gather they were men of the word of God, both willing to hear and obey it, as also to proclaim and teach it.

All in all, these elders appear so little as mere officers of the church. They can surely be little less than true pastor-teachers of the church of God.

6. The Church and The Eldership

(i) Appointment of Elders

In Acts 20:28 Paul says to the elders of the church at Ephesus, 'Take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you guardians...' This must mean that the appointment of elders was (is) by the Holy Spirit. This does not contradict the statement of Acts 14:23 where Paul and Barnabas appoint elders. They do in fact 'with prayer and fasting'. At such times the will of the Holy Spirit is known to the church, as witness the gathering at Antioch in Acts 13:1-4. Again in Titus 1:5 Paul indicates he had left Titus in Crete to 'amend what is defective, and appoint elders in every town'. Paul had obviously had quite a ministry and Titus was now completing that. We have there good reason for believing these elders would have

been chosen according to the mind of the Spirit. In this case the appointment of elders is a serious matter, seeing so much responsibility devolves on the eldership. We cannot overstate the fact that the elders were men chosen and appointed by the Holy Spirit. This underlines not only the high dignity of such an office, but also how deeply significant and important it is.

(ii) The Functioning of the Eldership

It is impossible to think of the church as being the church without the eldership. By this we do not mean a church would be invalid, but it would be irregular if it lacked the eldership. In any case, as we have previously indicated, there would be a natural, even if unordained, eldership. We mean by this that the gift of eldership would be exercised in an unspoken way by those with the natural abilities of elders. We doubt this would ever have been in N.T. times. In fact, such would be unthinkable. We know that the church always had elders, and it is wrong to say that the elders were merely officers, and the eldership came late in the development of the early church. As we have seen, eldership was there right at the beginning of the Church at Jerusalem.

When in Romans 12:8 Paul speaks of 'he who leads, with diligence', he uses a Greek verb which later in I Tim. 3:4-5 he uses again. In the latter case it speaks of a father ruling his own family. This gives us a' indication of the nature of true ruling. It is 'Fatherly'. From the many passages we have looked at we take it that the elder exercises authority. The words 'lead', 'rule', etc. indicate this. In I Cor. 14:33 after having called for correct use of the charismata in worship, Paul says, 'God is not a God of confusion, but of peace'. In same way there must have been leadership which demanded the right use of the gifts, and exercised some oversight over their use.

(iii) Are Elders Pastor-Teachers?

In the list of gifts given in Ephesians 4:7-11, the last of these gifts is that of a pastor-teacher. We have no doubt from our studies above that the elder is a pastor. True, he is one in concert with other pastors, but he is primarily a pastor. This is seen from Acts 20:28, I Peter 5:2, Hebrews 13:17, and is implied in I Thess 5:12-13. At the same time he is a teacher. This we saw in I Tim. 3:2, Titus 1:9-11, whilst the statement 'who labour in preaching and teaching' (I Tim. 5:17) accords with the teaching that elders are called to give in Acts 20:28ff., as against the wolves who will tear the flock. Hebrews 13:7 speaks of 'those who spoke to you the word of God', and I Peter 5:2 in speaking of 'tending the flock' must mean that they are not only protected (by teaching), but fed by the word also.

It may seem a great leap to conclude that an elder is the pastor-teacher of Ephesians 4:11, but then what is against believing that? We mean that they have to do the work of both a pastor and a teacher, and since this is their primary task, it may be concluded that they form part of the list of the gifts. We have already observed that this does not mean they could not exercise other gifts or manifestations of the Spirit. We assume they did. However, there is a need to see the eldership as official and formal over and against the vibrant and vital operations of the charismata. If it is an office, then it is the office of one who teaches and watches over the flock.

(iv) The Way of Teaching and Pastoring

We so often read back into the N.T. the present-day patterns of our churches. Hence if we look at our elders only as serious-minded officers of the church we may do a great disservice to true eldership. Briefly we have seen that

- (a) **The eldership was local.** That is, it was not imported, or processed through some seminary or training school. The elders were drawn from the local congregation.
- (b) **The elders were persons of maturity.** Just as our ‘aldermen’ came from the Saxon term ‘aelderman’ meaning ‘elder-man’, so were elders appointed because of their age, wisdom and maturity. Hence when they cared for the flock, or taught, it was not done simply according to some rigid methodology. It was not just theology on a conceptual level, but rather teaching related to the experience of life where people were.

The writers of the N.T., and especially the epistle-writers, rarely give what may be called a theological discourse as such. They relate to the problems and needs of the church and speak accordingly. For example, they do not speak of a doctrine of forgiveness so much as they enjoin an act or operation of forgiving. Likewise with love; and so on. The elder, living amongst his people would be able to teach them what the faith was, and its practice right where they lived. To imagine the elders as theological paragons or pundits would be to miss the point. This must be borne in mind for today, since some pastor-teachers have more theory than practice, and often are not equipped to deal with personal problems of the flock. In Titus 2:3 the older women are to teach, but then to teach whom and what? The answer is they are to teach the younger women, ‘to love their husbands and children, to be sensible, chaste, domestic, kind and submissive to their husbands.’ This is scarcely academic theology as such! It is, however, very practical. If we could understand teaching along this line, then we would be close to the mark.

(v) The Importance of Maturity and the Required Qualities

We have already seen both the qualities required, and the duties demanded of elders. Now we can see, very clearly, that the elder was not simply required to be a moral and upright person, but to be one who had been tried out. He had ‘been through the mill’. He had brought up his family. He had gone through the trials and tests which determine whether a man emerges as a mature or an inadequate person. Hence, because of his experience he could help others going through such experiences. If once he had been a short-tempered, easily-irritated, insecure person, he was now ‘right, holy, self-controlled’, ‘temperate, sensible, dignified’. He could teach others how to become thus. Having won the battle over love of money, or power-consciousness, he could now teach others⁵. His theology was not something stored away in his mind, but practical theology, enabling him to live where life demanded it, and so to help others in a similar position. In any case, all theology is, or should be, practical.

If we recognise that the two significant areas of life are *authority and relationships*, then we can recognise that an elder needed to be (a) Able to exercise the authority given, and (b) To exercise a good set of relationships, and lead others into subjection to authority, thus leading them, also, into good relationships.

⁵ We are not assuming that all elders were once short-tempered, irrational, etc. Probably not. However, it is possible some were prior to their Christian experience. Now they were changed.

On reading we see the invaluable nature of the leadership. Many of the counselling agencies we need to use today, and the 'para-church' aid- groups would be made unnecessary by a good eldership. Teaching in the congregational gatherings would be life-related, and not merely theoretical theology. The way of worship would also relate to true knowledge of God, as also teaching, exhortation, encouragement, and the right use of the gifts in worship and admonition. Without a full eldership much would be lacking in the daily life of the congregation, and their effectiveness in proclaiming the Gospel.

Let us repeat this important point:- If the congregation lacks good elders, it not only lacks good leadership, and good discipline, but it lacks the insights and understandings to carry out full living within families.

When James says that 'pure religion and undefiled is to visit the fatherless and widows' he is surely speaking of a situation where the elders, out of their supplies of mature fatherhood, aid the fatherless, and comfort the widows. How nature they would have to be to do this. We must remember at this point that the deacons, who were likewise godly men (cf. I Tim. 3:8-13) were more given to the physical work of supplying bodily needs and serving the indigent. Doubtless the constant visitation of the elders would be the reason they were called in. The elders would give their time more to teaching, counselling, aiding in relationships, encouraging the variety of gifts, and helping in the conduct of worship. Whilst deacons would be involved in the whole of the Christian community, their responsibility was not that of directly teaching and having pastoral oversight.

(vi) The Value of a Corporate Ministry

We have seen two things already. The first is that the eldership was corporate. The second is that it is possible that a bishop was a leader or president of the elders. We have little reason to believe there was simply one pastor in the local church. However it is possible and even probable that the elders had a leader from amongst themselves. Certainly the post- apostolic period spoke of a president of the eucharist. Hence we can see the local church with a ministry of elders, all sharing the oversight together, whilst each having personal ministry with those who needed it. James appears to be the leading elder in the church at Jerusalem. In addition, there would be public teaching and worship in which these pastor-teachers would participate.

The advantage of this, over and against the modern pattern of one pastor, is very evident. The problems could be shared, mutual encouragement would be natural enough, and the church would feel secure in the ministry given to it. The deacons would undertake the work, probably, of assisting the widows, orphans, and the poor. This would leave the elders free for more intensive pastoral caring. It does not mean they would not relate to the widows, the orphans, fatherless and poor. To the contrary, but their ministry would not be confined to the supply of physical needs. In the corporate sharing of the problems and difficulties the wisdom of many counsellors would become evident.

(vii) Conclusion as to Apostolic Eldership

We are now in a position to sum up our understanding of apostolic eldership. We have seen that eldership can only be truly seen in the light of a church in which every member had a gift, whilst some possessed more than one gift. From time to time the manifestations of the Spirit would be made known and operative through members. Hence there would be a variety of services, of

acts and effects. In the midst of this would be the pastoral-teaching ministry of the elders themselves being a group of leaders who brought order, discipline, exhortation and encouragement to the local congregation. In this constant pastoral-teaching care the church would flourish.

As we have seen, the elders had to be men who had already battled with the major situations of life, including that of bringing up a family, administering discipline, and encouraging good relationships within each family, and the whole family of the congregation. Not only did they feed their people with positive, life-related teaching, but they also detected false teaching, wrong practice, and harmful evil. This they fought, watching over the flock. They were not afraid to rule, and although their rule may be better called leadership, nevertheless it was the exercise of authority. Because these men had been sons, brothers, husbands and fathers, and perhaps grandfathers, they were in a position to understand the practical things of life, that is of authority and relationships.

The church then would be reasonably well-structured. The total burden would be shared so that it came upon no person in particular. Elders being subject to one another would be protected from the corrupting effect of total power within the group. As we have observed, it is difficult to see how the church could be truly a church without its elders.

7. The Church and The Eldership Today

(i) Forms of Authority

The primary purpose of this study is simply to examine eldership from its beginnings and discover its functional nature. Naturally this would be with a view to its present-day use. We have seen that eldership, generally, is a position of high honour and dignity. We have also seen it is functionally necessary to the government of people. In our modern age the elders are the members of parliaments, assemblies, local governing bodies, and so on. This is in the civic realm. In the realm of the church we have episcopal government with gradations of authorities in some denominations. In others we have the presbyteral system, i.e. a group of unsalaried elders with a salaried minister who is virtually subject to the presbytery. Other denominations have a pastor (one to a local church) who exercises a large measure of authority in some cases, and little or none in other cases. In some denominations there is an eldership oversight, resembling that of the early church, whilst some do not nominate elders as such and the congregation participates in and leads the worship and the affairs of the church. As we have also observed, it is not simply the use of the term elders, or of the elder-system which necessarily makes a valid church, for there may be an unconscious, un-named strata of elders who, in fact., do the work of elders whilst not being appointed by the congregation. In this case, the church would be acting in a reasonably functional manner.

(ii) Authorities Called in Question

We live in an age when every kind of authority is being questioned, and in many cases is being opposed and even subverted. This may have the effect of testing out the strength and validity of those who seek to exercise authority. At the same time, the Biblical view that the authorities that be are ordained of God (Rom. 13:1, cf. Study No. 5 'The Nature of Authority and Obedience') should make any hesitate to call the functional system in question.

At the same time we should be wary of thinking that to reform the N.T church pattern will necessarily enliven the congregation and restore life where it was dead. It may, in fact, work the other way. When the congregation is enlivened through the ministry of Word and Spirit, and when the necessary gifts are being used, then life may come increasingly, and as a result the pattern of church life will tend to draw nearer to that of the church as we see it in the N.T. We must always, of course, be careful not to make such a pattern a set form, or an idolatry. We merely repeat that because its pattern was functional it is good to work according to its order.

This does not mean changing episcopal or set presbyteral patterns, but working within the scope they afford. There are so many elements today which were not in the early church, yet this does not necessarily mean that current methods or patterns are wrong or inadmissible.

What we can say is that the eldership pattern is invaluable. There is nothing archaic about its order. In civic affairs its system works well. In the structure of the church it should work no less. The concept of elders being practical men does not mean theology is to be set aside, nor that the specialist researches of academic theologians should be ignored. To the contrary; we should use all possible means to obtain our ends. However, to regard elders as merely executives of an organisation - 'the Boffin boys in the back room' - is to deny them, and their congregations a rich and positive ministry. This is an age when we use trained counsellors. The best of counsellors would be leaders who have had great experience of the Word of God, of the Holy Spirit, of men and women and life generally. They would prove to be our best counsellors.

(iii) Authority and Relationships

We are forced to return to this point, time and again. That is we must see that life consists in the quality and measure of relationships experienced by persons. Within the family of God these relationships are linked with the authorities and gifts God has placed within the congregation. This is basically why Paul calls for men of the calibre and qualities which he demands. Such will be able to hold the church together in discipline, and encourage full, rich, and mature relationships.

(iv) Elders - Men and Women

It would be difficult to conclude that women were elders in the N.T church. Paul makes it clear that he does not permit a woman to teach or have authority over men. In such cases she is to keep silent. He has his reasons for pressing this principle (I Tim. 2:12-13). At the same time, he enjoins women who are older to teach those who are younger. (Titus 2:3-5) We can almost call these women women-elders, yet their teaching and pastoring is limited to other women. The term 'limited' is somewhat humorous, seeing the scope is endless, and enough to absorb the teaching powers of the elder women. If it is pointed out that Phoebe was a deaconess, then there can be no doubt that she did that kind of service, as a woman, which deacons did as men. However, this was not the work of a pastor-elder.

Should women, then, not be pastor-elders? Paul's answer would appear to be, 'No'. The fact is that women, today, are pastor-elders. Countries such as Borneo and Indonesia have many women-pastors. It is certainly not that

women cannot exercise such a ministry. It may be called in question as to its being valid. It may well be called irregular, but if there is any reproach it should be that men are not undertaking their responsibilities. They can scarcely blame women for doing what they will not do, and for supplying what they will not supply.

(v) The Return to True Patterns of the Church

In fact the question really opens up the subject on a much wider basis. It is this: 'Is the church today in that position of obedience, power, and strength which was present in the N.T. church?' In many cases the answer could be, 'Yes', and in many cases, 'No'. It is against this background that many of our questions should be asked. We look for a use of the gifts and powers of the Holy Spirit such as was present then. We look for the life of love and proclamation of the Gospel which was the life of the church in that early period.

Nevertheless we must not idealise the early church, for its problems were very many. Towards the end of the first century we find grave deficiencies in some of the churches. This can be seen by reading the 2nd and 3rd chapters of the Revelation. Whilst recognising our churches are weak today we have the opportunity of approaching our problems in a positive and Biblical way. We can understand the significance of eldership. We can see its original principles of operation, and their obvious value. There is no reason why we should not again use this true and functional way of church government.

Finally, when we see afresh the functions and operations of the twenty- four elders within heaven, we are struck with awe at the authority which is theirs, and the functions they fulfill. What a high office and dignity is theirs, yet what great humility, adoration and worship they express. Surely their existence in the creation is not by chance, and their example merely by-the-way!

On this basis, as also the basis of present need, let us pander deeply the whole matter of eldership, and its value for the church today.

(vi) Some Final Observations

In a study such as we have done, certain misunderstandings are sure to arise. One of the most probable is that eldership is of sane divine order and that therefore it should be exercised for its own sake. In fact the divine order - if we admit to such - is simply a functional order. Every order of authority has its function to fulfill, its principles to carry out so that the end-plan of God may be fulfilled. Its being is part of the whole functional order set up for the well-being and operations of all creation.

Hence when we make functional patterns and authority-orders an end in themselves they become a tyranny. We find no perfect church within the N.T Hence the need for apostolic, prophetic and teaching visits, and also the many letters written to correct error and encourage obedience. We must not see eldership as other than a functional aid to the whole life of the church.

secondly, we must see the eldership is set in the context of gifts, the manifestations of the Spirit, and the various services and acts and effects. We must see that the diaconate is of no less importance even though its functions are different. The eldership operates within the other gifts and ministries and offices.

Thirdly, we must see that the eldership was always local. Elders did not move to other churches. Hence the total teaching ministry was not confined to the elders. Apostles, prophets, and evangelists moved from church to church, effecting their own ministry to the congregations. Such supportive ministries would be greatly helpful to the elders as well as the congregations.

Fourthly, we should remember that no pastor-elder was confined to an exercise of his office. Within that office he could exercise the gifts God has given him. We would not know what they might be for any given elder, but they would be those which were useful in the exercise of his ministry both as an elder, and as a member of the body.

Finally, let us make a general observation. There are many churches today which trail far behind the apostolic order and pattern of the churches. This does not call for criticism, nor for leaving such churches. Some of them are apathetic in their membership and ministry. Many have a paid ministry which is little short of professional. Often such churches expect their paid minister to fulfill the task which would normally be that of the entire (corporate) eldership. Sometimes his work is also that done by the deacons. Hence he is over-burdened and under-equipped. There are also many churches which show little exercise of the gifts seen in the N.T. Given the present debate concerning what gifts are now extant or not extant, no debater says none of the gifts is exercised. All admit some, whilst others claim all. This is not the point. Some churches show little evidence of any gifts.

Hence much ground remains to be taken and covered. The way in which we go about the renewal of these deficient churches is a matter for deep thought, prayer, patience and steady persistence. It will not only be a matter of restoring eldership, but in fact the whole context and power in which eldership truly operates.

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