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A table of contents for *The Fraternal / Baptist Ministers Journal* can be found here:

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CONTENTS

Eldership

by the Revd Tom Rogers, Minister,
Gillingham Baptist Church. 3

The Authority of Fraternal Admonition

by the Revd R. Alastair Campbell, Minister,
Broadmead Baptist Church, Northampton. 12

Faith and Freedom

by the Revd John Stroud,
Minister, South Street Baptist Church, Exeter 18

Book Reviews 27

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Eldership

When I was asked to write this article for the *Fraternal* my response was willing enough, but having pondered the matter further I find myself somewhat regretting having made such a hasty decision. For one thing it seems to me that much has already been written recently on the subject, from one point of view or another, and the truly impartial student must surely feel somewhat confused. Another very sound reason for my regret is that whilst I see it as a very important subject I do not see myself as an authority on the matter! However, we have felt led to appoint an elder, and with the door wide open for the appointment of more I suppose it might be that we can add something to the conversation that is going on at present.

It must be admitted that one of the great needs of the Church today is effective, decisive leadership. Derek Prime (*A Christian Guide to Leadership*) makes the point that “the appointment of the right leaders was considered a Number-One Priority” in the New Testament times. Certainly Luke seems to indicate that this is one of Paul’s main concerns when journeying with Barnabas through Asia (Acts 14:23) and his advice to Titus (Tit. 1:5). But what I believe the Church lacks today more than anything else is “humble” and “submissive” leadership. The late Dr. Fison in his enthronement address as Bishop of Salisbury pointed out that the Jordan valley was physically the lowest place on the earth’s surface, and then he went on to emphasise that, therefore, when Jesus was baptised He was placing Himself physically lower than anyone else in the world and from that lowly position was able to “look up to everyone”. In the same way” he went on, “I would say ‘down with bishops!’ because only by being down can they be expected to look up to everyone else”. Granted he was referring to the ἐπισκόποι but surely it would also apply to the πρεσβύτεροι? Did not the Lord Himself say that “whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave” (Mtt. 20: 26-27)? So I believe our first requirement to be a leadership that is humble enough to look up to all others, and totally submissive to the will of our Lord.

But perhaps I am jumping ahead of myself. Most of the different structures and variations of structure in Church leadership that we see today claim to be based upon Scripture. What I personally find so encouraging in Scripture is the way in which the Holy Spirit interprets it for each generation and age according to their particular need. Sometimes He draws out a startlingly new revelation—or apparently new. Such surely must have been the experience of our forefathers when they opened the Word and began to see what the Holy Spirit was teaching them concerning baptism! Today many are searching Scripture for a definitive statement concerning leadership and some are even managing to find it! All down through the centuries Christians have been guilty of this same dogmatic approach in Scriptural guidance. For example the Church in Rome in the middle of the 3rd century insisted in having only 7 deacons (because of Acts 6), whereas they had 46 elders! Wherever I find this kind of interpretation today I feel — and I cannot be more explicit — I feel that the

qualities present in the leadership are far nearer arrogance than humility, and have a far greater readiness to rule than to submit. Surely Scripture must be the foundation of our faith and order and we must allow the Holy Spirit to build upon that foundation according to the need of the moment and place. If then the situation that arises is not the same as that in some other place or time there is little need and no merit in our feeling either suspicious or superior. Let the Lord mould His people according to His own divine will and plan.

Yet, if we accept Paul's analogy of the Body or the Building, we have to admit that the skeletal structure must be soundly established and is likely to have some similarity from age to age. Is there a case, then, for looking for a rough uniformity in basic structures? I believe there is.

Let us take a brief look, then, at what we might see in Scripture concerning structure. I have found Lightfoot's essay on "The Christian Ministry" enormously helpful and warmly recommend it for a deeper study on the subject. He maintains that the early Church structure as we have it in Acts is inevitably and undeniably based upon Old Testament thinking. There is no sacerdotal system laid down and no mention made of a priestly office because all have access to the Father and, therefore, all are priests.

This is an ideal and it is an ideal that is seen and understood in the Old Testament. Here the whole community is considered to be "set apart" or "holy". God's glory is to be revealed not to the priests or Levites but to "my people" (Lev. 10:3). It is not just the priest who is "holy" but the "people" — "I am holy and I make my people holy" (Lev. 21:8). It was the "people" who were chosen, not the priests alone (Deut. 14:2). Initially the priests are representatives of the people, the children of God. It is the whole nation who lay their hands upon the Levites by way of ordaining them (Num. 8:9-10) and it is the whole nation who are responsible, through the Levites, for making the sacrifices and offerings required. No one is permitted to abdicate his divinely given responsibility.

When the New Testament epoch dawns we find an immediate return to this ideal. It was when they were "all together" that the Holy Spirit came, and prior to that it was when they were all assembled that they appointed Matthias to the office of 'ἐπίσκοπος' (Acts 1:20). As the Church grew and the structure enlarged, as communities and Church "households" sprang into being across the world, leaders were appointed, probably mistakes made, but the vision of the ideal was never lost sight of: "The Most High does not dwell in houses made with hands" (Acts 7:48), the Church was taught; again and again they were urged to grasp the fact that their physical body was a Temple of God Himself "God's Spirit dwells in you" (1 Cor. 3:16). Moreover, stern things were said of those who insisted upon "observed days and months" (Gal. 4:10). So every day was holy, and every Christian a priest and every redeemed person a Temple of the Holy Spirit, and every Christian community a manifestation of the Living Body of Christ. As such the Church is seen as the on-going incarnation, the Divine manifested in human form, with Christ as Lord at our head, and every "member" equally necessary and equally responsible to Him (1 Cor. 12).

It is within this context, this analogy of the Body and the gifts given to it, that Paul makes mention of offices, and enumerates them as being "gifts" to the Body that are already within the control of and for the use of the Body. (1 Cor.

12:29). Note that no mention is made of a priestly office because all are seen to be priests and all are responsible before God. When writing to the Ephesians (4:11-12) the offices are depicted as gifts to the Church to enable her to fulfil her ministry. The ministry is that of the whole Body and, therefore, the skeletal structure (leadership) is there to enable the Body to function as God ordains, not to usurp its position or authority.

This skeletal structure in the early Church seems to consist of three main offices — ἐπισκόποι, πρεσβύτεροι and διακόνου. Whilst my brief is to look at the middle of these I cannot ignore the others for there is such an inter-relationship between them that it is quite impossible to understand one without the other.

For this reason we look briefly at διάκονος — usually translated by us as “deacon” but interestingly enough in the Good News Bible as “helper”.

Most would agree that as an office it is unique to the New Testament. There are those who like to trace its origin back to either the Levites or servants of the Temple, and some to the man-servant in Greek society, and others who like to mix the two. But as an “office” within the structure of the people of God it must surely be seen as new. Lightfoot is quite uncompromising on this point: “It would appear that the institution (of deacon) was not merely new within the Christian Church, but absolutely novel”. I would even go on to suggest that it was not instituted as an “office” at all but was, at first, seen as a pastoral function of Godly men exercising their ministry within the Body. It was as this ministry developed within the work of each individual person that the “office” became established — it seems unnecessary to point out that Philip did not long remain “serving at tables”, (however, you interpret that phrase!), and that it was not an apostle, or an elder, who became the first martyr because of his bold and courageous preaching, but a deacon.

It would seem then that the office developed and deepened according to the God-given personality and gift of the individual and so gained a prominence that is not seen in the original intention. Moving freely among the flock of God these men (and later women), were in a position to encourage and help people to such a degree that the flock would quickly learn to lean on them for guidance and help, to call upon them for a “Word”, to accept their leadership — in fact to treat them as under-shepherds. So, by the time Paul is writing to the Church at Philippi mention is made of ἐπισκόποι and διακόνου but not πρεσβύτεροι as an office within the structure. Paul Fiddes in his recently published book *A Leading Question* feels that this is because ἐπισκόποι and πρεσβύτεροι, had become almost synonymous — just different names for the same office. I wonder whether it could not be more likely, that the διακόνου had come to function as πρεσβύτεροι whilst still retaining the original title.

All this, however, is to suggest that there is an overlapping of function and a loose interpretation of “office” where the διάκονου is concerned. We must bear this in mind in any discussion of “Eldership”.

Eldership

Unlike the office of διακόνου the office of πρεσβύτεροι grew very naturally out of the experience of the early Church within the context of the Old Testament. The early Church consisted mainly of Jews and it is natural, and to

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be expected, that the form of leadership which began to develop came from this past experience.

The Gospels are full of references showing how the office of *πρεσβύτερος* was a generally accepted one and how it applied to both civic and religious leaders. The “elders” were always at the heart of the general opposition to Jesus. Jesus Himself drew attention to the fact that “the Son of man must suffer many things and be rejected by the ‘elders’.”

All this is well known but the question must be asked “did the early Church take this title and apply it to an office, within the new structure, accepting it as ‘a ruling authority’”? Or was it adapted under the guidance of the Holy Spirit to become something else, and if so, what? In other words, are many today embracing an Old Testament structure simply transported into the new Testament and called “new”, or is the Body of Christ a new thing, demanding a new structure, albeit having the same title?

Clearly, the early Church used the title as they understood the meaning of the word under the old structure. So *πρεσβύτεροι* within the Christian Church became leaders of God’s people, they are the teachers, they are the ones to whom the whole Church turned for advice and counselling (Acts 15:6), they are to exercise a ministry of healing (James 5:14) and clearly they are involved in the discipline and correction of God’s people, although the final judgement is always that of the whole Body — the Church (Mt. 18:15-17). There are definitely occasions when the apostles appointed the elders “over” the Church (Acts 14:23, Titus 1:5) and these elders were seen as having a spiritual authority to which even the apostles submitted; Acts 21:17 recalls how the elders in Jerusalem counselled and advised Paul concerning the course of action he should follow and the Church generally was informed of “our judgement” (v. 25)).

No mention of the *διακόνου* is made in any of these passages and, therefore, it is assumed by some that the deacon is a lesser person, a “doer”, a servant in the practical areas of the Lord’s work. But can this view really be supported? Mention has already been made of Stephen’s martyrdom on the grounds that “he did great wonders and signs among the people” and that the Jews “could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he spoke”. Philip was also clearly a gifted preacher and by Acts 21 is established and recognised by the wide Church as an evangelist. Is it to be supposed that he did not share in the leadership of his local Church in Caesarea? Of course, he could have been “promoted” but no mention is made of his status, almost as though it did not matter, which was probably the case.

There are, of course, other references that could — and in a deeper study, should — be considered, but through them all I believe we can begin to see a pattern that might well help some of us today. The early Church leadership structure was in part drawn from the Old Testament pattern but at the same time was moulded and adapted by the Holy Spirit until the whole Church truly became the people of power. Those who were called to be servants are seen to be preachers of great power, and workers of great wonders (Acts 6:8), whereas those who were called to be leaders are instructed to be servants of all (Mt. 20:26-27, 1 Cor. 9:19 etc.) whose task is to be guardians

or shepherds of God's people (Acts 20:28), zealous and alert in this work for the Lord and in their battle against Satan (Acts 20:31) and obviously of blameless character (Tit. 1:5-6). Implicit in all of this is that they will "let this mind be in them which was also in Christ Jesus", a humble mind enabling them to "look up" to the lowliest member and never in any sense seek to rule over the Church of the Most High.

So far I have not mentioned the *ἐπισκόποι* in any detail for two reasons: (a) it is not within my brief and (b) Paul Fiddes has dealt with it so admirably that I really feel that there is little to add. However, I cannot go all the way with him in feeling that *ἐπισκόποι* was just another name, in another place, by another people for the same person. There certainly was considerable overlap but this is equally seen in the relation of the *πρεσβύτεροι* with the *διακόνου* as well as the *ἐπισκόποι*. It is even possible that this overlap caused confusion in the early Church as well as today! Except that our insistence on the rigid structure based upon "appointment" and "title" compounds this confusion whereas the early Church had a flexible structure bound by love and based upon function rather than "appointment". So the *διακόνου* are seen to be doing the work of preachers, and evangelists, and Paul's character description of a deacon(ess) in 1 Tim. 3 certainly outlines the qualities necessary in a pastor — a shepherd, visiting homes and counselling the flock. So he must never be one open to gossiping (because he will be a confidant), he must be careful how much he drinks, (imagine having a glass of wine in every home!), he must never be open to bribery, and he must have a clear understanding of the faith, (in order to communicate it in the home). Surely we can see how in this essentially pastoral role the *διακόνου* would receive the confidence of the flock and would begin to function as *πρεσβύτεροι*.

Likewise, we find an overlap between the *ἐπισκόποι* and the *πρεσβύτεροι*, almost as though the *ἐπίσκοπος* is the accepted chairman of the *πρεσβύτεροι*, as "ruling elder". It surely is significant that there is no character description made for the *πρεσβύτερος* in 1 Timothy, yet considerable detail given for the *διάκονος* and *ἐπίσκοπος*. So, too, in Phil. 1:3 no mention is made of *πρεσβύτεροι*. Is this because they did not exist? No, certainly not — later 1 Tim. we read of them (5:17) and we are told that they are worthy of "double honour" if they function well. Is it not possible that the character description is implicit in chapter 3 in that *διακόνου* and *ἐπισκόποι* are both seen as *πρεσβύτεροι* — serving, caring and shepherding? Certainly in Tit. 1: 5 & 7 there seems to be an interchange of title. Then also Peter calls himself an apostle (1 Peter 1:1) and *πρεσβύτερος*(5:1).

The question of the authority of the *πρεσβύτεροι* is also something which I believe grew out of the Old Testament environment but also took account of the Holy Spirit's presence in every individual member. So it is in Acts 15 that the "apostles and elders" met together to consider the matter, and to make a judgement (v.6) but it was "the apostles and the elders *with the whole Church*" which implemented and decided the action. This is a precious principle that I believe we must hold fast to and one that is best guarded by allowing the *πρεσβύτεροι* (and the *ἐπισκόποι*) an authority which is first and

foremost and entirely “spiritual”. By this I mean that it is not an executive authority claiming a legal standing upheld by rules and constitution. So the appointment is made by the whole Body as with Matthias (Acts 1) and Judas and Silas (Acts 15). When we read later in Scripture of appointments being made seemingly by individuals (Tit. 1:5) I am sure that even Paul would not have countenanced their appointment unless sanctioned by the whole Church. We must never let impatience or ambition allow us to lose sight of the overall insistence in the new Testament of the whole Church being the Body of Christ, the People of God and “individually members of it”. It is wrong for the Church to abdicate its responsibility before God. Even when it is right and expedient to delegate, the final responsibility must always be that of the whole Body.

Let me now come to our present day situation and, then, to the situation as we see it in our own local Church.

1. We face the urgent need within our local communities for humble, submissive leadership. Men and women who are equipped and gifted by God to lead but who also when recognised and appointed through the whole Body are humble enough to continue to submit to His Will as seen through His Body. Their gifts will vary according to the purpose and plan of God in the particular locality but there are some obvious gifts that we must always be aware of: teaching, preaching, counselling, etc. Such a Body must at all times be bound by the cords of Divine love; love must be the hall-mark of their character and personality. They must be appointed out of love (not out of necessity or desperation!) and their appointment must be accompanied by a loving expectation. They must be upheld in love, cradled and embraced in the love of the whole Body from which there must come a loving submission. In this way they must minister in love, never losing sight of the fact that, whatever they are called, they are each of them a *δούλος* of love.

2. We face the confusion within the modern situation made all the worse by the ambitions of men who take advantage of spiritually weak and ill-informed Church members who are all too willing to abdicate their personal responsibility before God to those who delight to “rule over them”. Sometimes I feel that the so-called free evangelical church of today has returned to some of the worst characteristics of Romanism where the individual submitted to the priest's authority in everything, except that the “priest” is now called “elder”!

3. We face the problem of traditional structures which generally speaking means: “minister”, (only one for the average Church) “deacons” and “ordinary Church members”. None of them fully understanding their function or purpose and few understanding the relationship of complete and utter dependence that the one ought to have on the other in Christ. For example the *ἐπίσκοπος* (let's call him minister) instead of majoring on teaching, praying and enabling the whole Church, is more often bogged down with visiting and caring for the “widows” (scripturally, the deacons' work). On the other hand the *διακόνου* (let's call them deacons) instead of serving and caring for the flock are usually much more like a Board of Directors dictating policy, and their sense of

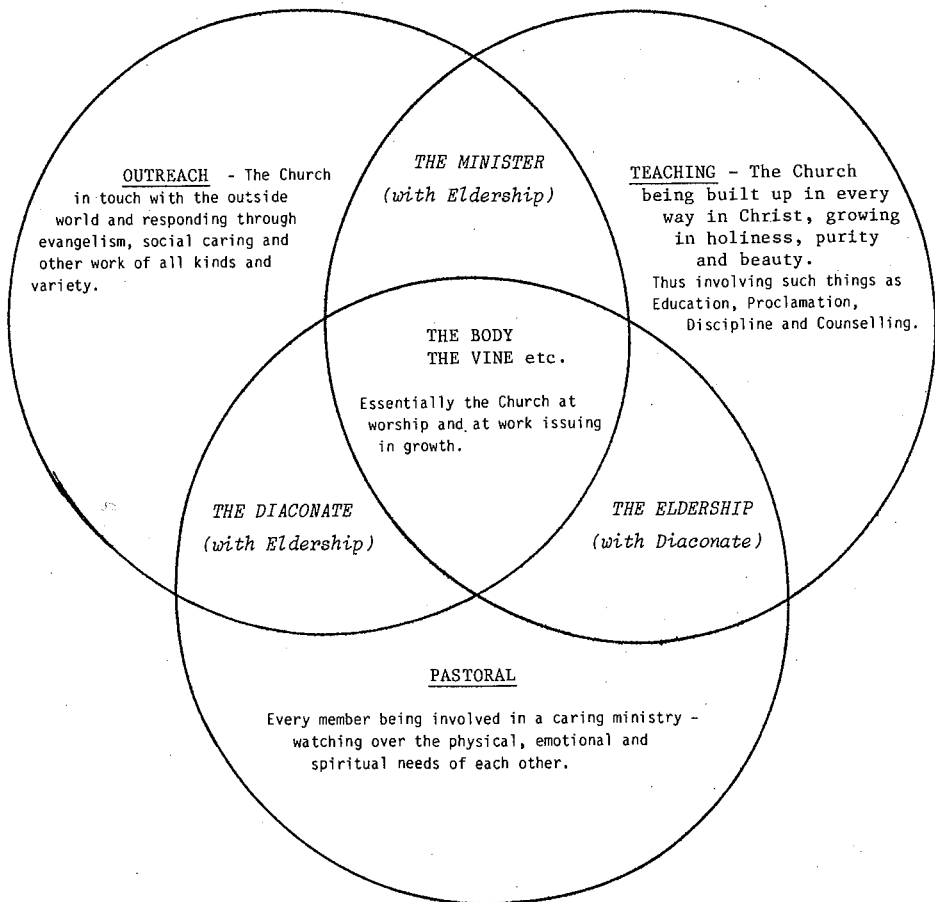
dependence upon each other in Christ sometimes degenerates to and is limited to an acknowledgement that the one decides the stipend of the other!

My personal response to all this within the local Church situation is to cry out in desperation "Lord, what would you have me to do?" And I believe that lovingly and graciously He is making His way known.

My brief does not cover the *ἐπισκόποι*, or *διακόνου* but I have to state here that I believe there is a place for both within modern Church situations as well as the *πρεσβύτεροι*. The task of the *ἐπίσκοπος* would be to oversee the entire work of the Lord locally and to relate that work to the wider work of the Church universal. His leadership is spiritual and is recognised by both the Church universal and the local community. The *διάκονοι* are those men and women who are called and gifted by God to care for the flock, maintaining a close relationship with each member and leading them through counsel and home instruction in the ways of Christ. This care of the flock also involves them in what we would call the "organization" of the Church. In this connection they maintain a close watch to ensure that each organization is fulfilling the purpose of Christ. This in turn gives them a concern for the fabric, to maintain its adequacy and purpose. Because of modern legal necessity they hold executive authority, responsible for safety, orderliness and maintenance.

The *πρεσβύτεροι* (let's call them "elders") is neither an in-between office nor a new form of ruling body. It consists of those whom the whole Church has called (recognizing the gifts God has given them) and set aside to minister in areas of prayer, teaching/instruction, discipline and counselling (not exclusively so, but as a priority). Some will have been called and enabled to a full-time service, others will exercise their ministry in a lay capacity, but all are equal and work alongside the minister (*ἐπίσκοπος*). In my own Church the whole Church prays and seeks God's guidance, giving suggestions and comments to the minister and diaconate, who then have their joint responsibility to nominate to the Church Meeting. The appointment is confirmed annually. They have an authority but it is entirely spiritual and must rest upon the whole Church discerning that they speak out of a deep, personal relationship with the Lord. They can expect to be listened to and followed as representing the Lord, but just as He does not enforce His word, neither can the elder, unless the whole Body endorses it. They are involved in the worship, the pulpit ministry, the teaching ministry, the instruction of new members, counselling and the oversight of the pastoral ministry. However, their main purpose is prayer (together and in private), stimulating the faith and giving to the Lord's people the vision they need.

The following is a diagrammatic presentation of how we see it all working together — it was produced by my "elder".



For all this to function properly a number of things must be borne in mind:-

1. The eldership/diaconate must spend a great deal of time in sharing together, praying and growing together. They must learn to be open and honest with each other, prepared to listen to each other and to learn from each other. Above all else they must learn to love.

2. Each Church member must learn to trust — especially those whom they have appointed to lead. No member can expect to have a say in everything, but rather accept and trust the judgement of those gifted in that particular area. Therefore, the whole Body must trust each member to fulfil the purpose for which God has equipped him and the elders enabled him, and in so doing each will play a functional part within the whole. For this reason the work of the Body must be shared out as widely as possible, every member involved in something, in some way, somehow.

3. The ministry of the Church must be directed and led by those so called and gifted, but not done exclusively by them! So the worship of the Church

(both in its content and its vision) is the responsibility of the whole Church, each member fulfilling his or her priestly calling. The outreach of the Church, (evangelism, social work, pastoral work, civic responsibility etc.) is the ministry of the whole Church — led and enabled by the “leadership”, but essentially and actively involved.

I have not dealt with the detailed outworking of this, nor have I mentioned our pastoral groups, with the care structure that we are seeking to evolve. There has not been time to think of eldership in worship — involving the Worship Board using the talents of musicians, dramatists, puppeteers, readers etc. Suffice it to say that I believe the responsibility of our eldership is, through prayer and an understanding of God’s word, to enable the whole Church to glorify God and to bring His redemptive love to bear upon the community around.

Tom Rogers

The Authority of Fraternal Admonition

This is not the article I intended to write when I accepted the Editor’s invitation to write on ‘Authority in the Local Church’. I intended to write a defence of the idea that authority is vested in the leaders of the Church, by whatever name they are called, and that a neglected aspect of Christian obedience is submission to those who are over us in the Lord. I now want to say something rather different.

For some time now we have been involved in an increasingly sterile debate between those who see the locus of the Church’s authority in its leaders, and those who place it in the Church Meeting. The debate has become sterile because each is drawing on real elements of the New Testament witness, while seeming to ignore other elements, and because each is increasingly a reaction to the worst abuses of the other (nearly all writing on Church government is of this nature so that you hardly know what a person is saying unless you know what he is reacting against — thus, we have Anglicans discovering Congregational principles, Pentecostals reacting against Protestant individualism, and Roman Catholics getting excited about Class Meetings — to the horror of Methodists!). One side has emphasised servanthood, almost as if Jesus had said: “You call me Master and Lord, and you are *wrong!*”. The other side has talked of submission to the neglect of the freedom for which Christ has set us free. Often we must admit the targets have been caricatures, and the missiles merely slogans. But why has the debate occurred at all?

There has been an upsurge of interest in authority in the Church, and it is quite a recent thing. Partly, no doubt, the new interest in authority mirrors and participates in the swing towards authority in our society. While the rejection of all authority continues to spread in homes, schools and society at large, the inevitable reaction is well under way, but it would be as foolish to dismiss the new concern with authority in the Church on this ground, as it would be to ignore this factor entirely. In part, at least, the advocates of the new discipline have been motivated by a deep concern that the Church is failing to be what it should, that it cannot discipline its members or move forward promptly when

God calls. Individualism and rebellion, conservatism and lack of commitment have so infected the body of Christ that only a good dose of authority in the right place will bring health. I shall broadly agree with the diagnosis and even with the medicine prescribed, but suggest that we need to think again about the method and point of application.

Let us agree that leaders are to be servants; that they are to shun titles, status and coercive methods; that the New Testament contains no detailed and unarguable blue-print for Church organisation; that calls to submit to leaders are few (but real — see I Thessalonians 5, v12, Hebrews 13, v17, I Peter 5, v5). But let us also agree that the New Testament Church is never leader-less; that reference to leaders, though diverse, are common. That obedience is everywhere enjoined on Christians, that explicit evidence of congregational meetings that might provide a basis for our Church Meetings is at least as scanty as for Elders. We desire to be a people whose lives are holy and blameless, whose witness is clear and attractive; a people on the move fulfilling the commission Jesus gave us, serving the present age with the wisdom of the age to come, meeting together to seek and find the will of God, and then obeying it; as Michael Saward puts it: we want the Church to be “a redeemed people, holy people, a united people, missionary people, and in all things, a people gladly submissive to the truth as it is in Jesus.”² Where shall we look for the dynamic to get us from where we are to where we agree we ought to be?

One answer that has suggested itself is that the dynamic is in authoritative leadership, just as in the Army, or in industry, when morale is low, and performance poor, a new leadership has sometimes put things right, so in the Church. Management must be free to manage. Of course, the leaders will need to have vision, enthusiasm, ability, but when it comes to the crunch, they will need to know that they possess authority to act decisively to discipline erring members and to re-shape the policy of the Church. The Church needs to recognise that the leaders it has called are also called of God and given authority to lead the members. Presumably, they are mature, godly, spiritual people as the pastoral epistles say they should be; they give time to praying together, seeking to hear what God is saying and to decide what should be done; they bring their decisions to the Church, explaining the reasons, they invite the Church to agree and submit to these decisions. There is no doubt that this can work well, that it could result in much better government and congregational life than often exists at present. Nevertheless, it has several practical problems. One is that the leaders themselves may not agree, not just that they might debate vigorously but that they might come to a point of irreconcilable difference. What then? It is very easy, as with marriage, to believe at the outset that it could never happen. Secondly, the leaders may be wrong. Not because they are fools or knaves, but because they are busy and under pressure, deciding things in a hurry at the end of a busy day, subject to mood swings, irrational fears and the pressure of others' opinions. But the real objection to the 'follow my leader' approach is inherent in the approach itself. If the Church members are able to receive and follow their leaders' decisions in this way then they are possessed of real grace and are arguably spiritually mature enough to share in the process of finding God's will. On the other hand, if they are not able to do this, then they are unlikely to receive their leaders' decisions with meekness and unite together in doing them, because this would

mean some cost to pride and personal opinion — in the latter case, the leaders will need to resort to coercion of some kind, perhaps threatening to resign if they are not obeyed. Is this the way of Christ?

A better way is suggested by the 16th Century Anabaptist theologian Balthazar Hubmaier, quoted by John Howard Yoder in 'Concern' February 1967. It is worth quoting at some length: "Q: What is the baptismal pledge?

A: It is a commitment which man makes to God publicly and orally before the Church, in which he renounces Satan, all his thoughts and works. He pledges as well that he will henceforth set all his faith, hope and trust alone in God, and direct his life according to the divine word in the power of Jesus Christ our Lord. In case he should not do that, he promises hereby to the Church that he desires virtuously to receive from her members and from her fraternal admonition, as is said above. Q: *What power do those in the Church have over one another?* A: *The authority of fraternal admonition.* Q: What is fraternal admonition? A: The one who sees his brother sinning goes to him in love and admonishes him fraternally and quietly that he should abandon such sin. If he does so, he has won his soul; if he does not, then he takes two or three witnesses with him and admonishes him before them once again. If he follows him, it is concluded, if not, he says it to the Church, the same calls him forward and admonishes him for the third time: if he now abandons his sin, he has saved his soul. Q: Where does the Church have this authority? A: From the command of Christ, who said to his disciples, all that you bind on earth shall also be bound in heaven and all that ye loose on earth shall also be loosed in heaven Q. *But what right has one brother to use this authority on another?* A: *From the baptismal pledge in which a man subjects himself to the Church and all her members according to the word of Christ."*

Admittedly, Hubmaier and Yoder are writing about Church discipline, but authority in the local Church is concerned both with the corporate life of the fellowship and with the individual member. Does this not suggest both the nature of our problem and the way to its solution. Our problem is individualism, as the modern house church advocates of authority would agree. An individualism which is the perversion of personal faith, whereby the priesthood of all believers becomes the papacy of each believer! Often, the opposition of those who have opposed authoritative leadership has been an invalid protest because they have used scriptural words about servanthood to disguise the fact that they are not willing to submit to anyone — the old Adam has merely donned the costume of the new Adam. It is surely both shaming and encouraging that our problem is as deep, and its solution as ready to hand as the believers' baptism we have prized so highly. Hubmaier is saying that the lynch-pin of authority and order in the Church lies in the commitment each member made in his baptism. Is not this the missing piece of the puzzle? For, in general, our people have promised one another nothing in baptism; we have reduced baptism to an act of personal testimony to what the Lord has done for me — the focus has often moved away from the promise being made to the experience being claimed, and if a promise is in view, it is the believers' promise to Christ alone. To be sure, many of us have been more conscious than this of the Church dimension of baptism, but in most places our practice falls well short of the baptismal pledge suggested by Hubmaier, and still a living part of the Mennonite experience. Because there is no explicit pledge or covenant between us, we have Churches of people who, for example, attend Sunday

THE BAPTIST INSURANCE COMPANY LIMITED
4 SOUTHAMPTON ROW,
LONDON, WC1B 4AB
Telephone No: 01-405 4084

To the Readers of the Fraternal.

Dear Friends,

"S" for Storm

Most churches arrange for their fire policies on buildings and contents to extend to include storm damage. Very many have been glad to have this cover during the early part of this year, when on a number of occasions high winds caused considerable damage throughout the country.

One or two aspects of storm cover deserve mention. It is usual for the Insured to bear the first amount of any claim (for normal risks £15) to obviate small incidents which are disproportionately expensive to handle. The cover is for specific instances of damage by storms not the gradual deterioration of property by weathering, which is a maintenance matter. For this reason, damage by frost is excluded from storm cover. Frost will not harm the fabric of a building which has been maintained in good condition. It should be stressed that frost is not excluded from Burst Pipes cover. The freezing of pipes etc., is the main risk insured when this cover is arranged.

Some insurers do not consider damage to gutterings etc., from weight of snow to be storm damage, but we take a liberal view and pay such claims—provided, of course, the gutterings have not rusted away! This variation between insurers' interpretation of policy covers supports the view that cost is not the only consideration when making comparisons.

Yours sincerely,

M.E. PURVER
General Manager

worship when they feel like it, and who regard the other responsibilities of membership as a matter for their own private decision. In such a context, it is surely impossible for leaders to exercise authority in a Godly way, because the submission of heart and mind to Christ of his people is not there (probably not there in the leaders either!). The authority of fraternal admonition is the necessary basis on which the authority of leaders rests.

On the other hand, the steps we need to take are plain. First, we need to re-think and recover the baptismal pledge giving to the affirmation "Jesus is Lord!" an explicit Church dimension. This would enable us to teach the reals, but as the terms of a covenant shortly to be entered into freely, yet solemnly of Church membership, not as idand publicly by those about to be baptised. Secondly, (perhaps in reality this needs to come first) we need to re-mint our own commitment as members of the Church, re-thinking as a Church what it is we promised to do for one another, taking to ourselves the authority of fraternal admonition, both to give and to receive, and then re-committing ourselves to one another in solemn covenant. Third, the adopting of this covenant by the Church gives the pastoral leader the authority to speak to individual members about their walk and commitment, provides an agreed basis for the practice of a discipline whose aim is restoration and reconciliation, and whose fruit would be a people moving together under the authority of Christ, subject to one another in Him. Fourth, the pledge or covenant would need to be annually renewed and that renewal carefully prepared for. It is for lack of that, that we have had our clothes stolen. I am encouraged to think that this is an idea for the hour, by the appearance of two booklets from the Baptist Union. In the first, *Making the most of the Church Meeting*, Fred Bacon says: "All Churches could profitably adopt the practice — as used to be more common — of drawing up a covenant which includes the responsibilities of membership, to which each new member subscribes, and which the membership reaffirms annually together."³ In the second, *A Leading Question*, Paul Fiddes refers to members and Churches 'covenanting together' (page 43 and following). What he takes as implicit in our relationships as believers and Churches, I am proposing should be explicit.

The authority of servant/leaders is real, for God has called them, and with the call goes the authority to lead the Church. But that authority cannot be rightly understood apart from the authority and submission of the people of God as a whole. It is not that some rule and others obey, it is that all are committed to obedience and mutual submission through their baptism, and all are called thereby to honour those whom Christ calls and gives as leaders in his Church, though not in a way that exempts leaders from submitting to fraternal admonition, or to the Church and all her members. The house Churches have taken a lot of stick in the last few years for their authoritarianism, but they should at least be given credit for a proper concern with authority in the Church. We may think, as I do think, that they have located that authority in the wrong place, but we need to ask ourselves whether in our Baptist Churches today we are doing any better, or whether it is not rather true, as Isaiah puts it, "we have become like those over whom thou hast never ruled, like those who are not called by thy name".⁴

Notes: 1. cf John 13:13

3. op.cit p.30.

2. *Task Unfinished*. Falcon. 1973. 4. Isaiah 63.19.

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How SPURGEON'S HOMES is
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Children coming into care these days no longer need to live "away from it all" in large institutional type homes. Many of them are the victims of broken marriages and they need to stay close to places and schools they know. Spurgeon's have now established a network of small family units in Bedford, Wolverhampton and Luton, each run by houseparents. The children often need us for only a few months and being close to home can see their families and friends. We have also opened Family Day Care Centres at Coventry and Wolverhampton to meet a desperate need for pre-school age children. A 'Preventive Care' unit has been opened at Bedford.

All this work is a step in a wider sphere of service to show practical everyday Christianity to children in need. We hope that you will share in this growing outreach by encouraging your Church to remember our work in their prayers and send a gift of money.

Please send your enquiries and gifts to:-

The Secretary, Peter Johnson,
Spurgeon's Homes, 14, Haddon House,
Station Road, Birchington, Kent, CT7 9DH.
Telephone: Thanet (0843) 41381.

Reg. Charity No. 307560

Faith and Freedom

The exhilaration of ministry is the privilege of being in the position of pointing to Jesus Christ. Whether it be publicly from the pulpit, or quietly in conversation; silently in the hospital ward, or wrestling with the imponderable conflicts of the shop floor; our loyalty to our Lord determines the kinds of interventions we might make. This gives us great authority.

But the authority is limited. It is only as we fulfil the role of John the Baptist, and point beyond ourselves, that we fulfil our calling. Authority in ministry is only valid if it liberates people to be disciples of Jesus Christ. We could write, without difficulty, a long list of those influences or burdens from which our people need to be set free. One of the humbling experiences of ministry is discovering that they need to be set free from ourselves! The perplexed, the distressed, and those seeking challenge and meaning will not find satisfaction if they are required to be loyal only to us.

Therefore there is an inbuilt condition to our authority as pastors. It is easy to misuse our position, for the best of motives. It is unnerving to see people in an uncertain state of mind when we are sure that we have an answer which would rid them of the painful task of careful and critical thought. It is frustrating to see people moving forward to maturity at a slower pace than we think appropriate. It is tempting to step in and give the answer which we think will solve their problem. It makes us feel very good when people take notice of what we have to say to them. But if this leads to an unspoken arrogance, requiring people to "think as I think", we are no longer pointing them beyond ourselves to another. The signpost is accorded more importance than the destination.

Most of our people live in a world which requires them to be critical about ideas that are given them for acceptance. They will experiment with those ideas, and probe the validity of the different suggestions that are made. They will reserve judgement until an idea appears to be reasonable, and when they make their decisions, there will be a degree of flexibility, so that their opinions can continue to mature.

With a sympathetic understanding of the threatening nature of living in such a world, the minister might assume that on Sundays the congregation needs to stop having to think, and be told with some authority how to make decisions. It is important that we think about the nature of our authority, because in a world that is committed to developing awareness, religion might thus easily be offered as being a body of truth that stands in a uniquely protected position. This alone is to be accepted without thought. It is to be held away from the questioning of a probing mind. It requires instant, unswerving allegiance.

The danger is that in the name of the Christian faith we might ask our people to surrender their integrity, and hand over responsibility for themselves to a person or people who exercise authority in the fellowship. There are times when we would all be glad for someone else to make decisions for us. There may come a time when the Christian church is resented for the freedom of thought and exhilaration of developing faith that is denied, if submission or orthodoxy is all that is required.

This article began life as a reflection on the way in which it might be unhealthy for a University Chaplain to abuse any authority he possesses amongst students whom he serves. The concern is more with the pastoral implications of distorted authority than with patterns of authority that might be adopted for the local church. But patterns of church government are themselves subject to a higher authority, and it might be helpful for us to look at the possible consequences of living with the structures we choose to establish.

We need to define what we mean by two particular terms. Firstly, what do we mean by authority, and secondly, what does it mean to think critically?

Authority has its proper place in the Christian faith. It is implied by order, and the God whom we worship is a God of order, both in creation and in the out-workings of His kingdom. Some form of authority is necessary for the well-being of any community, and the Christian congregation is no exception. Love does not invite us to delightful anarchy, but places upon us the obligation to deal in certain ordered ways with one another.

But it is necessary for us to distinguish between something that is "authoritarian" and something that is "authoritative". An "authoritarian" attitude demands submission by compulsion. It is the behaviour of the dictator. By implication it denies a person any room for free and critical thought. If questions are allowed, limitations will be carefully drawn, and at some point or other compliance will be required. Truth is something which is to be imposed. It depends for its security upon authority other than itself, and the more it is probed, the more doctrinaire it will become.

On the other hand, something which is "authoritative" invites freewill to consider and make its own decision. Its authority lies not in compulsion but in inner consistency and harmony. It will be accepted once its expertise is recognised. It is self-authenticating, for those who are prepared to submit it to the test of experience. Therefore it is glad to be questioned, because the more it is asked to validate itself, the more its expertise is seen, and the more authoritative it becomes.

For the Christian the only ultimate authority lies in the God revealed in Jesus Christ. The Gospels portray Jesus as possessing authority because in Him the Kingdom breaks into human experience. His authority is revealed as people follow Him as disciples, and in them and through them their world submits to His word. But it is only in the following that Jesus authenticates Himself. He refuses to impose His will in an authoritarian manner. There are other observers, who are varyingly amazed or critical, who do not follow. For them, the authority of Jesus is not so apparent. If, in the New Testament, an attitude of faith and discipleship is essential for the authority of Jesus to become apparent, then nothing in our ministry must steal from our people the opportunity to take up that stance.

Christian authority can never be authoritarian. The purpose of Christian ministry is not to suppress freedom and impose servitude, but to set a person free for a growing and liberating experience of Jesus Christ. Therefore neither Church nor conscience, reason nor experience, dogma nor scriptures, can be put in a protected position of being beyond thought or question. They are to be "authoritative", but not "authoritarian".



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The Official Opening of this scheme took place on the 12th May. It was a truly joyous day and yet another sign of the hand of the Lord upon the Association's work. The dedication was given by Mr J. Hugh Jones, the Association's Chairman, and the building declared officially open by Mrs Eileen Blackaby, widow of the late Eric Blackaby who passed away in July, 1983. Eric Blackaby was the driving force behind the building of this scheme whilst he was chairman of the Local Project Committee and we are indeed sorry that he did not see the fruit of his labour brought to fruition.

**General Secretary,
Baptist Housing Association Limited,
4 Southampton Row,
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What do we mean by being "critical" in our thinking about our faith? A critical attitude is necessary if someone is going to ask questions of authority, so that it has a chance to authenticate itself. It is only if something is held up for inspection that we will really see whether it possesses authority for us. Therefore to be "critical" or "experimental" does not mean that we will arrogantly sit in judgement over against something else, but rather that we will be prepared to use our intelligent, sanctified thought to understand it more clearly. It will mean that we will be ready to look more objectively at beliefs or experiences that we have inherited. We will listen to Christians whose voice might be new to us, and we will be prepared to ponder the moral and political questions of our belief.

In one of his books, Anthony Bloom describes doubt, from the point of view of the scientist, as a systematic weapon, a joy. Through it he will try to discover the flaws in his own theories. It is through doubt that new discoveries are made. He doubts the understanding he has discovered, but knows that the underlying reality remains to be explored. His belief is in this reality that is beyond, not in the model that happens to satisfy his own mind at the time.

Applying this insight to Christian experience Anthony Bloom describes his own approach to faith. "As far as faith is concerned, I started with something which was an experience which seemed to be convincing that God does exist. Doubt comes into it, not as questioning this fundamental experience, but as questioning my intellectual workings out of it. And in that respect the doubt of the believer should be as creative, as daring, as joyful, almost as systematic, as the doubt of the scientist who having discovered facts that have convinced him up to a point of something will begin to find the flaw in his reasoning, the error in his system, or new facts that will invalidate his model of the universe." Christian understanding has grown only as there have been those with courage to believe in this way.

There are certain pastoral reasons why our role as minister involves encouraging people to think more openly about the presuppositions of their faith.

i. To maintain separate criteria for evaluating what is true in secular experience, over against religious experience, is to risk creating a built-in tension that will require an ever increasing investment of energy to maintain. The situation will be like that of someone who is struggling to preserve some kind of psychological defence, and finding that all of his resources have to be used in this venture. The wall separating the secular from the religious will need to be continually strengthened. In consequence there will be decreasing communication between the two fields of life and ultimately a diminishing application of the Christian faith to secular problems. The tragedy will be that one day one of the sides might need to be rejected, because the tension has become impossible to cope with. Either faith will be rejected as inadequate to all the problems that are forcing themselves with such severity into the person's understanding, or the world will be suspect as an unsafe place in which the Christian has to operate. This is an unnecessary pastoral tension, if it is true that all truth, both secular and religious, should be approached with the same sincere honesty. It also means that the evangelistic life of the church is forced more completely into the mould of being that activity which takes place only when the church makes its "forays" into the heathen world beyond its doors.

ii. An authoritarian faith runs the risk of producing an impoverished picture of God. It is possible for us to purchase the security of dogmatism at the cost of losing God. Both in the Old and the New Testaments God is portrayed as possessing mystery, freedom, otherness, disturbingness, and unpredictability. Once he becomes contained in the authorised "dogmas" of his people, he is "safe", but no longer satisfying to them. R. Davidson, in his book *The Courage to Doubt* (SCM 1983) demonstrates how throughout the Old Testament period the nation's understanding of God grew through those very people who were prepared to question the "received understanding" of their contemporaries.

Because Jesus refused to take the path of certainty offered by the faith of Jewish orthodoxy He clashed with the Pharisees. For example, their pre-packed dogmas could not entertain the liberty with which Jesus began to question the Sabbath observances. The path to the cross goes by way of the conflict stories of the Gospels, which describe the clash between faith which requires certainty at all costs, and faith which is able to recognise that God leads to insights which are new and sometimes disturbing.

One of the values of the rediscovery of the reality of the Spirit of God is that we are recognising again that God is delightfully unpredictable. "The Holy Spirit manifests to us above all the living and present God as One whom we can never 'hire' once and for all and adopt for our own possession. That is why Luke tells us how God in His Spirit is constantly intervening in the life of the community, issuing new orders. God remains the One who is constantly en route toward new people and new shores. He cannot be detained at the place where he happens to be at the moment." (Eduard Schweizer, *The Holy Spirit* p.78. SCM 1980). To follow where God is leading demands that we shall risk our certainty in order to discover a deeper truth. This is impossible for our people if we require to be the custodians of their pilgrimage.

iii. An authoritarian faith runs the risk of losing the flexibility that is necessary if we would be adaptive to new situations. Because the faith of Jesus was not expressed in code or statute it was flexible, and able to welcome both publican and sinner. Jesus refuses to allow the letter of the law to determine the behaviour of his followers. (Matt. 5) It is far more important that they should be moved by the Spirit.

If one's attitudes or answers become cut and dried, set out in dogma or book, or compliant with the cultural expectation or leader's dictate, then new problems that present themselves to us can only be seen through the spectacles of the past. In this sense, submission to authoritarianism and act of faith are mutually exclusive. The first asks for a sign but is not willing to change. The second is prepared to follow on to new things, even though a sign might not be forthcoming.

There is the old story of the crab and the cat. The crab is a creature with its security fixed firmly on the outside. It is adapted to survive very well in one situation, but because it is so adapted it is quite incapable of leaving that habitat, and adjusting to the new. On the other hand, a cat has its security on the inside. It is vulnerable, because it is always in contact with its environment, but it can adapt to new situations and new problems, and learn to cope in safe and creative ways. Its security does not lie in a shell, which cramps as well as protects.

iv. He who cannot adapt will find growth difficult. Too swift a recourse to authority deters one from being open to new ideas that are challenging and unsettling, but which might have something to add to our knowledge. In a book about prayer, Simon Tugwell pleads for a widely developed repertoire of skills in meditation. (*"Prayer"* Vol. 1 *"Living with God"* Veritas 1974). These should include Christian disciplines that might not normally be found in one's own Christian denomination. He suggests, "A driver who knows how to turn left only will not get very far."

Spirituality is not the only Christian experience in which our people should be free to take from the richness of other traditions, even if the new ideas gathered would provide too rich a diet for those who are responsible for leading the congregation. Unless our people are free to explore in new ideas, they will not build up reserves of understanding to help them to deal with the unexpected, whether that be sudden crisis or unforeseeable grace. Authoritarian dogma will stop us learning, because new ideas and new truth will not be able to pass through the grid that has been erected to censor out new things. So, in the New Testament, Peter uses his tradition and his conformity to justify his unwillingness to consider welcoming unclean Gentiles into the Christian Church.

Simon Tugwell uses another illustration. God may reveal Himself in strange places. It is rather like the parable of the treasure hidden in the field. You cannot set out and determine to find treasure. All that you can do is go for afternoon walks. True leadership will give people freedom so to do, without feeling the need to be forever cautiously determining the direction they may take.

v. Too quick an invocation of authority makes it so much harder to listen to other people creatively and lovingly. If we lose the knack of being able to suspend our judgement and become too concerned to "protect the truth", than to listen, uncomfortable tensions will arise within the fellowship. Uncharitable attitudes will be shown to the people with whom we disagree. We will begin to label one another. The label will justify our dividing apart into camps, each flying its own particular banner of orthodoxy. In the end, the denial of truth evidenced by our suspicious lovelessness will be more harmful than those errors which might need analysis as we try to be honest in our Christian pilgrimage. In a world that so quickly divides into camps, we need to allow our people to practise the old fashioned, but Christian, virtue of humble love.

Growth is more important than security. Maturity involves the ability to tolerate uncertainty, and to be able to use that uncertainty creatively. Perhaps it is more important to allow someone to grow in their Christian maturity, than it is to force them, at too early a stage, to conform to the "correct" answer to the questions that confront them. Of course, to live with the freedom to ask questions is disturbing. There is enough insecurity in life, and it is hard if we are going to add to it by allowing people to think critically about what they believe, without offering them some form of security in which to think. Therefore the twin pillars upon which pastoral work is based might be thought of as on the one hand, to encourage freedom to explore, and on the other hand, to provide security within which a person can use his freedom. We look now at some of the ways in which this security might be experienced.

i. We need first to recognise how we ourselves deal with uncertainty. If faith is something which takes us from the known into the unknown, it has more in common with searching doubt, than with the Christianity which has been cast by the need for security into an inflexible, unadaptive mould. Our own coping with questions might be a clue to help us to discern whether faith is fulfilling a need for unassailable security, or whether we are indeed prepared to allow faith to lead us into what is "unknown" and therefore threatening.

Christianity is not less true because it is questioned. It is not unspiritual to probe in order to discover what is authentic. The act of questioning is not an attempt to disprove, but rather an attempt to render something fit for use. A new drug is not subjected to expensive scrutiny because the manufacturer is eager to discount it, but because it has potential. Through the testing the company can be certain enough to market it with confidence.

The freedom with which we are open to new ideas, and the honesty with which we deal with our own questions, will give courage to others. If to be secure is at the top of our list of priorities, then it will be hard for us to resist the temptation to give the pat answer. People will begin to feel guilty if they want to ask the unorthodox question. It will be hard for us to conceal our rejection for those who disagree with us. On the other hand, if we are happy about living with uncertainty, we will be able to encourage people to recognise that their radical questions do not send God into tremors.

ii. We need to offer much more secure relationships in which critical questions can be asked. If in allowing freedom we give the impression that we do not care, something has gone very wrong. The caring thing to do is to hold together freedom and security. An imposed authority will provide security, but deny freedom, because transgression of what we expect will earn disapproval. An accepting relationship, with someone who knows his own mind, whilst still moving on to new understandings, will communicate the empathy, respect and tolerance within which a person can work out the content and the implications of his own faith.

Sometimes it may well be possible to push a person to make a commitment. On reflection, however, it may be more creative to let a period of indecision continue, and concentrate on fostering a person's ability to think clearly and critically, assess evidence, and perhaps reserve opinion until a decision is a sincere expression of mature commitment. Such reserve on the part of the pastor might not look good on the statistical tables, but decisions made by a person who has been gently loved through this period of growth are likely to be long lasting and creative.

We might encourage older members of the church to act as role models for others. This is not to think necessarily of those brilliant people who can be held up as an example of how to succeed academically or in business.

The concern is more with those people who can be examples of how to tolerate uncertainty, and convey the idea that God still remains God. I am thinking of the older people in our churches who learned to stay with the pain of their questions. They have learned the value of mystery, and, sometimes from bitter experience, the limitations of dogma. They can testify to the fact that their Lord remains true even in the darkness through which they have lived.



WEST HAM CENTRAL MISSION

York House, 409 Barking Road,
Plaistow, E13 8AL

Patron: Her Majesty Queen
Elizabeth The Queen Mother

Dear Fellow Ministers,

Those of you who know me reasonably well will know that my hobby is photography. I am certainly not an expert — the only thing I have in common with David Bailey is the make (although not the model) of camera he uses. Even so, I have received a lot of pleasure and not a few insights from the practice of picture-taking and picture-making.

I want to share with you just two obvious, but none-the-less vital principles of photography, and through them to illustrate something of the approach that we at the WEST HAM CENTRAL MISSION have to our work.

Firstly:- It is important that the object of a picture be in *SHARP FOCUS*. Nothing is more frustrating than a “fuzzy” image, whose details are unclear and whose impact is lost. We need to see clearly and realistically the people we seek to serve, and the situations in which they find themselves. Sometimes we parsons are guilty of praying for “all who are ill, or lonely, or limited by age... etc., etc.” That sort of prayer may have its place (although I’m not sure where that is!), but when it comes to practical, relevant, personal ministry — every individual counts — every detail of their lives, their experiences, their needs is of infinite significance. As we exercise our many and varied ministries we try to remember that God knows every one of his children *BY NAME* — our love, or rather His love, must be *FOCUSSED* so that it can meet each one’s need.

Secondly:- Never forget the *BACKGROUND*. A photograph of the loveliest girl God ever made loses something of its magic if it is taken against the backcloth of the local Rubbish Dump or your friendly neighbourhood Gas-works! To make a good picture you need not only to *FOCUS* on the subject — but to take proper note of the *BACKGROUND* against which it is set.

Amid all the business all the demands that our work makes upon us, we try to remember that it is all against the *BACKGROUND* of the great unchanging *LOVE OF GOD* in Christ. He is the *LORD*, in Him alone is *LIFE* and *HEALING*, and apart from Him all our efforts will be in vain.

When you think of us, please pray that we may keep in *SHARP FOCUS* the needs and the worth of those whom we serve, and at the same time never forget the *BACKGROUND* of *GOD’S STEADFAST LOVE AND REDEEMING PURPOSE* for all His children.

Yours in His Service,

Trevor W. Davis, M.A.
Superintendent Minister

Sometimes it is hard for young Christians to go through periods of searching. Their group might not be strong enough to allow them the freedom they require, and it might be that the group will protect its own security by trying to "put down" the one who is searching. Rejection is painful, particularly if a clumsy use of text or tradition reveals that a person's agony is not understood. The involvement of a mature, older person, or participation in a well led, caring nurture group, will give courage to be patient.

iii. We might well look at our worship, which is rightly a celebration of what we know and have received. As such it informs and builds up the content of our faith.

Worship can also, however, be an opportunity to practise being in the presence of what is lovingly incomprehensible. There is enough Biblical material for us to recognise that God is far greater than our knowledge of Him, and to believe that the gospel gives us the security to worship Him for Himself, though He challenge, daunt, probe and perplex us. Baptists, for whom words have for long been the backbone of worship, need to rediscover the use of silence, of music, poetry and drama, so that worship can engage us in adoration of the ineffable. This is something with which, as ministers whose business has for too long been words, we have little experience. There may be those in our churches who have a lot to teach us. Worship might then become an enactment engaging us in the drama of God's relationship with mankind, and help us to accept that our own searching, exploration and questioning are part of that drama. To take away the holy and the awesome, and offer instead dogmatism that leaves no room for mystery and searching, is to impoverish faith. The confident preaching of the gospel revealed to us leads us with security into the presence of the God whom we can never completely know, but whose knowledge of us is the foundation of all we are.

iv. Our people might be encouraged to take scripture more seriously if they were helped to understand that it does not itself require to be taken uncritically or thoughtlessly. Modern study of the gospels, for example, shows just how much insight is to be gained by letting the discrepancies and tensions within the various accounts speak for themselves. A scripture-based ministry means more than just being able to balance text with text. It means taking the questions and insights of biblical scholarship seriously, and allowing them to lead us more closely into the heart of the text. There are many, who, without being persuaded by the more obscure suggestions presented in the recent T.V. series "Jesus — the Evidence" are quietly glad to find that some of the questions they have secretly pondered for many years need not be a denial of scripture's authority. It is sadly possible that some of the trauma produced by the series is the responsibility of the church, because we have not encouraged our people to think about the kind of authority which scripture properly possesses.

v. We need to encourage people to believe that God is omnipresent, and that He is there even in their questions and doubts. Indeed, He might be present particularly in the honesty with which they address themselves to the crises that confront them. Rather than reject their perplexity, the questions can become windows through which their concept of God can become more satisfying. There are those outside the fellowship of the church whose honest

questions and reasons for withholding involvement, are more transparent to God than authoritarian dogmas offered within. Maybe the spirit also speaks beyond the walls of our structures. If so, we deny the Spirit voice if we silence His questioning.

If I am questioning ideas which are imposed upon me; if I shout my objections towards heaven in the face of the injustices of the world; if I am overcome with grief at untimely bereavement...the help I need at that moment will not come from the quick answer or the memorised text, but from one who will help me to own my dissatisfaction, my anger or my sorrow, and discover where "The Crucified God" (as J. Moltmann describes Him) might be present in such moments.

Robert Davidson concludes his book, *Courage to Doubt*, with these two thoughts:

"It is in the struggle to maintain certainties in the midst of uncertainty, in the painful groping for new light in the midst of a darkness that seems total, that the Old Testament bears its clearest witness to the courage to doubt."

"The future belongs not to those who must have certainties, but to those who can live with uncertainty, who can calmly and confidently explore the heritage of the past, the problems of the present, and the opportunities for the future, without the crutches of rigid and doctrinaire ideology."

Whatever new structures we adopt for our churches, they must be such as allow for such an exercise of faith by the people of Christ.

John Stroud

A Leading Question

by Paul Fiddes (Baptist Publications)

Happily coinciding with this edition on the question of leadership is the publication of Paul Fiddes' book on the same subject. As with his previous book on the charismatic movement, he brings clarity and theological strength to a subject too often bedevilled by decisions made in haste because of the pressures of the present, by parallel movements in the secular world and by the maverick world of the new sects.

The author traces two forms of leadership in the New Testament, the *episkopoi* and the *diakonoi*. The first of these is to be identified with ministry of word and sacrament as it has historically developed in our churches and the second with the diaconate. The term 'elder' (*presbuteros*), he argues, is not a separate order of ministry but a description of either minister or deacon. It is an inter-changeable term for both orders of ministry.

His re-affirmation of the historic pattern is timely. In the first place it alerts us to the danger of separating spiritual and temporal functions within the church's diaconate, leaving deacons to see to the church plumbing and elders to the welfare of the members. At a deeper theological level this

reflects our tendency to separate grace and nature, redemption and creation. In the second place, it puts the brakes on that process, begun in reaction to the tractarian movement and catholic revival in the nineteenth century and accelerated by the sectarian movements that have mushroomed in our own times, of discounting the distinct role of the Christian minister as *episkopos*.

We are undoubtedly being influenced by the new sects. Sectarianism is almost invariably anti-sacramental, thus the role of the minister as minister of the sacrament is either eroded or dismissed altogether. Add to that the decline of preaching and the role of minister of the word, a role that we have hitherto argued requires stringent tests of call and a thorough theological training, can be delegated to one of the 'preaching' or 'ruling' elders. It is perhaps not to be wondered that, denied a distinct identity of minister of word and sacrament, some come to welcome the compensaion of an authority as one of the 'ruling' elders hitherto unheard of in our Baptist churches and enough to prompt the envy of a medieval pope.

Paul Fiddes' book and the contributions of each of our writers gives us all excellent material to reflect on what is a leading question and what, for some, may one day become a burning matter of conscience if our churches continue to move towards the sects.

Due to lack of space "Of Interest to You" is held over until the next issue.