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LEADERS AND FATHERS[1]

According to the Book of Common Prayer, 'It is evident unto all men diligently reading Holy Scripture and ancient Authors, that from the Apostles' time there have been these orders of Ministers in Christ's church: Bishops, Priests and Deacons.' This leads George Caird to comment drily, 'That kind of diligence is fortunately less common today than it used to be.' (Caird, 1980: 81). For despite the greater caution with which today we generally claim the support of the New Testament for our own brand of Church order, it is still too often true that, 'This is the book in which every one searches for his own opinions, and every one with equal success finds his own opinions.' (Caird, 1994: 7). Baptists, of course,have been as guilty of this as anyone, but at least today we are more likely to be aware of the fact.

In this article I shall use the words 'overseer', 'assistant' and 'fathers' to translate the New Testament terms ἐπίσκοπος, διάκονος and πρεσβύτεροι (*episkopos, diakonos* and *presbuteroi*) to try to avoid reading into the New Testament the connotations that the words 'bishop', 'deacon', 'elder' or 'presbyter' have acquired for different Christian traditions over the centuries. 'Bishop' inevitably suggests to us an ecclesiastical dignitary exercising *translocal* oversight, which was not the case in New Testament times. 'Deacons' mean different things to different people: apprentice priests in one tradition, 'men in grey suits' in another! 'Elder' is an ambiguous term even within Presbyterianism, while a distinction between 'elder' and 'presbyter' cannot be traced further back than the middle of the second century and will add nothing to our understanding of the New Testament.

By contrast, the words I have chosen to use serve to bring out the essential connotation of each word. 'Overseer' reminds us that the early Christians used a functional word to describe their congregational leaders, and one without overt religious associations. 'Assistant' is not a perfect rendering of διάκονος but it serves to bring out the basic idea that in Hellenistic Greek διάκονος was the agent, representative or assistant of *somebody else* (Collins, 1990: 146). 'Fathers' might seem gratuitously insulting in these days of equal opportunity, but I use it not at all to imply that Christian leaders ought to be male but to bring out the resonance of the word πρεσβύτεροι for its social world and the distance between that world and ours. With these preliminaries we may begin the task of clarifying the meaning of the words 'overseer', 'assistant' and 'fathers' in the New Testament and the changing realities to which these words referred

OVERSEERS AND ASSISTANTS

By the time of the Apostle Paul's death in the early 60s two words were well on the way to establishing themselves as the terms that denoted the leaders of the local churches, at least in the area of the Pauline mission. One was 'overseer', the other was 'assistant'. The terms first appear together in Philippians (Phil 1:1), which is probably one of the latest letters Paul wrote. They next appear together in a letter

that was probably written shortly after Paul's death with the aim of securing the
Apostle's legacy within his churches (1 Tim 3:1-13). This passage has to do with
the qualifications for church office and, with the overseer and the assistants, the list
of offices is apparently complete. There is no mention of the fathers in this
connection. Moving beyond the New Testament we find the same pairing in 1
Clement 42:4 and in the Didache 15:1. Not until the letters of Ignatius do we find
the fathers mentioned together with the overseers and assistants in a way suggestive
of three ranked offices. Accordingly, we shall leave consideration of 'the fathers'
until later, simply noting that during the second half of the first century the ministry
of the local church could apparently be denoted by the words 'overseer' and
'assistant' alone. Whether this is because the overseers and fathers were identical,
or because the fathers belonged to 'a fundamentally different way of thinking about
the church, which can only with difficulty be combined with the Pauline picture of
the congregation' (Campenhausen, 1969: 76), or whether, as I think the explanation
lies, in the dynamics of the term 'the fathers' itself remains to be seen.

Who then were the overseers and assistants and what was their role? From the
list of qualifications given in 1 Timothy it seems that the overseer himself was a
person of some seniority, the head of his own household, with personal qualities
appropriate to that role. He must be able to teach, which suggests a person of some
education, and to offer hospitality, which suggests a person of some means. It is
extremely probable that the term 'overseer' refers to those who opened their homes
to host the meetings of the church, whose extended families formed the nucleus of
the various congregations (Giles, 1989: 36-7). Paul refers on a number of occasions
to people with a church in their house (1 Cor 16:19, Rom 16:15, Philem 2, Col
4:15), and on one occasion to Gaius as 'my host and the host of the whole
congregation' (Rom 16:23).[2] Despite all the studies devoted to the household
matrix of the earliest churches, accounts of the origins of the Christian ministry
often proceed without giving any attention to the social setting in which the ministry
developed. When Paul addresses the overseers at Philippi, the likeliest reason for
the plural there is that the Philippian church now consists of a number of households
and so has a number of overseers. The fact that the overseer in the Pastorals
appears in the singular on both occasions when he is mentioned may provide
evidence that the letters envisage the coming together of a number of households
under one overseer, the state of affairs clearly presupposed by Ignatius.

The work of the assistants is nowhere described. Although in later times the
term denotes either those who served the elements at the Eucharist or those
responsible for the poor and needy, it is not a safe assumption that this was their
role from the start. Paul uses the term of himself and his team of preachers (Ellis,
1970: 441-5) and, from the fact that assistants are required to have 'a firm hold on
the mystery of the faith' (1 Tim 3:9, and cf. Titus 1:9), it is possible that they too
were involved in the work of teaching and preaching. The term does not of itself
imply waiting at table, but only that the person so described is subordinate to and

assists someone else, in this case the householders who bear the title 'overseer' (Collins, 1990:194). This is borne out by the little that is said of assistants in Ignatius. They are 'ministers of food and drink', certainly, but not only that (Trall 2:3), for they are also sent on special missions as representatives of the church (Smyrn 10:1). It is likely that they were younger men (and perhaps women, 1 Tim 3:11). In today's terms we should probably think more of curates than deacons, but also of all sorts of administrative roles and sector ministries.

The terms 'overseer' and 'assistant' appear together, as we have seen, towards the end of Paul's life and in the decades immediately following, but this does not mean that there was no regular organization in the Pauline churches before that date. What is probably the earliest Pauline letter we have calls on the Thessalonians 'to acknowledge those who are working so hard among you, and are your leaders and counsellors in the Lord's fellowship' (I Thess 5:12). The word rendered 'working', $\kappa o\pi\iota\hat{\omega}\nu\tau\alpha\varsigma$, is Paul's regular word for his own pastoral labours. Counselling (or 'admonishing' RSV) was not reserved to the few (cf. 5:14) but, linked to $\pi\rho o\ddot{\iota}\sigma\tau\alpha\mu\acute{e}\nu o\nu\varsigma$,it clearly points to a leadership group in the Thessalonian church. Among them we would expect to find the Jason who provided the infant church with the room to meet and the benefit of his patronage (Acts 17:1-9). Similarly, we find Paul urging the Corinthians to 'accept the leadership of' Stephanas and his household (1Cor 16:15 ff.). They are founder members of the church; like Gaius and Crispus (Acts 18:7-8) they are householders; and 'they have devoted themselves to the service of God's people'. Whether men like this are to be numbered among the prophets and teachers, or the helpers and leaders whom Paul mentions (1 Cor 12:28), is a moot point, but clearly the church is not without leadership which will develop naturally over the next generation into the ministry of overseers and their assistants (MacDonald, 1988: 51-60). What we should notice, however, is that this leadership emerges naturally, derived from the household setting in which the churches were born. It is not 'Pauline' in the sense of being 'planned and given by Paul himself' (Holmberg, 1980: 199), but rather seems to have been endorsed by Paul when necessary, and for the most part silently taken for granted.

If the ministry of overseers and their assistants was not, as is often suggested, distinctively Pauline, but emerged naturally from the household setting of the churches, it is worth asking if we can trace its origins any further back than Paul, perhaps even to the beginnings of the Church in Jerusalem itself. Even to suggest such an enquiry may seem impossibly speculative, but it is worth remembering that the household church was not unique to the Pauline mission, nor is there any reason to think that Paul was its inventor. Acts portrays the infant church meeting in the upper room of a large house (Acts 1:13). The first Christians broke bread 'in their homes' (2:46, 5:42). Saul went from house to house in his persecution of the church, no doubt because that was where he would find Christians holding meetings (8:3). When Peter escapes from prison he finds a church at prayer in the house of

Mary (12:17). This evidence is all the more impressive for being quite incidental to the story. When Luke tells us that the Christians worshipped in the Temple, this may be partly shaped by his theological purpose, but the references to the household setting appear to serve no such interest. Now if Luke is even half right about the numbers of Christians in the early days, there must have been a growing number of such household churches and, if the earliest Christians met in homes, then they also had leaders at the household level, leaders provided by the household structure itself.

We do not know what these leaders were called, but it is striking that in the contemporary Essene communities we find a leader with the title of 'overseer', or in Hebrew, מבקר (*mebaqqer*),a word that is exactly equivalent to the Greek ἐπίσκοπος. The attempt to trace the Christian overseer back to the מבקר of the Damascus Document has often been made (Jeremias, 1969: 259), but has not met with general acceptance (Fitzmyer, 1971: 293). What in my view has been overlooked is the household setting which is common to both communities. For the Damascus Document speaks of 'camps', groups of Essenes living away from Qumran in the cities of Palestine, very similar we may think to the earliest Christian churches, small sectarian groups living in the midst of an unsympathetic society, using wilderness terminology to define themselves as the true Israel. It is entirely plausible that the Essene groups met in houses as did the Christian groups, and that the Christian householders acted as overseers and did the things the Essene מבקר did, instructing and pastoring the church and enrolling the catechumens (CD 13:9-10). The role of the מבקר as set out in the Damascus Document has many points in common with the role of a Christian overseer, and clear echoes of it appear in 1 Peter and in Hippolytus (1 Pet 5:1-5, Hipp *AT* 3). We have then a correspondence between the Essene מבקר and the Christian overseer that is linguistic, social and functional. They did the same things, they met in similar circumstances, and they were known by linguistically equivalent terms. All of this suggests that the possibility of a connection of some sort between the overseer and the מבקר may have been too quickly dismissed, and that there is at least nothing incongruous about supposing that the role and title that we find in the Pauline churches in the second half of the century may have originated in the Palestinian church at a much earlier date.

The bridge between the Jerusalem church and Paul is provided by the church at Antioch. This church was in close relationship with the mother church at Jerusalem, as is proved not only by Acts 15 but by Galatians 2, and was also the church of which Paul was successively a leader and a missionary before assuming a more independent role following his clash with Peter (Taylor, 1992). One would expect the Antioch leadership structure to be similar to Jerusalem on the one hand and to provide a model for the Pauline mission on the other. The leaders of the church are listed in Acts 13:1, the indications are that they are people of substance, and it is very likely that they are the overseers of the various house-churches. The fact that they are called by Luke 'prophets and teachers' need be no bar to this conclusion

since this is simply to describe them in terms of their gift rather than their office and function. Luke is concerned to show that the Gentile mission originates in the prompting of the Spirit and so speaks of the leaders in terms of their inspiration. Had Paul been writing to the church at Antioch he could presumably have referred to them in the same way as he speaks of the Thessalonian leaders, and at a later date as overseers and assistants.

All of this suggests that 'from Jerusalem as far round as Illyricum' (Rom 15:19), as the Apostle and others preached the gospel, the churches grew and developed along similar lines. Starting often with a single believing householder, the church in each city soon spread of necessity to other households, whose heads were the natural leaders of the church. At first they were simply 'the leaders' (προϊστάμενοι), but in time it became normal to speak of 'overseers and assistants'. Following the removal by prison and death of the Apostle's guidance, the increasing numbers and the tendency to deviation and division led to the emergence of a single overseer over the church in a city. There are signs that this is already happening in the Pastorals, which may indeed have been written to commend and legitimate the new overseer, whose supremacy Ignatius was later to support so strongly. This development will not have happened uniformly or without tension, as we shall see, but it was probably general by the end of the century.

We have traced the earliest stages in the development of the Christian ministry from its beginnings in Jerusalem to the first appearance of a threefold order of overseers, fathers and assistants in Ignatius. From this we can see that what is new in Ignatius is not the overseer, nor even the single overseer. What is new is that now for the first time *the fathers* appear as a distinct office within the congregation. To understand the significance of this we need to turn our attention to the meaning and role of the fathers in the churches and their social world.

THE FATHERS

Ancient society, Graeco-Roman no less than Jewish, was generally patriarchal and aristocratic, patriarchal in that authority within the family usually lay with the eldest male, and aristocratic in that power and influence within the village or the city usually lay with the heads of wealthy and traditionally 'noble' families. Among the Greeks, Athenian democracy was only a partial and short-lived exception to this rule, while in Israel the rise and fall of the monarchy did not seriously affect the influence of the aristocratic families which long survived it. Jews and Greeks alike accorded respect to the old, especially the senior members of senior houses, and deferred to their opinion in council or assembly, where they were referred to either as οἱ πρεσβύτεροι or οἱ γέροντες.

From the writings of Plutarch, contemporary with the rise of the Christian church, it is plain that 'the fathers' (οἱ πρεσβύτεροι) refers not to office-holders of any kind but to older people whom the younger should respect. In an essay entitled '*Whether Old Men should Engage in Public Affairs*'(*Moralia* 783-97), Plutarch is

found urging older people not to absent themselves from the assembly where they have a significant part to play. It is plain that οἱ πρεσβύτεροι are not the holders of any office of that name, since then it would make no sense to ask whether they should engage in politics. Rather they enjoy πρεσβεῖον, which is not an office but the honour due them in virtue of their senior status. Any citizen of Ephesus hearing the early Christians talking about their πρεσβύτεροι would be likely to think not that the word referred to an office, but simply that the Christians were normal in linking leadership and seniority.

Turning to the Old Testament we find frequent references to 'the fathers' both in the life of Israel and of her neighbours. In a society consisting of tribes, which consisted of clans themselves made up of extended families (or 'fathers' houses') each of these units and sub-units looked to the senior male among them for leadership. The head of a house made decisions within his own household and also represented the family in the counsels of the community. Such senior people are referred to on occasion as 'the heads of the fathers' houses' (Ex 6:25, Num 31:26), and they acted collectively to provide for the internal order of the community and to represent it to those outside (Reviv, 1989).

The Old Testament has a rich vocabulary of words referring to leaders, which cannot easily to distinguished from one another. 'The fathers' is found in parallel with many of these, but we should note that while the fathers are the heads of the houses, an individual head is never referred to as 'the father'. Indeed we may say that the word 'elder' or 'father' *never* appears in the singular with reference to an individual leader. 'The fathers' is a *collective* term, a way of referring collectively to those who may individually be known by other titles, and it tends to be rather vague. It often occurs in lists of titles of honour which together convey an impression that everybody of importance was present, without assigning a precise role to each title or group (e.g.Deut 29:10, 31:28). Finally we may note that it was not a matter of appointment. The fathers owed their position in the community to their positions in its constituent families. This was partly a matter of heredity, and partly a matter of gradually acquiring respect. This receives confirmation from the modern study of Bedouin and similar groups. 'It seems that when a man reaches the point where people often ask his counsel and he has the moral authority such as elders have, he is admitted by common, often tacit, consent into their "college" (Ploeg, 1961: 190).

The fathers of Ancient Israel thus constituted a form of leadership at all levels of Israelite society that was collective, representative, with an authority derived from their seniority relative to those they represented, and varying according to the size and wealth of the social group whose representatives they were. They were not so much the holders of an office of leadership as a body of people from whom leaders were likely to spring or be chosen, and with whose opinions any such leader must undoubtedly reckon. Seen from below the fathers collectively represented the leadership which the people must follow; seen from above, from the king's throne

for example, the fathers embodied nothing less than 'all the men of Israel', whose heads they were and whose views they articulated. When we turn to Jewish society at or around the time of the New Testament, we shall find that nothing much has changed.

Our best witnesses for the institutions of Jewish national life in the Second Temple period are 1 Maccabees, Josephus and, of course, the New Testament. What is striking about the evidence they provide is their lack of precision in the use of titles of office and the tendency to mention two or more titles together in à way that does not permit us to determine what difference (if any) is implied. For example, I Maccabees speaks of, 'A big meeting of priests and people, rulers of the nation and elders of the land' (14:28), leaving it quite unclear how many groups are in view. Josephus similarly uses a wide variety of titles to refer to members of the ruling class (e.g. *BJ* 2.293-405).

It is often supposed that in the literature of this period 'the fathers' refers to the lay members of a supreme court, the Sanhedrin. However, in the light of recent scholarly work the existence of such a body is extremely doubtful, and it seems more likely that, 'the Sanhedrin was not a regular political council at all, but only met at the request of the High Priest as his advisory body.' (Goodman, 1987: 114). In other words rulers summoned councils when it suited them, either to seek advice or conduct a trial, and those who were thus empanelled were people to whom the epithet 'fathers' naturally applied. On other occasions, 'the fathers' is a vague way of referring to 'people who, because of birth, wealth, abilities or position . . . acted on their own or collaboratively to get things done, with no reference to a formal body' (Sanders, 1992: 485). Reading through Josephus' *Jewish War*, one is impressed by two things, on the one hand the wide variety of terms used to describe the people in charge, and on the other the comparative rarity of the actual term 'the fathers'. The story of Josephus' assumption of command in Galilee is particularly instructive. He tells us that on arrival he judged it politic to involve local people of influence (οἱ δυνατοί *hoi dunatoi*) in his administration, both to conciliate the powerful and to gain the consent of the people as a whole. 'He therefore selected from the nation seventy persons of mature years and the greatest discretion and appointed them magistrates for the whole of Galilee.' (*BJ* 2.570). Josephus' purpose is to appoint magistrates (ἄρχοντες *archontes*). His assumption is that they will need to be drawn from among the people of influence, and moreover that they will need to be mature (γηραιοί *geraioi*) and wise. He does not use the term πρεσβύτεροι to describe them, though he could rightly do so. He does not, of course *appoint* them to be πρεσβύτεροι or δυνατοί or γηραιοί. They are that already, but he appoints them as ἄρχοντες, and this makes clear the distinction between 'fathers' and 'officials', between rank and office. The references to Jewish 'fathers' in the pages of the New Testament should be seen in the same light. They rarely appear alone, but usually together with other people of power and influence, and the word is never used in the singular. Two conclusions follow:

Jewish society at the time was aristocratic rather than democratic in character; and eldership was not an office, but a collective term for the people of influence in any given situation.

It is against this background that we should consider the vexed question of the fathers in the governing of the synagogue, and the possibility that they provided a model for a similar office in the church. It has been traditional to suppose that the elders who appear in the New Testament churches were taken over from the synagogue (most recently, Burtchaell, 1992), even that they represent a legalistic approach to religion over against a Pauline church order based on grace (Campenhausen, 1969:58), though in recent years this has not gone unchallenged and some have asserted that, on the contrary, there is no evidence for an office of elder in the synagogue at all (Banks, 1980:149). The question is complicated by our lack of evidence for the running of the synagogues, whether in Palestine or the Diaspora, in the period before AD 70 and by the difficulty of defining the synagogue in relation to the Jewish community in a given place. If we define a synagogue as a congregational meeting for prayer and study of the Torah, often but not always in a building dedicated for the purpose, then we need to remember that the congregation did not function independently of the local Jewish community as a whole. The synagogues had their officers, notably the ἀρχισυνάγωγος (archisynagogos) and the ὑπηρέτης (hyperetes), who attended to the day-to-day running, but they were not independent congregations in our sense of the term: they functioned under the authority of those who 'ran' the local community. These, as we have seen, were senior people influential by reason of birth, wealth or education, and 'the fathers' is one way of referring to them. Such were the elders of Capernaum who went to Jesus on behalf of the centurion (Luke 7:3), but they are not likely to have acted as the elders of the synagogue, rather as the elders of the town whose synagogue it was. If this is right, then the elders ran the synagogues, but it was not as elders of the synagogue that they did so. They ran the synagogue because they ran the community, and they did so not in virtue of an office they held but because of the honour they enjoyed as senior men from powerful local families.

Before asking what this background material has to tell us about the fathers of the New Testament churches, it will be instructive to ask what role the fathers played at Qumran and its sister communities. We may note at once that the word is very rare in the Scrolls (1 QS 6:8, 1QM 13:1). It is also hard to be sure on occasion when the Scrolls are describing the actual constitution of the Community, and when they are speaking in idealized terms. The most characteristic institution at Qumran is the congregational assembly, the leading members of which were the priests. The community operates according to a strict hierarchy, but it is a hierarchy not of age but of purity. Over each community, as we have earlier noted, there appears to have been an overseer, most commonly called by the term מבקר. In the Community Rule (1QS) 'the fathers' appear once, ranked next below priests, but since in a parallel passage the fathers or elders are replaced by levites, it seems

unlikely that there was ever an office of eldership at Qumran. It is true that both Josephus and Philo refer to the community obeying its elders, but since they are writing from the outside, they are probably doing no more than refer to the leaders of the community by what we have seen is an imprecise, collective term which their readers would readily understand.

Two reasons suggest themselves for the absence of elders at Qumran. In the first place, we have seen that the elders in Israel were the heads of the fathers' houses, and in the celibate community of Qumran there were no fathers' houses! There were, of course, senior members of the community who fulfilled the role of elders, but these were the priests, and for a community steeped in the Old Testament 'the elders' is not a natural way to describe priests. In the second place, as we have seen, 'the fathers' is a collective term, referring quite generally to people of weight and honour in the community. Individual rulers or chiefs were not known as 'the father'. Among the Essenes, both at Qumran and in the 'camps' of the Damascus Rule, we find a single overseer, who presides over the congregation and exercises pastoral care. It would not be natural to refer to this individual as 'the father'. We do not know how many Essene communities there were, but it would only be natural to refer to their overseers as 'the fathers' if in fact the overseers met together in some representative capacity, or if someone wished to refer collectively to such overseers as a body. There is no opportunity in the Scrolls for anyone to do this. 'The fathers' is thus not a natural word to find either in a monastic setting where the community is not based on family units, or to describe a single overseer acting within his own community. By contrast, we should not be surprised to see the term emerging within the household-based Christian churches, nor that as a collective term it begins to appear when the households begin to multiply. But this is to anticipate!

If this is how the term 'the fathers' was used in the traditions and cultural context most nearly impinging on the earliest churches, how should we understand the references to 'fathers' or 'elders' in the pages of the New Testament? We shall begin with the Acts of the Apostles where there are brief references to 'the fathers' in two contexts, the Jerusalem church and the churches of the Pauline mission.

The fathers appear without warning or explanation in Acts 11:30 when the church at Antioch collects money to relieve the poverty of the Jerusalem church and sends it 'to the elders' (REB) by Barnabas and Saul. They next appear in the account of the Jerusalem council in Acts 15 where the phrase, 'the apostles and elders', occurs several times. Finally, when Paul pays his last visit to Jerusalem he visits James, and 'all the elders were present' (Acts 21:18). Were these fathers appointed to replace the apostles when the latter left Jerusalem on missionary journeys, as has traditionally been supposed (Lightfoot, 1902:193)? Were they appointed to assist the apostles in the manner of the Seven (Acts 6:1-6), as others have thought (Lindsay, 1902:115, Farrer, 1946:133)? In view of the way that the

term 'the fathers' functions in other Jewish literature it must be more probable that this is an inclusive term for whatever leaders the church had and not the title of separate office within it. That is surely the intended meaning of Acts 11:30. It is futile to ask where the apostles were on that occasion, since Luke is simply saying that the gifts were duly received by the leaders of the church (who might well, so far as current usage went, have included the apostles). In chapter 15 two explanations are possible for the pairing of apostles and fathers. Either the 'and' is epexegetic and the same people are referred to by two titles to emphasize the solemnity of the occasion (Campbell, 1993:526), or, as I now think more likely, 'the fathers' refers collectively to the overseers of the house-churches of Jerusalem whose presence we earlier were led to posit. In neither case will there have been a separate office or rank of elder in the church, since 'the fathers' is regularly used to embrace a number of leaders without specifying particular offices. The same applies to the last reference (21:17), though here it is reasonable to suppose that James has become the single overseer over the Jerusalem church and 'the fathers' describes the *other* overseers who are now subordinate to him.

The two references in Acts to 'fathers' in the Pauline churches (14:23, 20:17) have occasioned a lot of discussion owing to the fact that Paul himself makes no reference to such fathers in his letters. For this reason Luke is held to be guilty of anachronism and of attributing to Paul a Jewish pattern of leadership that was only later introduced to his churches. The question of Paul's silence will be addressed presently. For the moment it suffices to say that 'the fathers' is an imprecise and collective term for leaders that does not specify a particular office. It is the sort of term a writer would be very likely to use if he were summing up a development that took place in several different churches. Acts 14:23 refers to the arrangements Paul and Barnabas made at the conclusion of a missionary journey on which churches were founded at Iconium, Lystra and Derbe. In each of these churches there was perhaps no more than one person of substance willing to open his house to the church and to give the congregation leadership and patronage. Such overseers Paul commends to the blessing of God as he himself had been commended before he set out on mission (χειροτονεῖν *cheirotonein*) is best explained by reference to Acts 13:3, 14:26, 20:32, as commending to God with the laying on of hands), and Luke refers to them all by the inclusive term 'fathers'. In the same way Paul is said to summon the fathers of the church at Ephesus to meet him at Miletus (20:17), and then speaks of the Holy Spirit making them overseers (20:28), not because the titles are synonymous but because 'the fathers' refers collectively to men who were individually overseers of the churches that met in their homes. Each person is an overseer, and together they are 'the fathers'.

It is well known that there is no reference to 'the fathers' in the Pauline letters before the Pastorals. According to the view popular with Protestant scholars for most of this century this is no accident, since the recognition of fathers was fundamentally at odds with Paul's charismatic understanding of the church. 'Paul

develops the idea of the Spirit as the organizing principle of the congregation'
(Campenhausen, 1969:58), with the result that, 'for an office of governor on the
lines of the presbyterate or the later monarchical episcopate there was no room at
Corinth either in principle or in practice' (ibid:65). Fathers represent for von
Campenhausen, 'a fundamentally different way of thinking about the church, which
can only with difficulty be combined with the Pauline picture of the congregation
and certainly cannot be derived from it' (ibid:76). In similar vein E. Schweizer can
say, 'For Paul an ordination, an explicit appointment on undertaking a form of
service is impossible.' (Schweizer, 1961:101), while for E. Käsemann, 'All the
baptized are office-holders' (Käsemann, 1964:80). James Dunn makes much of the
fact that in Corinth Paul nowhere asks the local leaders to sort out the problem, and
says, 'The implication is plain: if leadership was required in any situation Paul
assumed that the charismatic Spirit would provide it with a word of wisdom or
guidance through an individual.' (Dunn, 1990:113)

Popular as this view is, there are several problems with it. In the first place, it
is utopian, confusing theological argument designed to change a situation with
historical description of the situation itself. Paul's teaching on the body of Christ
cannot simply be read off as the constitution of the Corinthian church. Secondly,
this view is too dependent on a single Pauline letter, 1 Corinthians, a letter written
to a church where things had manifestly gone wrong. Thirdly, it underplays the
evidence we have already discussed which shows that regular leadership based on
the household was developing in all the Pauline churches. The leaders in
Thessalonica (1 Thess 5:12), and the overseers and assistants in Philippi (Phil 1:1),
show that regular leadership is not incompatible with a charismatic theology used to
evaluate it. Yet the fact remains that the term 'the fathers' is conspicuous by its
absence, and the reason, I suggest, lies in the connotations of the term 'the fathers'
itself.

Briefly put, my proposal is that *it is the household structure of the earliest
churches which is the factor that makes speaking of 'the fathers' inappropriate in
the first generation, and inevitable in the second.* So long as the local church was
confined to one household, that household provided the leadership of the church, the
householder typically presiding at his own table. As the number of believers
meeting in the *atrium* grew, there may well have been need for others to assume
responsibility for their care and teaching. The householder may for this reason have
been distinguished from others by the general title of overseer, with other able
people as assistants. No one would think of calling the head of the household 'the
father', for reasons that have more to do with linguistic usage than theology. Of
course, the New Testament evidence suggests that already in Paul's lifetime there
were several such house-churches in a place like Corinth, but their numbers were
still small enough to allow them to assemble for a common meeting in one house (1
Cor 11:18, Rom 16:23). However, as the numbers grew so that it was no longer
possible for the whole church to assemble in one place, and with the removal of the

apostle and the rising threat of factionalism, the need for a greater degree of local organization would become pressing. The leaders of house-churches would need to relate together in a representative capacity and at this point nothing could be more natural than to refer to their leaders collectively as 'the fathers'. Those who were individually overseers of their house-churches could appropriately be referred to as 'the fathers' when being described collectively and by a third party. This way of speaking belongs, I suggest, more naturally in the second generation than the first, which is why we do not find Paul using it in his letters.

I have already suggested that the Pastorals may have been written in support of the introduction of a single overseer in each city, which may explain why 'overseer' appears in the singular, while 'the assistants' do not. We must now consider what is meant in these letters by the term 'fathers', which appears three times with reference to church leaders (1 Tim 4:14, 5:17-25, Tit 1:5-9). Taking the Titus reference first, Titus has been left in Crete to 'deal with any outstanding matters'(1:5). This means that he is 'to appoint πρεσβυτέρους in every city', apparently to be overseers (1:7). Yet the situation is puzzling. We have seen that 'overseers' referred originally to the household leaders, and such people would presumably have been necessary and available from the start. However young the church, the new converts in each city must have met somewhere, most probably in a household whose head provided not only space and hospitality but a measure of leadership as well. Moreover, as we have seen, the senior men of the congregation did not need appointing as such, since the title connotes honour rather than office, as Jerome (*Letter* 59) long ago made plain (Harvey, 1974:330). That being so, the overseer mentioned here can hardly be simply a household leader, and the fathers can hardly be the holders of an office of that name, whether identical with overseer of separate from him. But if the Pastorals are concerned to legitimate the appointment of a single overseer over the various house-churches in each city, all is explained. Churches have been established in several Cretan cities, and in each of them there is now to be a single overseer, drawn from among those who as overseers of their own house-churches are the fathers of the church. 'Fathers' are thus to be appointed *as overseers* at city level (κατὰ πόλιν *kata polin*), since, 'When an elder is "appointed" there is nothing else he can be appointed to but the episcopate - "the appointed elder" is *ipso facto* a bishop' (Lowrie, 1904:347). Such overseers do not of course cease to be fathers, since 'the fathers' as properly describes the city overseers collectively as it earlier described the household overseers.

The exegesis of 1 Timothy 5:17 is complicated. When it says, 'Elders who give good service as leaders should be reckoned worthy of a double stipend, in particular those who work hard at preaching and teaching', we might at first suppose that there are as many as four groups in view: elders, elders who rule, elders who rule well, and elders who preach and teach. In fact, I believe that only one group is being referred to. The word rendered 'in particular' (μάλιστα) appears regularly

in the Pastorals and every time with the sense of 'that is to say' or 'I mean'
(Skeat, 1979:173, Hanson, 1982:92). Those who preach and teach and those who
rule are the same people. Secondly, there is no distinction intended between those
who rule and those who rule well. 'Well' (καλῶς *kalos*) is an echo of the 'noble
task' (καλὸν ἔργον *kalon ergon*) to which would-be overseers aspire (1 Tim 3:1)
and belongs to the language of compliment (as 'Honourable Members' refers to all
members). 'Honour' is doubly due to those who lead the church in this excellent
way by preaching and teaching. One group is in view: who are they? They are,
of course, the overseers, 'the fathers' functioning as always as a collective term for
these people. In this instance they may be the household overseers, but, if we are
right that the Pastorals envisage the appointment of city overseers, then the term
may refer collectively to such people in a number of cities. This in turn would
explain 'double honour'. The meaning is clearly financial (cf. 5:18): the overseers
are to be paid something for their trouble. Now the household overseers were
generally well-to-do householders who would not have needed to be paid by those
to whom they gave patronage, but the new post of single overseer may well have
been a full-time job which even a well-to-do person might hesitate to take on for
nothing. The honour will not, of course, be double in the sense of double that paid
to someone else, but double in the sense that while all leaders are worthy of honour
city overseers are doubly so, deserving not only honour but also an honorarium. I
conclude that 'the fathers' in the Pastorals functions as it always does to refer to
leaders collectively, and in this case the leaders are the overseers of the churches.

A glance at the letters of Clement and Ignatius will serve to confirm this
understanding of the role of the fathers in the churches. For Clement, as is well
known, writes to urge upon the church at Corinth the reinstatement of some of its
fathers who have recently been put out of office. As part of the argument he
reminds them that overseers and assistants had been instituted in the churches by the
apostles themselves (1 Clem 42:4), who had further arranged that when such
overseers died other 'respected men' (ἐλλόγιμοι ἄνδρες *ellogimoi andres*) were to
take their place. It is these respected men who have been put out of office, and the
office from which they have been ejected is that of overseer (44:4). Those whom
Clement calls 'fathers' have been deprived of the office of overseer. Following a
suggestion of R.M.Grant, I believe that what lies behind this is that the church at
Corinth now has a single overseer, who is insisting, in the manner of Ignatius, on
centralising the meetings of the church around himself (Grant, 1964:164). The
result of such a move is to diminish the role and status of the other overseers, who
may no longer preside at the Eucharist in their own homes. No doubt they will sit
in honoured places at the front of the meeting, but it will not be as overseers that
they do so, but *merely* as the fathers of the church. Clement conveniently
remembers that the apostles had foreseen that there would be disputes over who
should properly be called 'overseer' (44:1), and now he calls for these senior men
to be reinstated - as *overseers* of course. If this reconstruction of events is right,

it confirms what we have so far said about overseers and fathers. So long as there are several overseers, the overseers and the fathers are the same people, each father being an overseer. But if one of their number takes the title of overseer to himself alone, then 'the fathers' will change its meaning. Instead of referring collectively to the overseers, it will now mean those ἐλλόγιμοι ἄνδρες who are precisely *not*, or no longer, overseers!

Such are the fathers as we meet them in the letters of Ignatius. Here there is no doubt of the pre-eminence of the single overseer, but Ignatius calls repeatedly for obedience not only to the overseer but also the fathers and the assistants. Yet although he mentions the fathers frequently, and pays them fulsome compliments, he actually gives them nothing to do! It is a reasonable conclusion that, while Ignatius' interest is all in promoting the office of the overseer, the fathers are too important to be ignored. They are after all well-to-do householders, senior men of the community, and accustomed until recently to being overseers themselves. Ignatius is writing about the same kind of situation as Clement, but from the opposite point of view. He is anxious to curb the independence of the erstwhile household overseers and to persuade them to give up the leading of the Eucharist in their own homes in exchange for a seat on the platform, and the possibility of leading the Eucharist when appointed to do so by the overseer (Smyrn 8:1). No wonder he loses no opportunity to affirm the dignity of the fathers - to offset the fact that he is actually diminishing it!

In the century that followed the power and the sacerdotal role of the new overseers grew, but so did the number of the churches. It was impossible in practice for the overseer to preside at every Eucharist, and when he could not do so he delegated his authority to one of the fathers (Bradshaw, 1983:15). So it comes about that for the first time we find 'father' in the singular as the title borne by an individual leader, for whom the Latin writer, Tertullian, has to use the loan word *'presbyterus' (de Bapt.* 17). We may now properly speak of 'presbyters' with reference to ordained ministers, and thus for the first time of a threefold ministry of bishop, priest and deacon in the Church. The confirmation of this is provided by references (in Christian literature from the North African church of the fourth century) to *seniores laici* (Frend, 1961:281). Some of the fathers have joined the ranks of the clergy, and are therefore *presbyteri*; those who have not now find themselves dubbed 'laymen', although in the beginning 'the fathers' was simply a collective term for the leadership of the church, which was, of course, all 'lay'!

CONCLUSIONS

For reasons of space these must be briefly stated in a list of numbered propositions for further debate.

1. The diversity of the New Testament church's ministry has been greatly exaggerated. Where earlier generations saw only one pattern (their own!), modern ecumenical dialogue sees endless variety. Both are wrong: there was no blueprint,

but there was a constantly recurring pattern.

2.   The fundamental ministerial function is that of oversight, whether of a household group, a congregation that consists of several house-churches, or of a grouping of churches in a wider area.   The New Testament metaphor for such oversight is shepherd or pastor.   The smallest group of Christians needs no less, and the widest area of responsibility demands no more.

3.   The overseer will not lead or minister alone.   He or she will need to share the responsibility with others, and others will have gifts and ministries that the church needs.   The New Testament word for such people is διάκονοι; we might prefer a Latin word and call them *ministers*.

4.   The two-fold ministry of overseer and assistants/ministers is the oldest pattern known to us, traceable under that name to the early 60s, and by implication well before that.   The classic three-fold ministry cannot be traced back earlier than the second, or even third, century, but the form that development actually took was not simply the product of increasing size and more complex organisation, but was the expression of a sacerdotal understanding of ministry which many of us would want to reject.

5.   All such people, overseers and assisting ministers, may also be described in terms of the *charism* they receive from God and bring to the church - apostle, prophet, evangelist or pastor/teacher - but these are not to be thought of as separate offices, but a different way of referring to overseers and other ministers.

6.   The New Testament also refers to them as the elders or the fathers.   This collective term of honour reflects the culture of the time, and tells us what kind of people church leaders were, or were supposed to be.   Even today it reminds us that the church is wise to entrust leadership to those to whom respect can be given, not only in the church but in the world around, but since the term is not in general use in our society, it must be doubtful whether it is any longer a useful term to refer to our leaders and ministers.

7.   Since the Reformation it has been customary in many Protestant churches to elect a board of management in the local congregation.   Presbyterians call them elders; Baptists call them deacons.   In this practice we have mirrored our culture, as the New Testament churches mirrored theirs.

NOTES AND BIBLIOGRAPHY

1   This article presents in condensed form the argument of my book, *The Elders: Seniority in Earliest Christianity*, Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1994.   Previously published in *Irish Biblical Studies*, 17, 1995, 2-21, it appears here with kind permission of the Editor.

2   Unless otherwise stated biblical quotations are taken from the *Revised English Bible*, Oxford and Cambridge, 1989.

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