

THE SCRIPTURE DOCTRINE OF THE MINISTRY OF THE WORD

with special reference to 'A Settled Ministry'

Derek J. Prime

(Note: Scripture quotations are from the Revised Standard Version.)

The New Testament does not provide us with a precise blue-print of church order. The more one considers the varied convictions expressed by different groups of Christians, and the identical scriptures quoted to substantiate differing viewpoints, the more convinced one becomes on this point. It is perhaps only the superficial surveyor of the New Testament who would suggest otherwise. We certainly do not have a complete knowledge of the ministry of the Church as it functioned in New Testament times. It is not out of place to ask the question, 'May not God want to teach us something about church order from this very lack of precise information on points of detail?'

But the lack of complete knowledge does not mean that we are left to ourselves to do what seems right in our own eyes. We may deduce certain facts about the practice of the early Church. We may perceive established and definite principles of church order, including such relating to the ministry of the Word. Our aim on the one hand, therefore, must be to avoid dogmatism where the New Testament is not complete in the evidence it provides, and on the other hand, not to miss the guidance provided by the revealed facts and principles. Our task is to act in accord with the known facts and carefully to apply the revealed principles. We must neither exaggerate nor minimise their evidence.

Our Lord's Ministry

Our Lord's ministry was essentially one of teaching and preaching. Mk. 1: 39 is a verse among many which sums up His ministry: 'And he went throughout all Galilee *preaching* in their synagogues and casting out demons'. Or, as Luke puts it on one occasion, 'On another sabbath, when he entered the synagogue and *taught*, a man was there whose right hand was withered' (Lk. 6: 6). One of the problems in our Lord's ministry was that the miracles of healing attracted people sometimes more than the teaching. Mark records, 'A great multitude from Galilee followed; also from Judea and Jerusalem and Idumea and from beyond the Jordan and from about Tyre and Sidon a great multitude, hearing all that he *did*, came to him' (Mk. 3: 7, 8).

But whenever the gospel writers speak of our Lord's ministry they place the stress on the preaching and teaching. Matthew writes, 'And

The Rev. Derek J. Prime, M.A., S.Th., is minister of Lansdowne Evangelical Free Church, West Norwood, South-East London.

Jesus went about all the cities and villages, *teaching* in their synagogues and *preaching* the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every disease and every infirmity' (Mt. 9: 35). Our Lord saw His task as that of sowing the Word of the kingdom (Mt. 13: 19), and it was to be the task of His disciples also. Through the sowing of that Word, God's harvest would be brought into being (Mt. 13: 23).

People regarded our Lord as 'the Teacher' (Mk. 10: 17), and the early disciples spoke of Him as 'a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people' (Lk. 24: 19). He spoke of Himself as the Good Shepherd (Jn. 10: 11, 14), and He is described as such elsewhere in the New Testament (Heb. 13: 20; 1 Pet. 2: 25; 5: 4). From what He said to Peter (Jn. 21), it is plain that one task of the shepherd is to feed his sheep with the Word of God. Our Lord prayed in Jn. 17: 7, 8: '*Now they know that everything that thou hast given me is from thee; for I have given them the words which thou gavest me, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from thee; and they have believed that thou didst send me*'.

Our Lord gave Himself continually to teaching and preaching, most of all to instructing the apostles, and also the crowds which sought after Him (Mt. 11: 1). Our Lord and the apostles had a common purse (Jn. 13: 29), and there were womenfolk—and doubtless others too—who provided for them out of their means that there might be no hindrance to the fulfilling of the task of preaching and teaching the Word of God (Lk. 8: 3).

The emphasis that our Lord gave in describing the task of the apostles, and of the seventy, was that they were to preach and teach the Word (Mt. 10: 1-23). They were to preach wherever they went (Mt. 10: 7), and they were to move on when people would not receive them and refused to listen to their words (Mt. 10: 14). He did not imply, however, that they were in any sense superior to others through the exercise of their task. There is no evidence that our Lord instituted a ministry, in the sense that we use that word generally today.

The apostles' ministry

The apostles' ministry was one of teaching and preaching above everything else. Our Lord 'appointed twelve, to be with Him, and to be sent out to preach and have authority to cast out demons' (Mk. 3: 14, 15). They were men in training, the men who were to ensure that the ministry of Jesus continued after His Ascension. Our Lord made plain this fact to Peter when He said to him, 'Feed my lambs . . . Tend my sheep . . . Feed my sheep' (Jn. 21: 15, 16, 17). The apostles were taught that humble service of all is the secret of greatness and usefulness (Mk. 9: 35).

The apostles exercised a teaching ministry at Pentecost onwards. The early Christians in Jerusalem 'devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship . . .' (Ac. 2: 42). The apostles were careful to deliver a certain tradition, a specific body of Christian teaching. Paul writes to the Corinthians, 'For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you . . .' (1 Cor. 11: 23). And again, 'For I delivered to you as of first importance

what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures . . . ' (1 Cor. 15: 3). The apostles knew themselves to be committed to bearing 'witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ' (Rev. 1: 2). They knew that for the sake of the gospel they were appointed preachers and apostles and teachers (2 Tim. 1: 11).

In Acts 6 we find the apostles insisting that the ministry of the Word, together with prayer, constituted their main task and demanded their full attention. 'The twelve summoned the body of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. Therefore, brethren, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this duty. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word"' (Ac. 6: 2-4).

As we are able to follow the activity of some of the apostles in the New Testament period, we find that they avoided idleness and all appearance of idleness (2 Thess. 3: 7). In some circumstances they did not eat anyone's bread without paying, but with toil and labour worked night and day, that they might not burden any of those whom they served (2 Thess. 3: 8). This practice, however, was not because they did not have the right to expect material help, but rather that they wanted to give an example of industry for imitation (2 Thess. 3: 9). The indications are that in Jerusalem the apostles were supported through the common resources of the Christians.

The local churches

It is difficult for us to know how far we may argue from the practice of both our Lord and of the apostles with regard to the pattern of the ministry of the Word for today, when no guidance or application is given us in the New Testament. We are, however, on much surer ground when we review the apostolic pattern of arrangements for the local churches which were brought into being through their ministry, and also that of others.

The apostles sought to appoint elders in all the churches. The apostles themselves were never the local pastors and teachers in the churches which they saw God found through their ministry. Moreover, in appointing elders they sought to recognise the Holy Spirit's gifts. Paul said to the Ephesian elders, 'Take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, *in which the Holy Spirit has made you guardians*' (Ac. 20: 28). The reference in 1 Tim. 4: 14 to the gift Timothy had, given by prophetic utterance when the elders laid their hands upon him, may emphasise this same fact.

The apostles sought to appoint elders, not according to human wisdom and on the basis of human assessment, but on grounds of spiritual gift and spiritual character. Presumably these considerations account for the apostles not appointing elders when a church was first established. On his first missionary journey, for example, Paul did not appoint elders in every church until he revisited the churches (Acts 14: 23). Time needed to elapse, for spiritual character to develop and spiritual gifts to show themselves in men of proved worth.

Teaching and preaching

The teaching and preaching of the Word would seem to have been in the hands of the elders of the local churches. In Acts 20: 17-38 Paul called together the *elders* of the church. He exhorted them to feed the church of God which God had purchased with His own blood (Ac. 20: 28). Likewise, when Peter addressed himself to the scattered Christians of Asia Minor, he had a special word for the elders. 'So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ as well as a partaker of the glory that is to be revealed. Tend the flock of God that is your charge, not by constraint but willingly, not for shameful gain but eagerly, not as domineering over those in your charge but being examples to the flock' (1 Pet. 5: 1-3). Peter regarded himself as 'a fellow-elder', as a fellow under-shepherd; Christ had instructed him to feed both His lambs and sheep (Jn. 21: 15-17). And Peter saw the elders of the churches as having entirely the same function as himself in this respect. To tend the flock is to lead the flock to pasture. The task of the elders is to see that the flock are fed with the Word of God, whether all the elders engage in a teaching ministry or not. Christian leaders are Christian teachers; their leadership is helpful only as they provide the guidance and teaching of the Word of God. The writer to the Hebrews writes revealingly when he urges, 'Remember your leaders, *those who spoke to you the word of God*; consider the outcome of their life, and imitate their faith' (Heb. 13: 7).

The day by day ministry of the Word

The ministry of the Word is to be in the hands of those whose lives are consistent with that Word, and it is here that the careful qualifications for elders are so important. How do we know if a man is spiritually equipped for the ministry of the Word? How are you able to recognise the person who is filled with the Holy Spirit? Paul anticipated questions such as these when he wrote to his assistants, Timothy and Titus, giving instructions for the appointment of elders in the churches.

First, an elder must have a good reputation, extending beyond the church to the non-Christian public (1 Tim. 3: 7). Secondly, he must be of blameless character. No one expects the elder to be perfect but people have a right to expect him to be blameless: that is to say, that his life should measure up to the standards set by God in the Word of God for the living of the Christian life. In every area of his life the elder must be above reproach (1 Tim. 3: 2, 12; Tit. 1: 6). Thirdly, his life should be marked by self-control (1 Tim. 3: 2; Tit. 1: 8). Fourthly, he must be a man of spiritual maturity (1 Tim. 3: 6), able to teach (1 Tim. 3: 2) and to ensure that the flock is fed. Fifthly, his home life must be well-ordered. The man who is unable to control his own family cannot expect to be successful in looking after a congregation of God's people (1 Tim. 3: 5). Sixthly, if married, his wife should be one with him in the Christian faith. A wife's spiritual preparedness is as important as her husband's. Seventhly, he should be a man who gives of himself willingly to God's people, someone in whom a pastoral concern for others is clearly seen.

It is interesting, in this context, that having exhorted the elders to tend the flock, Peter goes on to say, 'being examples to the flock' (1 Pet. 5: 3). The ministry of the Word in the local church is not to be separated from the standard of character and conduct required from those who minister it. Paul tested Timothy before ever he entrusted him with serious responsibility. He wrote to the Philippians, 'I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, so that I may be cheered by news of you. I have no one like him, who will be genuinely anxious for your welfare. They all look after their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. But Timothy's worth you know, how as a son with a father he has served with me in the gospel. I hope therefore to send him just as soon as I see how it will go with me . . .' (Phil. 2: 19-23). No wonder Paul could send Timothy with confidence to Ephesus (1 Tim. 1: 3). Paul encouraged Timothy to entrust to other faithful men what he himself had heard from Paul before many witnesses, so that they in turn could teach others also (2 Tim. 2: 2). And, again, the emphasis is upon 'faithful' men—men whose spiritual worth had been proved. To such men is the preaching and teaching of the Word of God entrusted in the local church—and in particular to the duly appointed elders.

Not all teach and preach

Not all elders, however, were expected to teach and preach in the early churches—some ruled without teaching. Paul writes to Timothy, 'Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honour, especially those who labour in preaching and teaching; for the scripture says, "You shall not muzzle an ox when it is treading out the grain", and "The labourer deserves his wages"' (1 Tim. 5: 17, 18).

These words imply that all the elders 'ruled'—that is to say, they all exercised spiritual care and oversight of the flock. Some of the elders, however, and no suggestion is given as to the proportion, had the gift of ministry. To use Paul's words, some *laboured* in preaching and teaching. Furthermore, it was possible for elders, in some circumstances, to be paid for their task when their time was devoted to pastoral work, and those who gave themselves wholly to preaching and teaching were to be considered particularly worthy of ample and generous financial support. This interpretation coincides with the clear statement of Gal. 6: 6: 'Let him who is taught the word share all good things with him who teaches'. And in 1 Cor. 9: 3-14 Paul argues for the right to maintenance which those who minister the Word of God have on the basis of the Lord's command.

The task of ruling well is that of *all* the elders. They are the spiritual overseers of the local church. They are over God's people in the Lord, and are to be respected, and esteemed very highly because of their work's sake (1 Thess. 5: 12, 13). They are to admonish the idle, encourage the faint-hearted, help the weak, and be patient with everyone (1 Thess. 5: 14). These tasks elders may do without engaging in the public ministry of preaching and teaching.

Through this latter circumstance has grown up presumably the distinction between those 'overseers' who are called 'ministers' and those called

'elders'. This state of affairs is a great pity for ideas of 'clergy' and 'laity' are not found in the New Testament.

Particular gift

Teaching and preaching are the responsibility, mainly, therefore, of the elders in the churches—that is to say, of those elders who have a particular gift for the ministry of the Word.

The gifts of the elders differ, as do the gifts of all the members. 'Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; he who teaches, in his teaching; he who exhorts, in his exhortation; he who contributes in liberality; he who gives aid, with zeal; he who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness' (Rom. 12: 6-8).

Speaking of the gifts of Christ to His Church, Paul writes, 'And his gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, for the equipment of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for building up the body of Christ' (Eph. 4: 11, 12). Apostles and evangelists planted the churches. Prophets—particularly when the New Testament was not available to the early believers—strengthened the churches by bringing particular messages of help and encouragement. The phrase 'pastors and teachers', linked by the same article in the Greek, seems to describe the elders in the local churches who had particular care of the believers through the ministry of the Word. No line is to be drawn between pastors and teachers. The absence of the article before 'teachers' shows that Paul meant 'pastors and teachers' to refer to the same person—in other words, to speak of the ministering elder, in distinction to the ruling elder.

Believers are instructed to perform many kinds of service, both *within* the body and *as* the body of Christ, but the emphasis is seldom upon their ministry of the Word. All Christians are to be ready to speak the Word and to teach it as they have opportunity; but to some is given a special gift of ministry for the good of the whole body. We cannot separate the doctrine of the ministry of the Word from the doctrine of the Church. The Church—and the local church—is to be thought of as a body. Not all the members have the same function, but they all have the same objectives—the glory of the *Head* of the body, and the edifying of the *whole* body.

A pastoral connotation

Pastoral work—by its very nature—must be a settled task. Teaching and preaching always seem to have a pastoral association in the New Testament. Effective teaching and relevant preaching go hand in hand with pastoral care and first-hand knowledge of the people to whom one ministers the Word of God. All of Paul's letters—full of teaching and preaching—arise from pastoral situations. Throughout the New Testament stress is laid upon the necessity of those who teach and preach the Word being examples: a man can be an effective example only when he is living among people and identifying himself with them. Evangelistic

ministry is clearly quite different and does not demand a settled ministry in the same way as the spiritual up-building of God's people does.

It would seem right to conclude that God's provision for the ministry of the Word in the local church is found in teaching elders—that is to say, recognised pastors and teachers—from among the body of ruling elders. This conclusion does not rule out evangelists who may exercise an itinerant ministry, and others whom the Lord may raise up, in His sovereignty, for a special ministry to God's people. But the *regular* pattern for ministry is the elder who is both a pastor and teacher. Such do not exercise a priesthood, however, in any way different from that exercised by the whole company of believers.

The pattern

A local church should have both elders and deacons. The elders should concern themselves with the spiritual oversight of the flock; the deacons should concern themselves with the administration of the local church's affairs to enable the elders to be unhindered by such in their tasks.

The ministry of the Word should be, principally, with the elder or elders who have the gift of ministry—and not all elders should be expected to have this gift. No indication as to the number of ministering elders we are to expect for any given size of church membership is provided in the New Testament. All we know is that 'to each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good' (1 Cor. 12: 7).

The ministry of the Word should be linked with—and indeed should arise from—pastoral care. When the community of Christians is of considerable size, adequate pastoral care demands the setting apart of a ministering elder to give all of his time to the task. Where the community of Christians can support a pastor and teacher—or, for that matter, pastors and teachers—it is clearly to their spiritual advantage to do so.

Ideally, perhaps, such a person should be one of the existing elders, although let it be remembered that the Body is one, and there is no reason therefore, why one part should not help the other. Paul did not hesitate to send Titus and Timothy to parts of the body—to individual churches—where temporary or semi-permanent help was needed.

Persons so appointed should be regarded as elders still, but as the presiding elders or main teaching elders. It is not unreasonable for them to bear the main responsibility for the ministry of the Word in the local church, because their time is given most to the study of the Word and to the care of the flock. But the ministry of the Word, though principally with the presiding ministering elder or elders, must be shared ministry, depending upon the number of elders of gift there are. Encouragement should be given to all elders with gift to exercise their gift in accordance with its extent.

A personal application

It may be helpful to relate how I apply these principles to my own situation. Coming from a non-Christian background, I was converted in my early teens through the ministry of the Word at Lansdowne Evangelical Free Church. I maintained my membership with this particular local

church throughout my time in the army and then afterwards up at university. When I began school-teaching, I worked and lived in the neighbourhood of Lansdowne, and my membership became effective once more. During part of this period the church was without a pastor, and at that time I was called by the church to become an elder. The opportunity came to minister the Word on many occasions within the local church. Almost two years elapsed without the church calling another pastor, until—right ‘out of the blue’—the elders expressed the conviction that I should be set apart in this way. Their conviction was brought before the whole church, and the call was extended to me.

At this time, as already mentioned, I was an elder, and I would stress, I remain an elder. I see my position as that of the presiding elder, and as a ministering elder with major responsibility for ministry, although by no means sole responsibility. The ‘ruling’ is done by the elders corporately, and never by me personally.

Some of the elders have an obvious gift for ministry, and so have other members of the church. When I am absent from Lansdowne, my endeavour is to call upon the elders who have gift to minister, and also other brethren whose gift is recognised by the elders. For example, in our recent Church Anniversary, we called upon three of our brethren to minister—one is an elder, one a deacon, and another a younger man with distinct preaching gift. The elders share with me in conducting the church prayer meeting and in the ministry of the Word associated with it. Each quarter the elders meet for prayer with their particular pastoral group—we divide the membership up into groups geographically according to the number of the elders. I am a member of the elder’s group in whose area I live.

Furthermore, I have an assistant who is accepted by the church as an elder. He preaches once a month on a Sunday, and takes a prayer meeting each month. We place no notice-board outside saying who is preaching on any particular Sunday. Why do people need to know? What motive makes them want to know? We do not give out in the church notices whether my assistant or I will be preaching the following Sunday, so that the emphasis is upon the *ministry* of the Word rather than the *minister*.

We feel it right to give positive encouragement to men in the church to exercise any gift which the Holy Spirit may have given to them. From time to time we have a teaching and preaching class where the ministry of the Word is discussed and mutual stimulus given to better equip ourselves for such a high and holy task. In our Short-term Bible School to begin next week, we have a weekly expository group so that encouragement can be given again to the development of spiritual gift in relation to the ministry of the Word.

Paul’s concern was that ‘the word of the Lord may speed on and triumph’ (2 Thess. 3: 1). Progress in the Acts is always spoken of in terms of the Word of God growing and multiplying. We do well to give attention to the whole question of a settled ministry in relation to the ministry of the Word of God to the end that there may be no hindrance to the Word of the Lord speeding on and triumphing at this present time.