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DEACONS AND ELDERS

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Starting Points

There are two obvious starting-points for any Reformed discussion of the nature and functions of deacons and elders. First, there are the debates which have occurred within the Reformed tradition itself. These have taken place mainly within American Presbyterianism and have involved some of its greatest theologians – Miller, Thornwell, Dabney and Hodge.¹ They debated such questions as whether the ruling elder occupies an office distinct from the preaching elder; whether ruling elders may preach; whether ordination to the eldership should take the same form as ordination to the ministry; and whether ruling elders should participate in the laying-on of hands at ordinations of teaching elders. To a limited extent these same issues have also been discussed outside the United States, notably by the Irish Presbyterian, Thomas Witherow,² and by the Church of Scotland's Panel on Doctrine (which presented a Report on the Eldership to the General Assembly in 1964).

The other obvious starting-point is the New Testament vocabulary on the subject. Four words are especially important: *presbuteros*, *episcopos*, *poimen* and *proestos*. These terms have a rich background in secular Greek, in the Septuagint, in the synagogue and in the New Testament, and their meaning has been thoroughly investigated by New Testament scholars, the classic treatments being those of the Anglicans, F.J.A. Hort, J.B. Lightfoot and Edwin Hatch.³

¹ See Samuel Miller, *The Warrant, Nature and Duties, of the Office of the Ruling Elder, in the Presbyterian Church* (Glasgow, 1835); *The Collected Writings of James Henley Thornwell* (Richmond, VA, 1871-81), vol. 4, pp. 4-142; R.L. Dabney, *Discussions: Evangelical and Theological* (Richmond, VA, 1890-92), vol. 2, pp. 119-157; Charles Hodge, *The Church and its Polity* (London, 1879), pp. 118-33, 242-300.

² *The Form of the Christian Temple* (Edinburgh, 1889), pp. 66-143.

³ Hort, *The Christian Ecclesia* (London, 1897), pp. 189-217; Lightfoot, *St Paul's Epistle to the Philippians* (4th edition,

More recent studies, as reflected for example, in Kittel's *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, have added little to the conclusions of this distinguished trio.

These are the obvious approaches. Unfortunately, they lead nowhere, and one is inexorably driven to suspect that both the theologians and the philologists are asking the wrong questions. The latter approach is by far the more promising. But a church order derived from word-studies alone would be full of confusion and inconsistency. Furthermore, however it might resemble the church of the New Testament in certain details, it would differ from it frighteningly in its overall ethos and organisation. Above all, it would be devoid of any proper ecclesiology of preaching. There is no road from *presbuteros*, *episcopos*, *poimen* or *proestos* to the preacher. Indeed, if this nomenclature exhausts all the church officers available to us today we have no one at all called to the distinctive ministry of the Word. It is impossible to reconcile this with the paramount importance of preaching as reflected in, say, the writings of Paul, and this fact itself should alert us to the possibility that the whole approach is wrong. We are not simply coming to the wrong conclusions. We are asking the wrong questions.

The alternative is to look beyond our inherited church polities and even beyond the lexicographical studies of outstanding New Testament scholars and survey, instead, the basic patterns of organisation and ministry to be found in the apostolic literature.

Preliminaries

Before we do so, two preliminary comments may be appropriate. The first relates to the word 'office'. This term is often used in discussions of church polity and it suffers from being associated in English with the word 'officer', which in turn suffers from its militaristic and aristocratic overtones.⁴ It

London, 1879), pp. 181-269; Hatch, *The Organisation of the Early Christian Churches* (London, 1909), Lectures II and III.

⁴ Cf. Eduard Schweizer: 'The concept of "office" is today even fuller than in New Testament times, and is laden with the content that it has acquired in the secular sphere. Of course, in New Testament times too such ministries have to have definite names; but no comprehensive term "office" was adopted, and even the special designations of individual ministries were by no means uniform' (*Church Order in the New Testament*, London, 1961, p. 206).

is worth remembering that the word entered English-language theology through Latin and that in Latin *officium* commonly means 'duty'. A church-officer is not a member of a Christian elite. He is someone charged with a responsibility. He has a job to do and he is expected to labour at it (1 Tim. 5:17).

Secondly, a similar comment requires to be made on the word 'ordination'. This word, too, came into English *via* Latin and has even more unfortunate associations. The word *ordo* meant 'rank' and easily leads to the assumption that the 'ordained' person holds a higher rank than the ordinary Christian.⁵ While the New Testament certainly insists on careful selection of those assigned to certain tasks and even, in some instances, on solemn induction, it cannot tolerate the idea that there is a special class of 'ordained' persons who, as such, have special powers and are entitled to lord it over the flock. A Protestant minister is neither priest nor Christian leader. The only Leader is Christ; and the true deacon, preacher or elder is great only in his service and in his incessant toil. He will never assume that simply because he is a 'clerical' person ordinary Christians should salute him. Nor

5 As Colin Gunton points out, this would not have happened if Christians had taken seriously the idea that the church is a community, reflecting the relationships between the distinct, but co-equal, persons of the Trinity: 'At the very least, it must be seen that the ecclesiology of community relativises, and not before time, the whole question of an ordained caste... should we not consciously move towards an ecclesiology of perichoresis: in which there is no permanent structure of subordination, but in which there are overlapping patterns of relationships, so that the same person will be sometimes "subordinate" and sometimes "superordinate" according to the gifts and graces being exercised?' (*The Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, Edinburgh, 1991, p. 80). Cf. Eduard Schweizer: 'we have to ask whether there is ordination in the New Testament, and if so, what kind of meaning it is likely to have' (*op. cit.*, p. 207). Schweizer concludes that 'Paul does not know it', but this depends on his restricted view of the Pauline corpus. On the other hand, his claim that other sections of the New Testament church did know it arises from his equating ordination with 'a special action to assign a particular ministry'. He has in view, of course, the laying on of hands, but it is one thing to admit that this action was practised and quite another to regard it as an elevation to a special *ordo*.

should the church itself fall into the trap of drafting elaborate rules to demarcate the prerogatives of the ordained. There is no clear cut-off point between what a church-officer does and what a non-church-officer does. The idea that someone, whether male or female, should be forbidden to teach or to evangelise or to pass the Communion bread simply because he or she is un-ordained, is from the standpoint of the New Testament simply preposterous.

Serving Tables

When we look at the broad patterns of church organisation in the New Testament, the first thing that strikes us is a clear distinction between those who 'serve tables' and those who give themselves to the ministry of the Word. This distinction appears as early as Acts 6. At first, the apostles did everything: the teaching, the administration and the pastoral oversight. But as the church grew, the pressure became too great and the apostles protested that it was inappropriate for them to let the distribution of relief encroach on the time needed for the ministry of the Word. This led to the appointment of the first deacons.

The term *diakonos* itself had an honourable pedigree. It is true that in secular Greek it normally indicated humble and even menial service such as waiting at table. But both Jesus and the apostles dignified it by using it to describe their own roles. For example, in Mark 10:45, Jesus used it not only to define the thrust of his own ministry, but also to establish the tone of Christian discipleship. 'The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve.' Consequently, greatness in the kingdom of God means being the servant of all. Similarly Paul defined what God had committed to him as the ministry (*diakonia*) of reconciliation, described himself as a deacon of the church (Col. 1:25) and referred to his apostleship as a diaconate (Rom. 11:13). Such passages justify J.N.D. Kelly's observation that 'every kind of service in the propagation of the gospel is in the NT described as a *diakonia* or ministry'.⁶

There is equally clear evidence, however, that the word 'deacon' was used from a very early period to denote a

⁶ *The Pastoral Epistles* (Black's New Testament Commentaries), London, 1963, p. 80.

particular class of functionaries with clearly defined responsibilities. In Philippians 1:1, for example, deacons are singled out for special mention along with the *episcopoi*: a clear indication that they formed a class as recognisable as the bishops or overseers. They are also associated with the *episcopoi* in 1 Timothy 3, where verses 1-7 describe the qualifications of a bishop and verses 8-13 those of a deacon. This suggests that by the time Paul wrote the Pastorals deacons were as well established as bishops or elders. It appears, too, that their work was equally demanding: the scrutiny to be made before appointing them was at least as rigorous as that demanded in the case of elders.

In the sub-apostolic literature the existence of deacons is taken for granted. In Polycarp's *Epistle to the Philippians*, for example, we read: 'In like manner deacons should be blameless in the presence of his righteousness as deacons of God and of Christ and not of men; not calumniators, not double-tongued, not lovers of money, temperate in all things, compassionate, diligent, walking according to the truth of the Lord who became a *deacon* of all'(5). Deacons are also an essential element in Ignatius' concept of the three-fold ministry. In his *Epistle to the Magnesians* he refers to 'the bishop presiding after the likeness of God and the presbyters after the likeness of the council of the apostles, with the deacons also who are most dear to me'(6). There is a similar reference in his *Epistle to the Trallians* where he writes that 'nobody who does anything without the bishop and the presbytery and deacons is clean in his conscience'(7).

Not all agree that the origin of this order of ministry is described in Acts 6. J.N.D. Kelly,⁷ for example, denies it, both because the Seven are not called deacons and because they did not perform the tasks usually associated with 'deacons as a regular order of ministers'; that is, the Seven were not deacons because they were not assistants to the bishops. This merely reflects the peculiarly Anglican understanding of the diaconate. As for the fact that they are not designated 'deacons', it is surely a sufficient answer that they performed a task which is clearly distinguished from the

⁷ *Op cit.*, p. 81.

ministry of the Word and precisely defined as 'serving tables'.⁸

Whether these tables were tables from which money was disbursed or tables from which food was distributed it is now impossible to say. Either way, the function of the Seven was to administer the church's ministry of compassion, particularly its ministry to widows. Assuming that apostolic example is binding on the church this clearly indicates that it is always her duty to make specific arrangements for caring for the poor. From the very earliest days, Christian believers saw to it that none of their number was in need (Acts 4:34). What Acts 6 makes clear is that this ministry was not left to individual whim or to spontaneous charity. There were clear, specific, dedicated arrangements to ensure that the poor did not suffer by default, and the responsibility for seeing to it that the arrangements worked efficiently was originally assumed by the apostles. When this became impracticable, they did not abandon the arrangements: they simply put them in other hands and instituted an order of ministers charged specifically with looking after the destitute.

'Distribution'

This is what led the second generation of Scottish Reformers to include 'distributions' among the 'notes' of the church (along with the true preaching of the Word and the right administration of the sacraments): see the *Second Book of Discipline* II:2. The same perception drove Thomas Chalmers to tackle the pauperism of his Glasgow parish in the 1820s. Indeed, Chalmers revived the order of deacons specifically to ascertain the extent of this problem and to devise and administer ways of dealing with it.⁹ These deacons were in

⁸ Such early Fathers as Irenaeus clearly understood Acts 6.1-6 to refer to deacons. For example, he describes the Nicolaitans as 'the followers of that Nicolas who was one of the seven first ordained to the diaconate by the apostles' (*Against Heresies* 1:26:3); and he refers to Stephen as the one 'who was chosen the first deacon by the apostles' (*Ibid.* 3:12:10).

⁹ See Hanna, *Memoirs of Thomas Chalmers* (Edinburgh, 1854), vol. I, pp. 568f., 576-92. Cf Stewart J. Brown, *Thomas Chalmers and the Godly Commonwealth* (Oxford, 1982), pp. 129-51; and A.C. Cheyne (ed.), *The Practical and the Pious* (Edinburgh, 1985), pp. 115-29.

many respects the precursors of modern social workers and this raises the question whether churches should not have full-time deacons / social workers as well as full-time pastors. If the *Second Book of Discipline* is correct, no church is a true church which does not minister to the poor; and if the pattern of Acts 6 is to be followed, every church should have office-bearers whose designated responsibility is to distribute food and money to those in need.

The operation of such a ministry would obviously be influenced by the fact that today the state assumes a significant degree of responsibility for widows, the sick, the unemployed and the elderly. This is gratifying to the extent that such arrangements bring the state into line with the model offered in the Old Testament theocracy, with its manifest bias towards the poor, the widow and the stranger. It would be quite unwarrantable, however, to make the Welfare State an excuse for the church's neglecting its own diaconal responsibilities. Every congregation remains under obligation to make sure that all the needs of its members are met, and this requires a ministry of tables as well as a ministry of the Word. It is also our responsibility to remember the needs of Christians in other lands and to take steps to meet them. This is why Paul, for example, asked the churches of Macedonia and Achaia to arrange a collection for the poor among the saints at Jerusalem. But our responsibilities do not end even there. There is still the Good Samaritan principle. The church may at any time suddenly stumble upon a problem, and when it does so it has absolutely no right to walk by on the other side. It certainly has no right to argue that this is not on its agenda or within its budget or in its forward planning. If God puts it in our way it becomes our responsibility and we simply must find ways of dealing with it.

The story of the appointment of the Seven also makes plain that those involved in organising this ministry of social responsibility have to be specially gifted. In his instructions to Timothy Paul reinforces this point, making it clear that deacons are to be appointed only after careful scrutiny of their character, their past lives, their families and their theology (1 Tim. 3:8-13). Taken in conjunction with Acts 6:3, 5 this leads to a formidable list of qualifications. Deacons had to be Christians; they had to be of good standing in the community; they had to be well grounded in Christian truth; they had to

have clear consciences; and they had to have well-disciplined families. But above and beyond all this, they had to be select: '*choose seven men from among you... they chose Stephen...*'. This applied in three specific areas: they had to be full of faith, full of wisdom and full of the Holy Spirit. This last probably sums up what the apostles looked for: men whose entire lives were under the control of the Spirit of Jesus, who not only had once been filled but who had been filled again and again and who, abiding in Christ and refraining from grieving the Spirit, were habitually 'spiritual'.

Nothing could more dramatically underline the importance of the church's ministry of compassion than the insistence on such a formidable list of qualifications. The ministry of tables, reaching out to the poor, required the church's most gifted members, possessing not only administrative skills but vision and wisdom and indomitable faith. It is interesting that two of the Seven went on to what we today might see as 'higher things': Stephen to become a great apologist to whose arguments the Jews had no answer, and Philip to become an evangelist whose labours were greatly blessed. This suggests that sometimes one ministry may be a gateway to another; and even that people may sometimes have to be proved in one sphere of service before being moved to another. On the other hand, it is equally clear that in New Testament times those in high office (even apostles) would not deem diaconal tasks beneath them. Years later, Paul, at the height of his labours, sees no threat to his dignity in initiating and organising a collection for the impoverished saints at Jerusalem (2 Cor. 8: 1-9:15). He not only publicised the need: he appealed for the money, he personally carried it to Jerusalem and he personally selected those who were to accompany him. Today, as the need arises, Christian leaders, whatever their eminence, must be prepared to show the same mentality. The Lord, after all, washed feet. Why should we not clean drains?

Good Administration

In describing the arrangements for his collection Paul also indicates the importance of good administrative procedures. The apostle was not squeamish about appealing for money nor even about bringing considerable theological and spiritual pressure to bear on those who were in a position to part with it. The arguments he uses in 2 Corinthians 8:1ff. are still the

perfect model in this respect. But the passage also makes clear how meticulous Paul was about handling money: 'We want to avoid any criticism of the way we administer this liberal gift, for we are taking pains to do what is right, not only in the eyes of the Lord but also in human eyes (2 Cor. 8:20f.). Hence, the people were fully informed as to the use to which the money was to be put; they were assured that they were not being asked to carry an unfair share of the burden; and they were made to feel that the whole transaction was open to their scrutiny. Paul would not carry the money to Jerusalem unaccompanied, and thus leave himself open to the charge of misappropriating it. Instead, he would be accompanied by Titus; by the brother 'who is praised by all the churches' and who was chosen by the churches themselves to accompany their offering; and by a brother who had often proved his zeal. These brethren, Paul assures the Corinthians, were 'representatives of the churches and an honour to Christ' (2 Cor. 8:23).

The need for sound administrative procedures is brought out even more fully in 1 Timothy 5:3-16. It is clear from this passage that the church by this time had a well-organised ministry to widows. There was an official list of those to be helped and Paul lays down stringent guidelines as to who should be on it: only those over sixty, who had been faithful to their husbands, were alone in the world and were known for good deeds (vv. 9ff.). These regulations suggest that such widows were fully maintained by the church, and this explains Paul's apparently severe attitude towards younger widows: 'As for younger widows, do not put them on such a list. For when their sensual desires overcome their devotion to Christ, they want to marry.... Besides, they get into the habit of being idle and going about from house to house' (vv. 11ff.).

The important point here is not the details of the guidelines themselves but the fact that there were guidelines at all. It was imperative that the church's meagre resources should be distributed to those in greatest need. It was also imperative that the ministry of compassion should not be counter-productive. If, for example, it encouraged Christians to neglect their needy relations, it would produce a community who were worse than infidels (v. 8). It would be equally disastrous if the ministry of compassion produced a class of

idle young widows given to sensuality and gossip. This is the dilemma which has faced the social work of the church in all ages. How can we reduce poverty without producing paupers? And how can we provide relief without demoralising its beneficiaries? This is not the place to attempt an answer, but Paul was clearly aware of the dangers and of the need to organise the diaconate in such a way as to minimise the risk of abuse. There is something deeply moving in the spectacle of the man who penned the sublimities of Ephesians stooping to pen a memorandum on procedure.

What is the significance of the enigmatic reference to women in 1 Timothy 3:11? It is difficult to see why Paul should interject a directive to women simply as such into a passage dealing with the duties and qualifications of deacons. Nor does it seem grammatically possible to translate *gunaikas* as 'their wives' (that is, the deacons' wives). There is no reference to wives in the corresponding treatment of elders; and *gunaikas* without either definite article or possessive pronoun can scarcely be narrowed down to 'their wives'. The rendering 'women deacons' (J.N.D.Kelly) is as tenable as any, not least because the use of 'likewise' leads us to expect a group similar to the deacons introduced by the same connecting particle in v. 8. Whatever the uncertainties of 1 Timothy 3:11, however, there can be no dispute with regard to Romans 16:1: 'I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a *deacon* of the church at Cenchrea.' The reason she is called a deacon rather than a deaconess is simply that Greek had no distinct word for the latter. It is hardly likely that she was merely a servant of the church in some vague general sense. Paul directs his readers to give her any help she needs (as if she had a specific commission), adding, 'she has been a great help to many people, including me.' The work of a deacon did not, as such, involve any teaching or the exercising of authority over men and would therefore not breach Paul's restriction on women's ministry (expressed, for example, in 1 Timothy 2:12). From its very nature this is work which women could perform admirably. There is certainly nothing to preclude women possessing the essential qualifications. They are as likely as men to be full of faith and of the Holy Spirit (Acts 6:3).

The idea of a special appointment to the diaconate is only implicit in 1 Timothy 3:8ff., where the listing of qualifications

is obviously related to formal processes of selection and installation. In Acts 6:1ff., however, there is an explicit account of 'ordination'. The selection was made by the people, but the formal induction was conducted by the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on the Seven. This clearly sanctions the practice of formal selection and installation, but it does not sanction the conclusion that there is some grace inherent in the act of 'ordination' itself. The very idea of a magical infusion is alien to the thought of the New Testament; and even though it is just possible that the apostles had some special power to convey gifts in this way, that is no proof that later generations of 'clergy' are similarly endowed. In any case, in the New Testament possession of the gifts is a condition of 'ordination', not a consequence. Prayer was natural in the circumstances; and the laying on of hands was probably an act of benediction. This is not to say that it was, or is, otiose. When the church blesses in the name of Christ it has good ground to expect that divine acknowledgement will accompany the ensuing ministry. Beyond that, a solemn act of induction is a reminder to both those appointed and those appointing that their work is one in which the whole church is involved and which will be conducted to the accompaniment of its prayers and with its benediction.

Some further points merit a brief mention before we leave the subject of deacons. First, it looks as if the church in Acts 6 showed considerable tact in its election of men for this office. The original problem was the complaint of the Greek-speaking Jews that their widows were being neglected. From the list of names in Acts 6:5 it seems as if all those elected were Greeks. If this is so (the argument is not completely watertight since Greek names such as Philip and Andrew were also in common use among the Jews), it represents an example of deliberate pastoral tact and contextualisation. Maybe in some of our British churches we should deliberately choose deacons who are Asian or West Indian. We should certainly try to relate church officers to the communities they are expected to serve. A spiritually gifted white graduate of Oxbridge may not be the ideal deacon for Bradford.

Secondly, we should be careful not to obliterate the distinction between deacons and elders. The very reason for the original appointment of deacons was that those called to a

ministry of the Word should not be distracted by the ministry of tables. Unfortunately, churches of all traditions have found it extremely difficult to keep the two roles distinct. Presbyterian elders often find themselves enmeshed in the work of the diaconate; and Baptist deacons often find themselves carrying the burdens of spiritual oversight.

Thirdly, we must avoid the temptation to equate diaconal responsibilities with looking after buildings and finance. Under present conditions, unfortunately, a huge proportion of church income goes towards the maintenance of buildings, and some deacons do little besides counting money, putting it in the bank and meeting builders. In the New Testament, money and deacons were primarily for the poor.

The Ministry of the Word

But alongside the ministry of tables there was from the beginning a ministry of the Word, involving both the instruction of those inside the church and the evangelisation of those outside. This ministry clearly required two things. First, that a person give himself wholly to it. This was why the apostles did not want to become involved in the problems of administration. They wanted to 'give themselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word' (Acts 6:4). It is important to note that the precise business with which the apostles did not wish to be entangled was ecclesiastical. Not even the work of the diaconate should be allowed to distract a preacher of the gospel. How much more does this apply to secular pursuits! According to such a perspective it is impossible to engage in an effective preaching ministry if people have to snatch their moments of preparation from the demands of business, trade, politics or the caring professions. They must give themselves wholly to these matters, devoting themselves single-mindedly to reading, teaching and preaching (1 Tim. 4:13f.) and prayer (Acts 6:4). They must fan into flame the gift God has given to them (2 Tim. 1:6), making it their foremost determination to be workmen who do not need to be ashamed, correctly handling the Word of truth (2 Tim. 2:15). How else can they be prepared to preach the Word in season and out of season, correcting, rebuking and encouraging (2 Tim. 4:2)?

There may, of course, be times in the history of the modern church, as there were in the days of the apostles, when

circumstances force preachers into a part-time ministry. But this is not the biblical pattern. Preaching is no exception to the dictum, 'No man ever did anything well to which he did not give the whole bent of his mind.'

The second biblical prerequisite for effective preaching is proper training. This is not highlighted as clearly as the need for total dedication. Yet the emphasis is plain enough. Paul directs Timothy to impart his message to believing and reliable men who will be able to teach others (2 Tim. 1:2). The Twelve were trained by three years' companionship with the Lord. Paul was taken to 'Arabia'. Silas, Mark, Timothy and Titus had Paul himself for their mentor. Preachers are not born. Nor are they the products of mere professional training. Certainly, they must have the gifts (*charismata*) necessary to effective proclamation: gifts such as knowledge, utterance, wisdom and courage. But even those with *charismata* need to be trained, learning the message and emulating the methods of their seniors. The precise form which such training will take in particular traditions is a matter of Christian prudence and hence of adjustment to local circumstances. It would be absurd to argue that a university or college training is theologically necessary to valid ordination.

Mobility of Preachers

One interesting feature of New Testament patterns of teaching ministry is the astonishing mobility of the preachers of the Word. At first, the preaching was confined to Jerusalem, but after the death of Stephen persecution scattered the church and the believers went everywhere 'preaching the word' (Acts 4:8). The most notable figure in this movement was Philip, referred to in Acts 21:8 as 'the evangelist'. His ministry was obviously a highly mobile one. One moment he is planting a church in Samaria (Acts 8:5). The next, he is directed by the Lord to go to Gaza. Afterwards, he is found in Azotus and in every city between there and Caesarea. Paul and his companions (Barnabas, Silas, Luke, and John Mark) clearly itinerated equally widely, moving as the Lord directed them into areas where the gospel had not gone before and deliberately avoiding building on other men's foundations (Rom. 15:20).

Too often the question of an outreach, or missionary, ministry becomes bogged down in debate as to the meaning of

‘evangelist’ and in argument as to whether this ‘office’ was meant to be permanent. Such discussion is irrelevant to the main issue. There can be no doubt as to the biblical validity of a missionary, church-planting ministry. Nor can there be any doubt as to New Testament precedent for highly mobile, itinerant evangelism. Whatever the nomenclature, an itinerant ministry of the Word was clearly integral to the New Testament church.

The relation of these itinerant preachers to the local church is an interesting one. Whenever the idea of setting up such a ministry is mooted in Reformed churches today, our immediate reaction seems to be to take steps to safeguard the proprieties of church order. Before we know where we are the evangelistic function is so shackled and fettered that no self-respecting person would take it on. Nor would he be any use if he did. In the New Testament, by contrast, the controls are minimal. Certainly the local church commissioned Saul and Barnabas (although we cannot be sure that Philip was similarly commissioned). But it is perfectly clear from that point onwards that they were very much on their own. They did not require the permission of ‘the sending church’ for their movements. With the wisdom given to them by the Holy Spirit they made their own decisions on the spot.

Are we too inclined to define leadership in a restrictive sense – exercising control, maintaining order, keeping people in their place? We must learn, instead, to see it as something creative and dynamic, inspiring and liberating people to serve, so that no talent and no enthusiasm in the body of Christ goes unused. Only to a very limited extent should one person (or group) interfere with another in the spontaneity of his Christian service.

It was not only church-planting missionaries who itinerated, however. In the New Testament many of the church’s teachers were also highly mobile. This was not, of course, true of them all. The elders appointed by Paul in Galatia were, so far as we can see, local men engaged in a settled ministry. So were those referred to in Acts 20:17ff. and 1 Timothy 5:17. But Timothy and Titus were sent to Ephesus and Crete respectively to teach and organise the churches already settled there. It is also clear that in the apostolic period prophets and teachers circulated freely, requiring not only hospitality (Rom. 12:13) but also judicious

scrutiny (1 John 4:1). It is clear from the *Didache* that this situation continued into the second century:

Let every apostle, when he comes to you, be received as the Lord; but he shall not remain more than a single day, or if there is need, a second also; but if he remains three days, he is a false prophet. And when he departs let the apostle receive nothing save bread, until he finds shelter; but if he asks for money, he is a false prophet. (11)

The same mobility should be evident, presumably, in the church's teachers today. They must be prepared to move anywhere within the world-wide body of Christ according to the leading of the Spirit expressed not in our own private judgements but in the collective wisdom of the church.

Before leaving this point it is worth noting that no hard-and-fast distinction can be drawn between an itinerant and a settled ministry. Itinerants such as Paul sometimes settled in particular places for extended periods (Acts 9:10); and sometimes (again like Paul and his associates, Timothy and Titus) they exchanged their church-planting roles for church-building ones. The evangelist sometimes became the pastor. Mobility involved flexibility in function as well as in location.

The Preachers not Presbyters

A still more fascinating aspect of early church organisation is that its great preachers were not characteristically elders or presbyters. Some, like Peter and Paul, were apostles. Stephen and Philip belonged to the 'Seven'. Apollos has no official designation. Neither has Titus. Timothy does the work of an evangelist (2 Tim. 4:5). Preachers are described in a quite independent nomenclature as heralds, stewards, witnesses and ambassadors, and any attempt to link preaching indissolubly with the presbyterate is doomed to failure. There is no hint that all preachers must be presbyters or that all presbyters must be preachers. In fact, the church never depended entirely on the ministry of 'elders'. It always enjoyed a distinctive ministry of preaching engaged in by men who were highly mobile, specially gifted and trained, and totally dedicated to proclaiming the gospel. From this point of view, argument about the distinction between 'ruling elder' and 'teaching elder' leads us down a blind alley.

But this must not lead to a depreciation of the eldership. Presbyters were closely associated with preachers from a very early stage in the history of the church. Paul appointed some

in Galatia (Acts 14:23), addressed them at Ephesus (Acts 20:17ff.) and directed Titus to establish them in Crete. Their responsibility is broadly defined in the words *episcopos* and *poimen*. The former means 'overseer' and the latter 'pastor'. The elders' functions, therefore, were to exercise oversight and to engage in pastoral care. They were not always preachers, but they were always bishops and pastors.

This involved several different responsibilities. Primarily, they were the leaders or rulers of the congregation. In this respect, they were authority figures, set over the flock (1 Thess. 5:12). They were the ones who took the initiative, standing in the van of the church's forward movement, leading by example and taking the flak when their policies were unpopular or simply dangerous.

Again, they were the counsellors, warning, advising and comforting in the light of their own experience and the teaching of Scripture. This is the directive Paul gives to Timothy: 'correct, rebuke and encourage – with great patience and careful instruction' (2 Tim. 4:2, NIV). Today, members of the church take their emotional and behavioural problems to professional psychiatrists, not as a last desperate measure but often as a first resort. Does this reflect incompetence on the part of the eldership, or a flouting of New Testament patterns by the membership?

It is also the function of the elders to protect the flock. This is particularly clear in Acts 20:29: the elders must take heed to the flock because grievous wolves threaten them. The peril is both internal and external. Inside, there are false prophets, lying in wait to deceive (Eph. 4:14). Outside, there is the whole range of hostile religion and philosophy. The elders must be able to protect the church from all such perils. This is especially true of the internal threat. Paul's charge to the elders at Ephesus refers particularly to a peril which will arise from 'among your own selves'.

Another element in pastoral care is the need to seek out lost members of the flock. People fall by the wayside for all kinds of reasons: persecution, the cares of this world, personal backsliding, apathy and misunderstanding. Such people constitute only a tiny fraction of the church as a whole but they need a quite disproportionate amount of attention. Like the Good Shepherd himself, the Christian elder / pastor will leave the ninety-and-nine and go to look for the one lost

sheep. In theory, it may seem fair enough to promise every single member of the flock an equal degree of care. In practice this would be absurd. The lame, weak, the wounded and the stray always clamour for attention and it becomes as impossible to run a church to a timetable as it would be to run a medical practice.

Paul also stipulates that elders are to be 'given to hospitality' (1 Tim. 3:2). In its simplest form this means that all Christians are welcome in the elders' homes. If need be, the local church can even hold its meetings there, as it did in Chloe's house (1 Cor. 1:11). But the real point of Paul's principle is probably more specialised. As we have seen, the church was both nourished and propagated through the ministry of a highly mobile band of preachers who in their journeyings would naturally require accommodation. Paul expects that the responsibility for providing it would gladly be assumed by the elders. It would be a mistake, however, to think that it devolved on them alone. The writer to the Hebrews exhorts his readers to entertain strangers, and even holds out the inducement that by making a general rule of this they may some day entertain angels unawares (Heb. 13:2).

Another major part of the elder's responsibility is prayer. In Acts 6:4 this is clearly defined as an apostolic responsibility and as one of the reasons why men must be free from involvement in serving tables. Elsewhere prayer is the clear responsibility of all Christians. For example, in Ephesians 6:19 Paul makes it clear that everyone engaged in spiritual warfare must 'keep on praying'. What is the duty of all must be in a special sense the duty of elders as they take heed to the flock. As watchmen, they must pray for all the saints, for the preachers of the Word (Eph. 6:10) and, above all, for the members of their own congregations.

It is more difficult to evaluate the function indicated in James 5:14: 'Is any sick among you? Let him call for the elders of the church and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord.' The meaning of the reference to oil is, to say the least, obscure. But the general sense of the passage is clear: it is the responsibility of elders to minister to the sick and the precise form of their ministry is to pray for them. It is not the oil that heals but believing prayer (v.15). The stipulation that the sick person should 'send' for the elders should not be abused. To claim the

excuse, 'We were not sent for!', would be contrary to the whole spirit of the gospel.

Elders and Teaching

To what extent was teaching an inherent function of the eldership? Paul makes it plain in 1 Timothy 5:17 that not all elders laboured in the Word and in teaching. The background to this is probably the sentiment we saw in Acts 6:2: an effective ministry of the Word can usually be engaged in only by someone who lays aside every other responsibility and devotes himself to the Word of God and prayer. This was clearly not expected of all elders.

On the other hand, they were all expected to be 'apt to teach' (*didaktikos*), and in Ephesians 4:11 pastoral care and teaching are closely linked. We should not read too much into this, however. Neither the gift of teaching nor the responsibility of teaching was all that distinctive. Deacons, too, must hold the mystery of the faith with a pure conscience (1 Tim. 3:9). Older women are to 'teach' younger women (Tit. 2:4), and the whole congregation are to 'teach' one another in psalms, hymns and spiritual songs (Col. 3:16). The responsibility of all mature Christians towards the immature is clearly illustrated in the way that Priscilla and Aquila looked after Apollos, teaching him the way of the Lord more perfectly (Acts 18:26). Every Christian must confess his faith (Rom. 10:9, Heb. 4:14) and be able to give everyone who asks a reason for his hope (1 Pet. 3:15). Indeed, the very significance of Pentecost is that, at last, all the people are prophets (Acts 2:17), witnessing to Christ (Acts 1:8) and proclaiming the virtues of the One who called them out of darkness into his marvellous light (1 Pet. 2:9).

All this suggests that aptness to teach was a widespread gift in the apostolic church and was certainly not enough in itself to constitute a man an elder. It had no more weight in this connection than any of the other qualities referred to by Paul (1 Tim. 3:1ff.). To put it bluntly: a man has no more right to be an elder simply because he can teach than he has because he is the husband of one wife. The indispensable teaching gift that Paul was looking for probably amounted to no more than an ability to bear a close personal witness to Christ, to answer objectors and to give adequate pastoral counsel. What was desirable in all Christians was indispensable in an elder; or, as

George Gillespie put it, he does 'by authority that which other Christians ought to do in charity'.¹⁰

There is no special significance in the fact that elders are required to be apt to 'teach' rather than apt to 'preach'. The New Testament does not regard preaching and teaching as technically distinct. The Sermon on the Mount, for example, is regarded as teaching: 'Jesus opened his mouth and taught them' (Matt. 5:2). Similarly when the Lord commissions the disciples to evangelise the nations, he directs them to 'teach' all the things he himself has commanded (Matt. 28:20). Whether in a pastoral or in an evangelistic setting, therefore, preaching must be didactic. For the pulpit to neglect doctrine is calamitous. On the other hand, preaching is not defined in the New Testament as a special method of communication. The content of the preaching (the *kerygma*) is indeed special. But that *kerygma* may be put across in an almost infinite variety of ways: in one-to-one conversations, to small groups or to huge gatherings; by speaking, by announcing, by reasoning, by arguing, by proclaiming and by writing. It is entirely inappropriate to identify a preaching ministry with a pulpit ministry. Preaching means putting the *kerygma* into the public arena by any means in our power.

Two points of more general interest deserve a brief notice. First, elders were supported by their local congregations. This was plainly so in the case of those who were not only elders but also preachers. It also applied, however, to at least some of those who were simply elders. According to most scholars, when Paul says in 1 Timothy 5:17 that the elders who rule well should receive double 'honour' he is probably referring to double remuneration. Certainly, the primary meaning of the Greek word used (*time*) is 'price' or 'value' and the meaning 'honorarium' is well established. The interesting thing in 1 Timothy 5:17, however, is that Paul is speaking primarily not of preachers, but of those who 'rule well'. It is they who are to be counted worthy of double remuneration. We have already seen that a good case can be made out for a full-time paid diaconate. An even stronger case can be made for maintaining some elders in a full-time ministry.

¹⁰ *Assertion of the Government of the Church of Scotland*, I. II (The Works of Mr George Gillespie, Edinburgh, 1846, vol. I, p. 13).

Elders and the Wider Church

Secondly, the authority of elders was not confined to their own local congregations. This has been the main area of debate between Presbyterians and Congregationalists, the former maintaining that particular churches should be united under a common presbyterate and the latter arguing that each local church is an autonomous, self-governing entity whose elders have neither authority nor responsibility beyond their own congregations.¹¹ This division of opinion runs right through Evangelicalism, affecting such bodies as the Evangelical Alliance and the British Evangelical Council, and at this stage of the discussion neither outlook has much hope of convincing the other. It is, however, too important to ignore.

Bearing in mind that I bring to this enquiry my own Presbyterian prejudices, the obvious starting-point is Luke's account of the so-called Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15:5-29. The agenda was set by a dispute which first appeared in Antioch, but which was of general interest to the whole church: on what terms were Gentiles to be admitted into membership? Did they have to be circumcised? And did they have to keep the Jewish laws? The answer given to this question would have repercussions for all the churches, especially those established in the course of the missionary journey just completed by Paul and Barnabas. Looking behind the details, the precise precedent being laid down is that questions of common interest should be matters of consultation and agreement between all the churches.

The church at Antioch was a superbly endowed church, probably better equipped than any other in history to resolve such questions by itself. Yet it decided that such unilateral action would be inappropriate. Hence the decision to send Paul and Barnabas and some others to Jerusalem to discuss the matter with the apostles and elders. Was this simply a case of deferring to the superior wisdom, experience and authority of the church in Jerusalem? Hardly! It is clear from Galatians 1:11-2:14 that Paul was not at all disposed to regard his apostleship as inferior to that of Peter, James and John, even though they were deemed to be 'pillars' (Gal. 2:9). The matter

¹¹ See, for example, R.W. Dale, *Congregational Church Polity* (London, 1885), particularly Book I, ch.V.

was referred not to Jerusalem as such, but to the wider church, to the body of apostles (including Paul and possibly Barnabas) and to the elders (including those from Antioch). This explains the form of words used in Acts 15:22: 'It seemed good to the apostles and the elders and the whole church'. Had it been expedient to resolve the matter by apostolic decree Paul's own word would have sufficed. Instead, it was resolved in a way that underlined the coherence of the world-wide body of Christians and the interdependence of all local churches. This is why the decree (*dogmata*) of the Council had to be 'kept' (*phylassein*, used of keeping a law) not only by the churches at Antioch and Jerusalem, but also by those at Derbe, Lystra, Iconium and the other churches of Phrygia and Galatia. It is also why the decree to impose 'no other burden' on Gentile converts is binding on all churches down to the present day.

But the issue cannot be limited to the meaning of this particular text. The fundamental question is whether the New Testament indicates that the elders of a local church should settle all matters without consulting the elders of other churches; and this rests on the further question whether local churches should function without reference to each other, rather than in submission to the wider body of Christ. Only if local churches are self-sufficient, autonomous and purely self-regarding bodies can we argue that their elders have no responsibility for any church but their own and that their decisions cannot be reviewed by anyone but themselves.

Presbyterians argue that this is not the pattern we find in the New Testament. In the early church each congregation was clearly not a law to itself. Apart from all else, all the churches were subject to the authority of the apostles, who gave clear guidance not only on matters theological but also on a wide range of practical details, and obviously expected a common approach on many matters of order and worship as well as on fundamental doctrine. For example, on the matter of their women praying and prophesying with their heads uncovered, Paul appears to rebuke the Corinthians precisely for being out of step with the other churches: 'If anyone is disposed to be contentious, we recognise no other practice, nor do the churches of God' (1 Cor. 11:16). Similarly, when he enjoins the women to keep silence in the churches, he refers to this as the practice in 'all the congregations of the saints' (1 Cor.

14:33); and when he comes to the matter of the collection, he contents himself with saying, 'Do what I told the Galatian churches to do' (1 Cor. 16:1). Clearly the range of uniformity in the apostolic churches extended beyond matters of essential doctrine. Equally clearly, as Bavinck points out, 'The apostles did not function simply as the local consistory of the Jerusalem church but were at the same time overseers of all the churches.... An objective organisational tie may have been absent but a living and personal bond was present for all churches through the office of apostle itself.'¹²

The question is whether the demise of the apostles transformed the whole situation, putting each church, for the first time, on a footing of total autonomy. Apart altogether from the evidence to the contrary in, for example, the Apostolic Fathers, such a development is inherently implausible. It would have meant a revolution not only in inter-church relations but in the nature of the churches themselves. Certainly, in one sense there was no apostolic succession: they left no infallible plenipotentiaries to take their place. But in other senses they clearly left successors. For example, deacons are their successors from the point of view that they now do a job which apostles used to do. Presbyters, too, are their successors ('the presbyters among you I exhort, who am also a presbyter', 1 Pet. 5:1); and so, too, are evangelists and missionaries. Obviously no single individual could ever again wield the authority of a James or a Peter or a Paul. But all the churches of Jerusalem, Corinth and Ephesus could continue to exist under a common eldership; as could the church (singular) throughout all Judaea and Galilee and Samaria (Acts 9:31). In this respect the eldership as a body provides the apostolic succession. From this point of view, the Council of Nicea is the legitimate successor of the Council of Jerusalem.

Other details in the New Testament clearly indicate that particular churches did not behave as isolated units. As Bavinck wrote,

the spiritual fellowship that existed between the various churches was more intimate than that of many later churches that are organisationally united in a classis or synod.... It is, in fact, almost

¹² From an article, 'The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church', reprinted in *Calvin Theological Journal* 27 (1992), p. 225.

unthinkable that this spiritual bond among the early churches should have been absent. The unity and catholicity of the church is a constantly recurring theme throughout the New Testament. It follows directly from the unity of God Himself, from the unity of the Spirit, from the unity of truth, from the unity of the covenant and the unity of salvation.... This catholicity of the church, as the scriptures portray it for us and as the early churches exemplify it for us is breathtaking in its beauty. Whoever becomes enclosed in the narrow circle of a small *kerkje* or conventicle, does not know it and has never experienced its power and comfort.¹³

But how did this work in practice? For one thing, local churches supported the work of church-planting in other areas and maintained close links with the churches established through such efforts. The Philippians provide an instance of this, supporting Paul during his ministry in Thessalonica (Phil. 4:16). Similarly, the church at Antioch initiated (under the Holy Spirit) the mission to Galatia (Acts 13:1ff.), received the missionaries on their return (Acts 14:27) and acted in the interests of the new churches by referring the problems posed by the Judaisers to the apostles and elders gathered at Jerusalem. The churches even felt an economic responsibility for each other. This is why the disciples at Antioch decided to send relief to the brethren in Judaea (Acts 11:29) and why the Christians of Macedonia and Achaia made a contribution towards meeting the needs of the poor among the saints in Jerusalem.

But such interaction also took place on the spiritual plane. For example, when the church at Jerusalem heard of the thrilling developments at Antioch (11:22ff.) they promptly dispatched Barnabas to supply the new converts with proper teaching; and when Barnabas himself found that the task was beyond any one man he sent to Tarsus requesting the services of Saul.

There is a real danger that in focusing on particular texts and even on particular words and offices we disable ourselves from seeing the overall pattern of New Testament ecclesiology. The church of these days was a body, and it defined the church as a body for all ages to come: one body, not hundreds of thousands. This means that no one cell in the body has a right to operate without regard to the whole. Equally, however, it means that no local eldership has a right

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 226ff.

to disregard the body as a whole. Local churches and their elderships are dependent on the whole body of Christ; and responsible to and for the whole body of Christ.

Two modern analogies may be helpful here. The first is from medicine. A cancerous cell is one which mutates and develops without regard to the body as a whole, eventually destroying the very life on which it depends.

The other analogy is from Chaos Theory, particularly from the so-called 'butterfly effect': a butterfly in Peking may cause a storm in Chicago the following month. More prosaically, small fractional changes can have decisive significance for major events. This is as true for the church as for any other system on earth.¹⁴ Decisions taken by elders in the Shetlands can radically affect the church in St Albans. Indeed, they affect the church all over the world. Who can deny it, if the efficient working of the body depends on every part being joined and knit together and doing its job properly (Eph. 4:16)? From the very beginning the church had a unified, collegiate leadership extending to all its congregations. That leadership was directly involved and consulted at every critical point in the development of the emerging people of God: the reception of the Samaritan church (Acts 8:14), Peter's mission to Cornelius (Acts 11:1ff.) and Paul's ministry to the Gentiles (Gal. 2:9). The idea of totally isolated, autonomous churches is wholly alien to the New Testament. The church is the body of Christ, one in the vision of God and one in its visible expression. Each member is united not only to the Head but to each other member. The only alternative is thorough-going ecclesiastical chaos through the multiplication of innumerable detached and self-regarding cells.

Conclusion

We return, then, to our basic perspective. The New Testament applies a wide variety of designations to the various functionaries of the church. Some are technical, but most are not, and few, if any, are used with elaborate precision and

¹⁴ The larger the system, the greater the effect of minute changes. Cf. John Polkinghorne, *Science and Christian Belief* (London, 1994), p. 26: 'exquisite sensitivity implies that the smallest trigger from the environment can have large effects, so that there is an essential holism built into the nature of chaotic dynamics.'

accuracy. There are certainly not as many ministries as designations, and it is quite impossible to deduce any clear idea of church-structures from the terminology alone. The truth can only be found by trying to identify the various ministries enjoyed by the apostolic church. These were three-fold: a ministry of tables, a ministry of oversight and a ministry of preaching. All of these transcended local churches; representatives of all of them might be fully maintained; and the preachers were expected to be highly mobile.