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# Leadership and Ministry in the Church

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## The Brethren ideals in the wider church context

It may be fairly argued that it is on the subjects of leadership and ministry, particularly in the local church, that the Brethren movement has made one of its most distinctive contributions to the church's theological understanding. Whether that contribution is quite as original or as great as many Brethren people believe is however more debatable: considerable myths are commonly built around no more than a kernel of truth. Brethren tradition would be inclined to draw a sharp contrast between arrangements in other Christian churches and those in the Assemblies. It would tend to depict authority, leadership and ministry in the main branches of historic Christianity — protestant, catholic and orthodox — as being confined exclusively to a small, salaried, office-holding group, usually one or two in each congregation, with a sharp distinction of status and function being drawn between them and the laity. In so far as it is capable of a standard summary, the Brethren ideal would argue that ministry in the church should be exercised by any male member\* according to the particular charismatic\*\* gift or gifts which he enjoys; and that authority and leadership should be exercised collectively, either by a group of office-holders (i.e. recognized elders) or the brethren of the congregation as a whole. Moreover, leadership and ministry in the local church should be exercised not by people given financial support for this purpose but by those in secular employment or retired. A supported ministry should, according to the tradition, be confined to missionaries (on the assumption that when a church has been planted they will move on) and itinerant evangelists and Bible teachers; where such financial support is given it should not be through the mechanism of a regular salary but on the faith principle. This pattern, the tradition would argue, is adduced from scripture and some at least would go as far as to regard alternatives as being in error.

The Brethren ideals were, however, by no means unique, either in their own time or in the history of the church as a whole. Though there was a wide difference between the arrangements of the earliest Brethren and those of the established church in the 1830s, the first and second evan-

\*In the case of women of course the public exercise of gifts associated with authority, leadership, and local ministry is generally permitted only in limited terms, e.g. among women and in foreign missionary work.

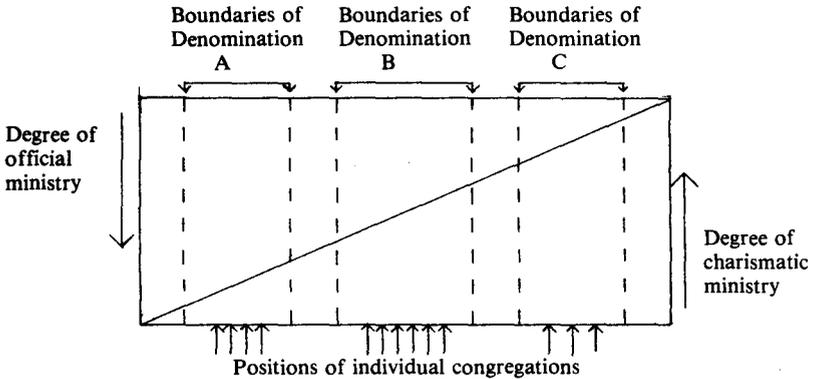
\*\*In this paper, the word 'charismatic' is used in its theological meaning. Where the church movement of that name is intended, I have written 'Charismatic'.

gelical awakenings which begat Brethrenism, were distinguished by a burgeoning of charismatic gift and ministry by laymen as distinct from a trained and qualified official ministry: while the great figures of the revivals were typically professional religious leaders, the battalion commanders and n.c.o.'s of the evangelical hosts were typically unordained laymen, unlettered preachers, itinerating in their home districts and exercising a cottage and tent ministry. This feature lasted well down into the nineteenth century, particularly in country areas and particularly in Primitive Methodism.\* In all denominations in Britain it endured in some areas of church activity, notably in the Sunday schools and in charity.<sup>1</sup>

In *The pilgrim church*, E. H. Broadbent<sup>2</sup> sought to trace 'Brethren principles' throughout the history of the church. Some of his supposed examples do not stand up to close scrutiny; on the other hand, were he writing now he would have been able to substitute other, sounder material for there was more than a grain of truth in his approach. At many times and places in church history the concepts of charismatic gifts, of lay leadership or at least of the association of a lay and an official ministry on equal terms have come to the fore: Lollardy; the various branches of the Hussite movement; the Waldenses;<sup>3</sup> Anabaptism; the Independents; early Quakerism; and German pietism are just a few examples. Moreover, as the paper will show at many points, the subjects of leadership and ministry are difficult to divorce from the wider issue of church government. The more democratic manifestations of church polity, such as are found in Anabaptism, in the Scottish church, and in English nonconformity imply much about the *status*, if not the spiritual gifts, of the ordinary church member *vis-à-vis* his ministerial leaders. The simple fact is that many Christian groups have subscribed to a greater or lesser extent to the principles of the equality of all believers in status before God; the priesthood of all believers; the consequent absence from the church of distinctions of spiritual class or caste of a hierarchical nature; and the conferment on individuals of charismatic gifts according to God's sovereign grace without respect to formal position in the church.

Nor should we set the Brethren ideals and an ordained ministry in rigid antithesis to each other as if they are the only, mutually exclusive alternatives. At their extremes, the ministerial and charismatic models are very different from each other. But the practical experience of the churches suggests that most have a ministry associated with office (which I term an 'official ministry') and a charismatic ministry, in quantities which vary between denominations, within denominations over time, and between different local churches within a particular denomination. A diagram may help to illustrate the point.

\*Cf. the expansion of the assemblies in North Devon; and C. H. Spurgeon's early ministry in Cambridgeshire in the 1840's.



The earliest years of Methodism are a clear example of an official ministry and a charismatic ministry subsisting side by side in varying degrees between localities and over time. It can be argued, too, that the phenomenon has been present in Brethrenism to a considerable extent: contrast those assemblies which have not had a publicly recognized eldership and have left complete freedom to men to exercise a preaching ministry with those which while not denying a charismatic ministry have also had a recognized eldership keeping control of the preaching arrangements and other aspects of church life.

Over the course of time particular denominations can shift their position on the two continua suggested in the preceding paragraph. In this respect, the Church of England has experienced massive changes over the last two hundred years. Recently the rate of movement has accelerated, but we should not underestimate the rate of change in the character of the Anglican ministry even early in the nineteenth century — in this respect, our Brethren forebears were not good prophets. In both the evangelical and the high church wings of Anglicanism the quality and quantity of the ordained ministry rose rapidly throughout the nineteenth century so that by 1900 it was of a quite different character from 1750. In the evangelical wing at least, the laity was already beginning to be accorded an active role in the church's ministry which could have been thought scandalous and even impossible a hundred years earlier.<sup>4</sup> The logical extension of this improvement in the pastoral ministry is the wider teams found in many Anglican parishes today which include not only vicar and curate but readers (no longer 'lay readers' — a significant change of terminology in itself), deaconesses, parish workers and hospital visitors. Such teams might be regarded as part of the official ministry in the terms of this paper. But since 1900, the doctrine as well as

the practice has changed: now evangelical Anglicans would reject the distinctions implied in the words 'clergy' and 'laity'; would deny any distinction of status or role deriving from the intrinsic character of the official ministry; and would emphasise that the *laos* (people) of God embraces all Christians and that ministry is the responsibility of the whole people because gift is given to individual Christians without respect to status or office.<sup>5</sup> This trend is also discernible among non-evangelical Anglicans, partly through the emphasis since the middle of the 1950's on the theology of the laity.<sup>6</sup> Evangelical Anglicans would, too, explain the New Testament words for elder-bishop and deacon in a way which would command applause from many in the Brethren and, designations apart, would seek to promote the discharge of the roles within individual congregations.<sup>7</sup> The running of many Anglican churches is now in the hands of a body which, by analogy with the term 'queen-in-parliament' might be described as 'incumbent-in-parochial-church-council'; it is often difficult to distinguish the role of this body as being different from the average brethren oversight. (The chief differences are probably that the PCC is elected annually and that women can be — and almost always are — members!)

The nonconformist churches have not been immune from these trends either, though the changes may have been less dramatic. The terminology may have been closer to that followed in the New Testament, but in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the balance of power and influence has shifted in favour of the elders and deacons and even of the church as a body. The installed minister would be viewed both by himself and his congregation as being *primus inter pares* and dependent for his influence as much on his manifestation of gift as on his office.

The speed of change in the last fifteen years in the protestant denominations — and indeed in the other historic churches too — has been accelerated by the Charismatic movement and its child or cousin, the house church movement. Where individuals and congregations have been influenced by these movements, there has, initially at least, been a dramatic swing towards the charismatic side of the two continua suggested above: towards an emphasis on the ministry of the whole body, on collective leadership, leadership by those with particular spiritual gifts (e.g. apostles and prophets), and direct leadership by the Holy Spirit. Indeed, the trends in other churches are such that Brethren assemblies feeling tentatively and in the name of church growth towards a more regular and official ministry must take care that they do not pass Anglican and Charismatic brethren and sisters travelling like comets in the direction from which we have come in some disillusion and despair.

A final point in considering the theory and practice of other denominations is the importance of not allowing ourselves to be misled by mere semantic differences. A sound argument for using terms as close as possible to those of the New Testament is that for many they serve as a job

description and give a lead both to the office-holder and others as to his role and status. It is nevertheless true that someone bearing an unscriptural designation can perform a wholly scriptural role, that for example an Anglican bishop can discharge a role similar to, say, Titus in the New Testament; or that a member of an Anglican parochial church council or a Baptist diaconate may more than adequately discharge the duties of a New Testament bishop. The opposite is of course also true: that an elder in a Brethren assembly may signally fail to meet the requirements of an elder as laid down in the New Testament. As a matter of fact, the character and practice of leadership and ministry varies widely between assemblies. Brian Mills in his paper classifies the main types of arrangement which are to be found. He identifies seven different schemes of congregational government, covering a wide range from anarchy, through four different forms of group leadership (by the brethren; by the brethren and sisters; by elders; and by elders and deacons) to two forms of individual leadership (one formally recognized and the other self-appointed) with both carrying some risk of lapsing into dictatorship. Some combinations of these alternatives are of course possible, as where a regular church meeting is held to allow elders and deacons to consult the membership at large. In addition, Brian Mills identifies the possibility of area leadership, which might in principle, if scarcely in practice, be led by any of the modes suggested above; it is likely that in these conditions leadership would be by a group or an individual. The reader may easily slot his own church into the appropriate place in the model and reflect on the contrast with the alternatives which are practised.

Thus it may be argued not only that the Brethren tradition is rather less distinctive than is often assumed, but within the assemblies themselves there is, if practice is any guide, some uncertainty about what the ideals are and how they should be applied. To this extent, the tradition can be characterised as a myth, ripe for re-appraisal with humility in the light of scripture, present conditions, and the thinking and experience of other Christian groups. A proportion of Brethren churches are already re-appraising their tradition in this way and can be seen tentatively edging their way towards some form of full-time ministry within local churches. There are, however, those within the movement and outside it — chiefly those with experience of the Charismatic fellowships — who counsel caution. They rightly point to the unmistakable phenomenon that, where any marked reformation or revival occurs at the prompting of the Holy Spirit, there is often, perhaps always, a re-appraisal of the scriptural teaching on the nature of the church and its leadership and ministry, and a consequent re-emphasis of the charismatic nature of Christian ministry and of the role which the whole body has in it. Before considering the scriptural and practical merits of some form of full-time ministry, we must therefore look again at biblical teaching on leadership, office, and

charismatic gifts. Leadership and office cannot properly be examined without considering the *relationship* which each has to spiritual gift.

### Charismatic ministry and official ministry

As is often the case with questions of importance, to enquire into the relationship between charismatic ministry and official ministry is to plunge ill-armed and ill-trained into one of the current battlegrounds of biblical studies. Scholars from such differing stables as Hans Conzelmann and James Dunn argue strenuously, for example, that what is found in the New Testament is church government and ministry in very rapid evolution: that the church in its earliest days was a virtually leaderless (in the conventional sense), charismatic community, taking its guidance from the Holy Spirit through apostles and prophets; later, within some fifty years of the foundation of the first churches, this God-controlled community had become "in effect subordinate to office, to ritual, to tradition" in the form of an official, proto-Catholic ministry — elders and deacons: Conzelmann contrasts Paul's emphasis on spiritual gifts and his omission of references to elders and deacons in 1 Corinthians with the prominence of these offices in the pastoral epistles (which he regards as non-Pauline).<sup>8</sup>

It is of course one of the occupational hazards of the historian to mistake acorns for oak trees, as Whig historians equated the roles of the medieval and Victorian parliaments! Prophets at least continued to function in the church into the third century and have, it can be argued, continued to emerge ever since, generally in association with revival, for example, in the guise of Wesley, Whitfield and the like, the itinerant preachers and teachers which have distinguished Brethrenism in the English-speaking world, and even in the medieval mendicant orders. In the pastoral epistles, it was in fact to apostles, or at least those appointed by an apostle, that the task of appointing elders and deacons was given. At the end of the first century, well after the Pauline corpus was complete, the Syrian churches which produced the *Didache*, though showing signs of incipient sacerdotalism, gave a large role to 'charismatists' and ostensibly the regulations for treating them were designed to prevent them from abusing the hospitality of the congregations they visited rather than to control their influence and authority.<sup>9</sup>

If the New Testament is taken as a whole, there can be identified operating in parallel,

*first*, a charismatic ministry of the church as a whole, whether universal or local; this derives from the giving of spiritual gifts to individuals on a widespread basis: '... there are varieties of gifts ... varieties of service ... varieties of working, but it is the same God who inspires them all in every one. To each ... To one ... To another' (1 Cor. 12:4-11); the

remainder of the chapter emphasises the universality of the giving of these individual gifts (see also Romans 12:3-13);

*secondly*, apostles (and their delegates), preachers and teachers (as Paul describes himself in 2 Tim. 1:11); as has been seen, just a little after the New Testament period a distinct band of itinerant preachers were recognized by the title of ‘apostles and prophets’; and,

*thirdly*, elders and deacons appointed to exercise authority, and to be responsible for the conduct of the local congregation.

Against this background it is relevant to ask whether apostleship, eldership and deaconship are to be regarded as offices, i.e. recognized positions in the church with particular authority, responsibilities, and accountability to God for performance in those capacities. In the case of eldership of course, this question is a *cause célèbre* of dispute in the Brethren movement: it became an issue in Plymouth in the disagreements of the 1840s;<sup>10</sup> a generation ago, G. H. Lang devoted a lengthy passage in *The churches of God* to the question of whether the New Testament ministry was a ‘stated’ ministry;<sup>11</sup> and the view that an elder is simply someone who is doing the work of an elder is still advanced today in the assemblies. The question is now relevant more widely in the church as the earlier reference to the writings of Dunn and Conzelmann suggests. Moreover, the precise role and status of the apostle and prophet has been brought into particular prominence by one section of the house church movement.

### *Apostles and prophets*

Among the different terms relating to leadership in the church ‘apostle’ presents the greatest difficulty today, though it did not do so in New Testament times. It is difficult to see Paul’s consistent application of the term to himself in introducing his epistles as other than a claim to an office exercised towards the church as a whole. But many theologians of great stature such as Calvin and Warfield have argued, as has Brethren theology in general, that the office of apostle was temporary, applying only to the early days of the church. According to their analysis those who held the office of an apostle were the twelve disciples, Matthias who was chosen to replace Judas Iscariot, and Paul ‘as one born out of due time’. Their essential qualification for the office was that they had been eye-witnesses (with the exception of the special case of Paul) of Jesus’ public life and ministry and, in particular, of the resurrection; and they had been the recipients of his last great commission to carry the gospel out into the world. In consequence of their task of establishing the church, they laid down regulations for its conduct and with the prophets were responsible for determining and testing its doctrine (see Acts 2:24, and 15:22-29, Ephesians 2:20, and Galatians 1:18-19 and 2:9). But when the task of establishing the corpus of Christian doctrine and ethics was

complete, the need for the role of the apostles as the witnesses to Christ's ministry and resurrection, and the receivers of his commission was superseded, as was the role of the prophet by the second and third century when the canon of scripture was established.

This interpretation remains strongly held today, even by some in the Charismatic movement. It is interesting, for example, that the Rev. Michael Harper, while accepting the apostolic ministry of the church as a whole, argues that 'It is best, surely, to see the apostolic office, in the sense of an authoritative ministry in the church, as being intended only for the early days of the church. In the secondary sense, as messengers or missionaries, the ministry has continued. Indeed it is an important aspect of the total ministry of the church . . .' Subsequently he adduces other, quite different arguments, essentially practical and managerial, to underpin the office of Anglican bishop.<sup>12</sup>

In recent years, however, there has been an increasing willingness to argue for the continuation of the office of apostle beyond the death of the twelve and of Paul. (Clearly, the office of prophet continued at least for a while.) The chief weakness of this position is that it requires the postulation of two grades of apostle: first, the eye-witnesses of Jesus who enjoyed a unique and unrepeatable authority in establishing the church. (Here those who argue this line are not far from Michael Harper whose qualifying reference to 'authoritative ministry' is important, may refer to a particular aberration in one section of the Charismatic movement, and must be well taken by those with a memory of the recent history of one section of the Brethren movement!) Secondly, there is a continuing cadre of apostles whose special role is to act as a 'messenger', 'emissary' or 'delegate'. As the Rev. David Watson puts it, '. . . the apostles of today are those who travel as representatives or ambassadors of Christ for the purpose of establishing churches or encouraging Christians in their faith.'<sup>13</sup>

James, the Lord's brother — who was obviously qualified as an eye-witness — is described as an apostle (Gal. 1:19 and 2:9) and in 1 Corinthians 15:5 and 7, Paul distinguishes the twelve from 'all the apostles' in a passage which is of course referring explicitly to eye-witnesses. But the term is also applied to those who were not, or probably were not, eye-witnesses. It must be uncertain that Barnabas was an eye-witness and still more uncertain that Silas was (Acts 14:4, 14, 1 Cor. 9:1-6, and 1 Thess. 2:6). The probability is that in Romans 16:7 'apostle' is being used in the technical sense to describe Andronicus and Junias, while in 1 Thessalonians 2:6 Timothy, who simply could not have been an eye-witness, is ranked with Silas as an apostle. Taken with references to Paul's enemies as claiming to be 'apostles of Christ' (2 Cor. 11:13) and

\*There is some scriptural support for this two-tier model: the term 'apostle' in the New Testament is not confined in application to the twelve and Paul.

the inclusion of apostles in 1 Corinthians 12 in the list of spiritual gifts in a chapter which emphasizes the largesse with which God gives graces to the church, these all suggest that there may have been a continuing place for the office of apostle after the demise of the eye-witnesses.

The role of the apostle was to carry out the great commission to build the church by the proclamation of the message, by teaching and by enjoining Christian practice. It can be argued that it was more than simply the role of an evangelist. It is the role of proclamation, teaching and building up which Paul gives to Timothy, Titus, and Titus's friends (for the last see 2 Cor. 7 and 8, especially 8; 16-23 — in the last verse they are described as 'messengers (*apostoloi*) of the churches'). Paul himself, perhaps in consequence of his status as a primary apostle, claimed authority over the churches (1 Cor. 10:8) and the right to punish disobedience (2 Cor. 10:6). Following the Council of Jerusalem when, disturbingly, it was the apostles and *elders* who made regulations for the church as a whole, it was Paul, Barnabas, Judas Barsabbas and Silas who conveyed them to Antioch (Acts 15:22-35) and Paul, Silas and the newly-apprenticed Timothy who enforced them in the infant churches of south Galatia (Acts 16:4). Most difficult of all for those in the Brethren tradition is the case of Titus who was commissioned by Paul for church building, amendment and regulation in every town of Crete (Tit. 1:5).

The clearest use of the terms 'apostle' and 'prophet' in the New Testament is as spiritual gifts (1 Cor. 12:28). Silas possessed both for he is described by Paul as an apostle in 1 Thessalonians 2:6 while Luke says in Acts 15:32 that he was a prophet. But there is too running through the Acts and the epistles a definite thread of formal recognition by the churches for work as an apostle. In 2 Timothy 1:11 Paul describes himself as appointed. He could have had in mind his commissioning directly by Christ at his conversion (see Acts 2:15-18). But he also describes Titus as 'appointed by the churches to travel with us in this gracious work which we are carrying on' (2 Cor. 8:19); and in Acts 11:22, 30, 15:22, 40, and 13:1-3 the churches at Jerusalem and Antioch can be seen commissioning apostles and prophets for specific or more general tasks of inter-congregational or missionary activity.

The conclusion to which this analysis points is that there is a continuing and important apostolic (in the secondary meaning of the New Testament) and prophetic work to be carried out among the churches: it has a vital missionary element, but it includes too the tasks of teaching, encouraging good order and discipline, and carrying out other inter-congregational tasks. Such individuals will not of course exercise an authoritative ministry in the same sense as the primary apostles. But their ministry ought perhaps to be more formally recognised by the churches than it often is. Ultimately, its influence lies in the humble proclamation

of the word in the power of the Holy Spirit and in the churches' recognition of that proclamation for what it is and in their consequent obedience (see 2 Cor. 10:1-6).

It is comforting to note that in practice throughout most of the church's history, whatever the theory of individual denominations, men have emerged as missionaries, evangelists, teachers, theologians or as statesmen leaders whose influence, whether formally recognised or not, has been wide among congregations rather than confined to only one. The Brethren movement has not lacked its 'leading men', to use Luke's time-honoured phrase in Acts 15:22. But it is worth asking whether emphasis on the autonomy and self-sufficiency of the local congregation has not been carried to such an unbalanced extent that it amounts to an unscriptural particularism which may now be cramping opportunities for gifted men to exercise a wider ministry among Brethren assemblies. Among the practical questions which might be asked are:

(1) Is there sufficient awareness of the importance of this function and, if so, is the absence of this awareness hampering the emergence and development of apostles and prophets for our day?

(2) Are churches as distinct from individuals sufficiently conscious of their obligation to identify and develop gifted individuals not only for missionary work abroad, but also for missionary, teaching and guiding work in this country?

(3) Are churches collectively rather than individually missing opportunities for identifying and supporting individuals to exercise a ministry among them as a whole? What would our reaction be if the church down the road (Brethren or non-Brethren) came and asked whether we were prepared to co-operate in supporting a neighbourhood missionary or someone to exercise a special teaching ministry among the congregations concerned?

(4) Should such a ministry be formally recognized by the churches, and if so, how?

(5) Does the encouragement of such gifts imply a need for training and development and, if so, how best might it be done?

### *Elders and deacons*

If the status of apostleship as an element in the official ministry of the church and its continuation beyond the age of the primitive church can be disputed, there is no such problem about elders and deacons. It is their precise roles, and their relationship to each other and to the church at large, which require carefully to be teased out.

In what follows, the argument is that elder and deacon are recognized offices in the local church with responsibility to God for the development of the congregation as a whole and for the spiritual and other needs of individual church members. As such, their ministry is to be distinguished

from that of the local congregation as a body, though it is not so much different in kind as in intensity, responsibility, role and, perhaps most important, authority towards the congregation and individual members.

The scriptural foundation for this summary is to be found largely in the practice of Paul and his assistants. That elders and deacons are distinct from the local church at large seems clear from Paul's ascription of the letter to the Philippians 'To all the saints . . . with the bishops and deacons,' and from his definition of the qualities of elders and deacons in 1 Timothy 3 which assumes a need to be able to distinguish them from other church members by a process of selection. 1 Timothy 3:10 has the unmistakable air of selection for service in a distinct office: 'Let them also be tested first; and then if they prove themselves blameless let them serve as deacons.' The same verse suggests formal recognition, perhaps even after a period of probation, as does the command to Titus to 'appoint bishops' (Tit. 1:5). The practice of ordination by laying on of hands, though used for all sorts of purposes in the primitive church, signifies at least collective recognition and commissioning for the particular task.

On the method of selection of elders the New Testament is embarrassingly clear for the Brethren tradition! The only references indicate the appointment of elders by apostles or their delegates. There is guidance here for the church planter. Whether there is also a challenge to the traditional Brethren practice of elders' appointing their successors is another question, especially as none of the churches with which Paul and his assistants were dealing had been established more than a few years. The method of self-perpetuation has, so far as I am aware, no explicit support in the New Testament and it can present practical problems: where an existing eldership becomes weakened, unspiritual and ill-fitted for its tasks, there can be no certainty that they will make wise choice of their successors; and where the leadership group is changing rapidly in composition, it can take some time for its members to arrive at satisfactory roles and inter-relationships. In both these cases, advice from the outside might well help so long as those being advised do not find it totally unwelcome. In the apostolic practice of appointing elders, there may be a sanction for those occupying the apostolic and prophetic roles described earlier to be more positive in offering advice where they think that it is needed in a particular local church; since there would be no force behind such advice, except that inherent in the ministry of the person concerned, there would be no threat here to the autonomy of the local church: in the final analysis, the advice would not have to be accepted.

Contrary perhaps to common belief, the New Testament does not offer incontrovertible guidance on how and by whom deacons should be selected. That Timothy was instructed on the qualities required of deacons may imply that Paul expected him to appoint them as well as the

elders. On the other hand, modern commentators are apparently uncertain that the incident in Acts 6:1-6 describes the first selection of deacons: the men chosen are not actually described as such, though their task was table-waiting. Nor can it necessarily be assumed that the words 'pick out' in Acts 6:3 RSV imply a postal ballot! The twelve's words were, however, addressed to 'the body of the disciples' (v.2) and their advice 'pleased the whole multitude, and they chose Stephen . . .' — one can well imagine one of those most difficult of processes, among regenerate as among unregenerate men: a large and perhaps unruly crowd attempting to discover who is both suitable and willing to serve, with those most suitable bound to be looking steadfastly at their boots! It is interesting too that the apostles were content to leave the process of selection to others and subsequently to lay their hands, apparently without further question, on those presented to them when the selection was complete. It is worth asking whether these considerations should be held to be significant now, since, so far as I am aware, those Brethren churches which have deacons as well as elders generally follow neither of the two patterns noted above: it would be normal for the elders, not the church, to choose the deacons.

It is the tradition of a section of Brethrenism which makes it necessary to substantiate carefully that eldership and deaconship were formally recognized offices in the local churches and required some process of selection. But there may in fact be more widespread uncertainty about the qualifications of elders and deacons and their functions. In 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1, Paul was concerned much more with the qualities needed than with anything else, and consequently the requirements are clear — though honoured in the breach with surprising frequency. *Both* offices demand high spiritual qualities, which explains why Timothy was told not to choose hastily (1 Tim. 5:22). The requirements for both offices are in close parallel so that virtually the only differences between the two are that the elder must not be a novice and that, whereas the deacon like the elder must have a sound personal grasp of Christian truth and knowledge of God, the latter must also be 'an apt teacher' (1 Tim. 3:2) and 'be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to confute those who contradict it' (Tit. 1:9). (This may not of course require a *plattform* ministry — an assumption too often made in Brethren churches.) Otherwise, they must essentially be humble people who yet command respect in the church, in their public life, in their families and in their marital relationship; who are marked by self-discipline in personality, temper, habits, and in the giving and keeping of confidences; and who have rejected materialism and embraced generosity in the use of their personal possessions. If anything, the balance is towards quality of Christian living, though understanding of the faith, knowledge of God, and managerial competence are also mandatory.

The New Testament does not define the *role* and *function* of elders and

deacons with the same precision as it defines the qualifications. That may in itself be a pointer: that great flexibility is allowed to determine the role and function, the content of the job, and the arrangements for operation, according to the particular and inherently changing circumstances of time and place. It is possible, however, to detect some aspects of the job specification from considering the words used to connote the offices and the background to them.

### *The connotations of 'elder' and 'bishop'*

It is increasingly taken for granted in the church at large, as it has been by biblical scholars since the nineteenth century, that the designation 'elder' (*presbuteros*) describes in the New Testament the same office as the word 'bishop' (*episkopos*, literally 'overseer'). The *locus classicus* of the interchangeable use of the two words is their application to the leaders of the church at Ephesus in Acts 20:17, 28. Both words are in themselves instructive.

### *Elder*

Many societies in different parts of the world and throughout history have associated the exercise of authority, particularly local authority, and the administration of justice with experience and age, and have described those exercising the office as 'elders'. Israel and Judah were no exception, either historically or when the New Testament was written. The use of the word must have had a clear connotation for Christians of Jewish background or having a knowledge of Jewish customs. Elders led Israel in captivity in Egypt (Ex. 3:16) and later, seventy elders were gifted by the Holy Spirit to share the heavy burden of governing and of leading the people to the land of promise. In this context, it is worth noticing two things: first, the nature of Moses' burden: 'Did I conceive all this people? Did I bring them forth, that thou shouldst say to me, "Carry them in your bosom, as a nurse carries the sucking child to the land which thou didst swear to give their fathers?"' Where am I to get meat to give all these people? For they weep before me and say, "Give us meat, that we may eat." ' This might be regarded as good a summary as any of the elder's task, and there will be times when the church leader will know exactly what Moses meant and feel acutely the need for others with experience to help him! Secondly, for this task of leadership and government the elders needed the Spirit of the Lord (Num. 11:17, 25, 29): this is only one example of the way in which the Spirit came upon judges and kings with Israelite theocracy so that they could carry out effectively the task of civil government. Further in verse 25 the gift of prophecy accompanies the giving of the Spirit of the Lord for this purpose.

In the Deuteronomic legislation, the elders' task was in municipal government and the cases in which they were required to act were con-

cerned with ensuring the ritual purity of the city where a dead body was found within its boundaries (Deut. 21:2ff.); settling domestic and marital disputes in matters of some delicacy demanding a high degree of wisdom and discernment (Deut. 22:15, 25:7); and recovering murderers from cities of asylum (Deut. 19:12) while at the same time offering asylum to the man who satisfied them that he had killed unintentionally (Josh. 20:4). Later, under the monarchy, elders of Israel emerged as a kind of parliament, accepting the first kings and acting as executives to see that royal instructions were carried out (see, e.g. 1 Kings 21:8). By the time of Christ, the 'elders of the people' shared with the chief priests power in religious matters and had the power of excommunication (cf. John 9:34).

First century Judaism was organized on a congregational pattern, the synagogue; each congregation was governed by a council of elders, presided over by a chairman (ruler — cf. Mark 5:22, Acts 13:15, 18:8) whose duties may have rotated among the members. In the synagogue building, they occupied seats facing the congregation and regulated the worship; in addition, they were empowered to discipline members. It would have been natural for the early church to adopt a similar pattern of government (the layout of the earliest church buildings was similar to that of the synagogues) and for them to see at least some of the duties of elders as being on the same lines as those of elders in the synagogues. That elders in the church were expected to rule can be seen from 1 Timothy 5:17.<sup>14</sup>

### *Overseer*

The word 'overseer' had a wide usage in the classical world, being applied, for example, to magistrates (note the parallel with elders), administrators and even to philosophers when acting as spiritual or moral directors of individuals.<sup>15</sup> But in the New Testament the word is given a distinctive force in the Christian context by its association with the description of the church as the flock of God. In commissioning the elders of Ephesus at Miletus, Paul reminds them that the Holy Spirit has made them guardians or shepherds (*episkopous*) of the flock with a duty to feed it, and protect it particularly from those who would be doctrinal predators upon it (Acts 20:28-31). Similarly, in instructing elders, Peter associated the word 'overseeing' with the requirement that they should tend the flock of God and he goes on to speak of Christ as the chief shepherd who will reward them in due course for faithful work of this kind. The language of both Paul and Peter is sharply reminiscent of Christ's description of his role and functions as the good shepherd in John 10, and all three were of course mining a deep vein in Old Testament descriptions of effective spiritual leadership which find climaxes in Psalm 23 and Ezekiel 34. The chief functions of the true spiritual shepherd (pastor) are described by Christ:

### *(1) Leadership*

One of the shepherd's chief responsibilities in the hills of Palestine was to lead the flock so that they would have plenty of good pasture and water in country which was often barren and inhospitable (cf. Ps. 23:1). The flock was led over long distances for these purposes, and clearly it required of the shepherd knowledge of the country, of the climate and seasons, and good judgement. He had to know where he was going and prove to be right (in contrast to the Pharisees whom Jesus castigated as blind leaders who did not even know they were blind). (See also Matt. 15:14.)

This leadership is too one of example (as Peter also emphasized in 1 Peter 5:3), not of driving as is familiar to us in the west. The shepherd went in front of the sheep who trusted him and followed him. The pastor must therefore show himself in the long run to be worthy of being followed.

### *(2) Feeding*

'... he will go in and out and find pasture' (John 10:9). Christian pastors have an obligation to ensure that the local church is satisfactorily taught and, in so far as lies in their power, to ensure that the individual Christian can find a rewarding personal experience of God.

### *(3) Constant protection*

By night the shepherd formed the door of the sheepfold; by day he was constantly on the lookout for prey. Both Christ and Paul stress the need to be alert for, to be able to discern, and to neutralize, those who will disrupt the local congregation, particularly through false teaching (John 10:7-13, Acts 20:29-31).

These are functions performed towards the congregation as a whole. Jesus identified two further functions which related more to the needs of individual members:

### *(4) Recovery*

The shepherd searches for the lost sheep in order to restore it to the flock (John 10:16). This gives the Christian pastor special responsibilities towards the backslider, the lone Christian, and those on the fringes of the flock who need better integration into it.

### *(5) Rehabilitation*

The shepherd gives personal attention to the sick, the damaged and the wounded in order fully to rehabilitate them. James includes physical as well as spiritual healing among the duties of the elder (James 5:14 and 15).

The range of qualities required for proper oversight of the flock is daunting: the ability to inspire confidence and trust; the ability to steer a statesman-like course for the local church; knowledge and understanding of people, times and circumstances; discernment; wisdom; a loving care and concern for others; the ability to handle people sensitively and to counsel wisely and effectively; sound doctrinal foundations; the ability to instruct; and the ability to dispute with Christ's enemies. Two qualities

are however given specific emphasis by Christ: an intimate knowledge of and relationship with the flock as a whole and with individual members (John 10:3-15); and self-sacrifice — the willingness of the elder to lay down his life for the sake of the congregation for which he is responsible as pastor.

There is one obvious deduction: the office of elder cannot satisfactorily be discharged by those who cannot make it their top priority in Christian service, because they are called to, or cannot resist, other opportunities of service — like writing papers perhaps. There is an important point here, because there is a long and honourable tradition in Brethrenism of activity in the wider Christian world, for example, in inter-denominational organisations such as the Gideons, the UCCF, the Scripture Union, and Bible colleges. In addition, in our own times there is a greater recognition of the calling to Christian service in practical life, the trade unions and local community organisations. In more traditional terms, too, the custom of 'going out preaching' and inviting speakers from other churches to our own is relevant. The more time an individual spends away from his home congregation, the less effective is likely to be his work as an elder in that congregation. But the fact is that it is often those with the gifts to contribute in these wider spheres who are the prime material from which the elderships of the local churches should be drawn; and those who remain may often be much less suited to the tasks of eldership. This is not in any way to suggest that no one is called to the wider sphere of service, or that it is unimportant. But because of the obvious relationship of the health and strength of the local church to the well-being of the church at large, it is wrong that the leadership of the local church should be allowed to become stunted by the demands of the wider sphere, as may have happened in the case of some Brethren assemblies. The problem is of the deployment of resources. Is there again a role of guidance to individuals and churches which under the Holy Spirit the apostles and prophets already discussed might be performing since they see a good deal more of the game from their vantage point?

### *Deacon*

The root meaning of the word deacon (*diakonos*, a servant) is illustrated clearly in the apostles' use of the cognates, as recorded in Acts 6:1, 2: 'It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to *serve tables*.' It is used freely in the New Testament in a non-technical sense as well as to denote an office in the local church. Thus Paul describes himself as a deacon (RSV minister) of the gospel (Col. 1:23); the wine waiters at the marriage in Cana are deacons (John 2:5); and Martha busied herself with table waiting according to John 12:2 and Luke 10:38. The notion is of domestic service, the meeting of the practical needs of the household. In Luke 22:26-27, the Lord applied this role to himself when

he taught his disciples that spiritual leadership required the humble attitude of the domestic servant; and on the same occasion he gave a powerful demonstration of it when he girded himself with a towel and washed his disciples' feet (John 13, 3f., especially 12b-17).

If the primary task of the New Testament deacon was to see that the practical needs of the fellowship were met, what was the detailed content of this responsibility? It may well have included the host of practical tasks which are associated with deaconship in some Brethren churches which have adopted the office: the maintenance of buildings; preparation of halls; keeping of accounts and counting money; and the management of transport. But these tasks were of course largely unknown in the first century church because they were unnecessary. Nor does it seem quite correct to argue on the basis of Acts 6:1-6 (if this text is relevant) that they had charge of the finances. Because of its mode of operation, the first century church did not have to spend large sums, as we do today, on maintenance, lighting, heating and cleaning. And the important point about Acts 6:1-6 is not that the seven had charge of the finances, but the reason why they were given charge of them — the object for which the money was used. Here, the purpose for which Jesus and the twelve maintained a common purse with Judas Iscariot as their treasurer may be relevant. On this argument, the primary function of deacons is the giving of practical help, especially of a compassionate, charitable kind both within the household of faith and, by analogy with the twelve in John 12:4 and 13:29, among the poor at large. If this view is correct, it was the executive work of the deacons which gave the early church its outstanding and challenging reputation for beneficence both towards its own and the wider world.

There is support for this interpretation in the views of modern commentators about the precise significance of some of the spiritual gifts in Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12. “. . . ‘service’ in Romans 12:7 is understood by some commentators to refer to deacons, and ‘he who gives aid’ in Romans 12:8 to refer to the officer in charge of the distribution of money to the poor . . . the ‘helpers’ (in 1 Cor. 12:28) are understood to be deacons by many modern lexicologists . . .”<sup>16</sup> In the conditions of the first century, at most times since, and still in most places in the world, this is in itself a task of daunting magnitude and great importance. But despite fashions in thought today, even within the church, this task should be subordinate, as the apostles asserted in Acts 6:2, to the preaching of the word of God because it is consequential upon it: the quality and quantity of social help given by the church throughout its history has only been possible because of the work of the gospel in men's hearts and the leadership and pastoral work of elders. The magnitude of all these tasks is so great that, while the deacon may, like Stephen and Philip, show considerable pastoral and apostolic promise and eventually shift to discharging one or other of those roles, some specialisation of

function within the church is beneficial in order to achieve the best results.

It is tempting to wonder whether, with the advent of the welfare state in some countries, there will inevitably be some cramping of the role of the deacon as suggested above. The evidence is however that there is much which welfare arrangements have not the resources to do or are intrinsically incapable of doing. The invaluable and unique contribution which can be given in this country by what is known as the voluntary sector has recently been recognized by both the Wolfenden Committee and by governments of both parties. Moreover, there is or should be, a personal and distinctive quality about the help given by the church which state arrangements will often find it impossible to match. Some further thought may therefore be desirable to determine what in practice today the diaconal function can and should be, if it is to be consonant with that of the office in New Testament times.

### *Prayer*

‘But we will devote ourselves to prayer . . .’ said the apostles when they asked the disciples to appoint others to take charge of the daily distribution (Acts 6:4). However foreign it may be to our way of thinking, which tends to regard leadership as an activity, the environment in which leadership is given in the Acts of the Apostles is that of prayer and worship. It was as they *prayed* that they received guidance from God as to what they should *do*; and strength for the task. Peter on the house roof at Joppa and the prophets and teachers at Antioch are two examples (Acts 10:9, 13:2). In all the inevitable press of business which must afflict the church planter and elder, the imperative need for contact with God must not be forgotten, either individually or collectively.

As Paul emphasized in 1 Timothy 3:1 the office of elder is a high calling, and it would not be stretching the teaching of the New Testament to assert that the same is true of the office of deacon. The teaching about the functions of the elder and the deacon is perhaps the most challenging for the practice of Brethren churches. Those who are elders in local churches may well feel more than a twinge of conscience that often it is not the weighty tasks suggested in scripture which take up the time of oversights in assemblies, but the trivia of detailed administration which, however necessary, do too little to meet the true needs of the congregation.

### **Collective responsibility**

It has already been noted that Christianity was born in a Jewish environment where, whatever may have been true of the Roman and Greek worlds, government was organized on oligarchic rather than monarchic lines. The Sanhedrin comprised 71 members, with the chairmanship

undertaken by the high priest. As already noted, the synagogue was ruled by a council of elders. Whether or not for this reason, group responsibility was a prominent pattern in the early church. It was elders whom Paul appointed in every church of south Galatia (Acts 14:23) and 'elders in every town' whom Titus was instructed to appoint (Titus 1:5). In 1 Timothy this eldership is actually described as a board which acted in concert, Paul being one of them, to appoint Timothy to his task (1 Tim. 4:14, 2 Tim. 1:6). Seven men of good repute were chosen by the Hellenist disciples to manage the daily distribution. It was the apostles and elders of the Jerusalem church to whom the church at Antioch sent a deputation (Paul, Barnabas 'and some of the others') to deliberate on the question and it was a deputation which the apostles and elders sent back to Antioch with their instructions (Acts 15:2, 22). Finally, in the letter to the Galatians where Paul is seeking to stress that his gospel to the Gentiles was received directly from God by individual and personal revelation, he is careful to note that his teaching was tested at Jerusalem by 'them . . . (i.e.) those who were of repute' and that it was James, Peter and John who commissioned Paul and Barnabas to take the gospel to the Gentiles (Gal. 2:2, 9).

If the customary arrangement in the early church was a plural apostolate and a plural eldership, there is then a question about the process by which decisions should be made. Is it to be by voting, by consensus, or by unanimity? And is one individual member of the decision-making body to be allowed a *liberum veto* with which he can block any arrangement which does not quite accord with his personal wishes? In many assemblies the last is a critical question since the principle followed is that of unanimity, perhaps under the influence of the lengthy argument made for it in G. H. Lang's primer of Brethren church government, *The churches of God*.<sup>17</sup>

The quality of argument deployed there is in fact patchy. It is obviously the ideal that believers within a local church and indeed more generally should be of 'one heart and soul', to use Luke's description in Acts 4:32 of the early church in Jerusalem, or that they should be under clear conviction of the course of action to take, as the prophets and teachers at Antioch were about the first missionary journey of Paul and Barnabas (Acts 13:1-3). This is, as Lang argued, reflected in the Lord's prayer in John 17:20-21 and in the analogy of the body. Moreover, it ought not to be argued that the ideal is unattainable within a local church: rather, it is characteristic of Christian *koinonia* that the Holy Spirit can weld together the most unlikely material and the most intractable personalities; in itself this is a testimony to the power of the gospel.

Despite all this, however, it was a straw man, 'majority voting', which Lang pilloried as the only alternative to unanimity. Clearly, the reaching of decisions in a community such as a local church by 'bare majority', as C. F. Hogg put it, is undesirable if only because it is impracticable. On

important matters, groups of this character cannot proceed other than by consensus. But it is debatable whether that consensus must also be subject to the veto of a small minority. As C. F. Hogg again put it, 'Majority rule is bad; minority rule is worse.'<sup>18</sup> On this point Lang argued, 'Not the opinion of the majority to be acted upon, for they may be wrong in their judgement; and for the same reason, not that of the minority; but let all wait on God for wisdom, and it shall be given — in God's time — to those who ask in faith.'<sup>19</sup> Put bluntly this was simply inadequate logic: for the issue which often faces local churches is not 'Is it better for us, being at point A, to go to point B or to point C?', but 'Being already at point B, which is favoured by the minority but which most of us are agreed has serious difficulties, ought we not to go to point C?' When this is the nature of the problem, the consensus can quite simply be held to ransom by a small minority which already has what it wants. In these circumstances, it is not easy to see that the principle of unanimity is beneficial to the whole body. Lang recognised this possibility for he saw that the body does not always function in an ideal way. His solution for the problem was drastic, however: if the minority persisted, they should be excommunicated, thus allowing the remainder to proceed in unanimity!<sup>20</sup> The argument was justified by praying in aid passages in Matthew 18 and 1 Corinthians 5 which have little or nothing to do with decision-making in the local church, but concern resolving private disputes and disciplining individuals for immoral conduct.

The principle of unanimity was not in fact practised by the apostles themselves, certainly not by Paul. Apparently, he and presumably the majority of the church in Antioch were unyielding in their opposition to Peter and the Jewish minority, as described in Galatians 2. Paul and Barnabas separated with sharp contention and apparently the church did not wait before commending Paul to his second missionary journey. Christians must of course deal with each other with the utmost love at all times: on many issues, this will enable the dissenter to live with the policy of the consensus. On some occasions, it may be that the dissenter feels that he must part company with the consensus: it is better that this should be done graciously on both sides than by the wholly inappropriate procedure of exclusion *de jure* or *de facto*.

### *The relationship between office and spiritual gifts*

It was suggested above that church leaders require a great range of qualities and talents if they are to function effectively. Few, if any, individuals are likely to be endowed with the full range and it follows that the leadership of the local church simply has to be plural and collective in order to meet the New Testament requirements. In the course of the analysis, too, it was inevitable that particular spiritual gifts should be identified as being especially relevant to particular aspects of church

leadership. It may not be unreasonable therefore to discern a systematic relationship between particular aspects of leadership and the spiritual gifts listed in Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 14 and Ephesians 4.

<i>Functions</i>	<i>Relevant spiritual gifts</i>
Teaching	prophecy; teaching; exhortation; utterance of wisdom; utterance of knowledge.
Leadership, particularly strategic guidance	apostle; prophecy; administrator (lit. 'steersman'); utterance of wisdom; faith.
Government, regulation and discipline	utterance of wisdom; utterance of knowledge; ability to distinguish between spirits; ?interpretation (cf. 1 Cor. 14).
Pastoral	pastor; utterance of wisdom; utterance of knowledge.
Diaconal	service; contribution; acts of mercy; giving aid; helpers.

Such a model can at best only be tentative: the three principal lists of spiritual gifts overlap, with the possibility that in the different lists different words connote the same gift; moreover, as the scheme shows, particular gifts seem relevant to more than one function of leadership. Most important of all perhaps is the stress in the New Testament on the principle that the spiritual gifts are given to believers on a wide basis, as befits the generosity of God's grace. They cannot be regarded as exclusively associated with particular offices in the church or confined to office holders. The best that can be said is that the possession of a number of spiritual gifts in intensity and in particular combinations may mark out the individual concerned either for a role among the churches at large or for one or other of the two offices in the local church.

### **Leadership and the ministry of the church**

A general survey of leadership and ministry cannot today and in a Brethren context be complete without considering the role of the local church as a whole in leadership and ministry, and the relationship of elders and deacons to that role. The reasons are many: we live in an age which sets great store by democracy, consultation, participation and sexual equality; the Charismatic movement has revived emphasis on the priesthood of all believers and the charismatic ministry of every member of the body; finally, the Brethren tradition was itself created by that emphasis and many assemblies are still governed by the meeting of all church members — this is the mode of government assumed, for example, by G. H. Lang in the book already cited. Among some, particularly the

younger church members, a curiously ambivalent attitude can sometimes be detected. There is on the one hand the desire for participation in, or consultation about, decision-making; often they are equipped spiritually and otherwise to make a constructive contribution. On the other hand, there can be the cry that 'the elders should rule'.

There is a strong case to be made that the New Testament takes a high view of the role of the body as a whole in government as well as in ministry. The church is composed of members who, while differing in spiritual maturity, have equality of standing before God and equality of access to him; all have the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit; all are open to divine guidance; and as has been noted, spiritual gifts are widely given. Moreover, all are enjoined to be humble, especially those who lead and exercise spiritual gifts. Leaders are told they are to be the servants of all, just as the Master was the servant of all. Indeed, there is the example of the Master in the intimate relationship which he had with his disciples and his promotion of them from the status of servants to friends (John 15:13-15). The general tenor of the early chapters of the Acts of the Apostles is of an intimate association between the apostles, prophets, elders, and deacons and their congregations in the affairs of the church. On the immediate question of leadership and government, there was at least one important instance — no less than the council of Jerusalem — when the decision of the apostles and elders enjoyed the acclaim of 'the whole church' before it was conveyed by letter to Antioch. When it arrived, it was the congregation which heard the letter read, just as it had been the congregation which had dispatched the deputation to Jerusalem in the first place (Acts 15:3, 22, 30). The same pattern is followed in the Pauline letters which are normally addressed to whole churches rather than to individuals or just the elders and deacons.

Against this background, it seems impossible to conceive that it is right that the elders and deacons of a church should be remote bodies of men who hand down their decisions from on high to be obeyed without discussion or explanation, who are guilty of what Peter calls 'domineering over those in your charge' (1 Pet. 5:3). Decision-making should take place with an intimate knowledge of the thinking, feelings and needs of the church as a whole and great care ought to be given to how decisions are promulgated. The process of acquiring this intimate knowledge might well include discussion at a formal church meeting if that seems desirable, as well as more informal processes.

None of this is inconsistent with the principle that ultimate authority in the local church lies with the elders: *inter alia*, the duty of the elders is to govern, and authority and office must be distinguished from status. The scriptural model of the relationship between a congregation and their elders and deacons is a familiar one. It is the willing submission of equals to those responsible to God for them: just as the son submits himself to the father; and the wife to her husband; so the church member is

required to submit himself willingly to his elders for the common good. The father is of course worthy to be submitted to; the husband must be worthy of his wife's respect; elders must show themselves worthy of the respect of their congregation.

### *The organic nature of Christian leadership and ministry*

Thus far this paper has sought to analyse leadership and ministry into its component parts as indicated in scripture. But like all essays in systematic analysis, it has run the risk of misrepresenting the true nature of its subject in its totality, of petrifying on cold tablets what is in fact warm and pulsing with life. It is time now to redress the balance. It bears repeating that the New Testament does not offer a blueprint but basic principles on which to found effective methods of leadership and arrangements for ministry. Like the human body which is characterized by great variety without detracting from its essential humanness, the church in the New Testament shows much flexibility in detailed local arrangements. Nor can precise boundaries be drawn by exegesis between the roles and offices of apostle, prophet, elder, teacher, pastor, and deacon. As we shall see in a moment, apostles and prophets were not confined to an itinerant ministry, as the *Didache* suggested they ought to be:<sup>21</sup> they showed a notable tendency to settle down in one place for a period and to play a prominent role in a local church. And exercise of the gift of prophecy was common in the local church as numerous references in the Acts and the epistles show. Nor can sharp lines be drawn between the roles and offices of an official ministry on the one hand, and the ministry of the whole church on the other. Still less is it wise to deny one or the other. Those who try to do so may well fail to catch the true identity of leadership and ministry as depicted in the New Testament and still offered by the Holy Spirit to the churches today.

### **A settled ministry?**

Many may perhaps regard the discussion so far as a prelude only to the key question of these days in many Brethren circles: would it be right and prudent for them to support individuals to minister in particular local churches? To take the question of principle first, the theological issue can be defined in relatively narrow terms, viz. 'Does scripture warrant or prohibit a local church from giving financial support to one or more of their number to exercise a resident ministry in the fellowship?' The problem is not whether all financial support for Christian workers is prohibited. The New Testament obviously accepts some such support, and it has been reflected in the Brethren missionary endeavour and tradition of itinerant preaching at home. Nor is the problem whether financial support should be given to full-time as distinct from part-time workers. It is,

should a *resident* ministry, full-time or part-time, be maintained in churches *at home*?

There is no ambiguity in the New Testament that apostles and apostolic delegates were on occasion supported financially by the churches. In fact, Brethren teaching may have tended to place excessive stress on the point that in at least three infant churches, and possibly therefore as a matter of normal practice, Paul and his companions supported themselves by tent-making — they worked ‘night and day . . . not to be a burden to any of you’ (Acts 18:3, Acts 20:33 & 34, 1 Cor. 9, 2 Cor. 11:7-11, 2 Cor. 12:14-18, and 2 Thess. 3:7-8). But this arrangement should not be taken as an immutable norm. 1 Corinthians 9:6 & 15-18 may be taken as suggesting that it was normal for Paul and Barnabas to support themselves; but 2 Corinthians 12:13 may, on the other hand, be implying that Paul’s support of himself in Corinth was exceptional. Moreover, his main reasons for declining such help had nothing to do with the principle of accepting support: in Thessalonica, he wanted to encourage the believers to work rather than be idle while awaiting the Coming; and in Corinth, he wanted a freehold to preach an unadulterated gospel and to avoid being equated with the false prophets (1 Cor. 16-18, 2 Cor. 11:12-15 and 12:11-13) and at Ephesus, his reason was to put himself in a position to help the poor (Acts 20:35).

In any case, 1 Corinthians 9 is categorical that apostles have a complete right to financial support and the churches have an obligation to maintain them. 1 Corinthians 9:5-6 implies that all the other apostles were given and accepted such support. For his part, Paul stresses that he was waiving his right to support from both the Thessalonians and the Corinthians: ‘It was not because we have not that right, but to give you in our conduct an example to imitate’ (2 Thess. 3:9). The point is expanded in 1 Corinthians 9:1-18.

Paul sometimes exercised the right. Paradoxically he did so in both Thessalonica and Corinth by accepting help from the Philippian and Macedonian churches respectively (Phil. 4:16, 2 Cor. 11:9). The Philippians continued to support him while he was a prisoner in Rome (Phil. 1:5 and 4:14-20).

Much less certain conclusions can be drawn from the New Testament about whether it was the practice of the churches to maintain elders in a pastoral ministry in individual churches. There is no positive support for it; but nor is there any prohibition. Lack of guidance on the subject is not surprising: the book of Acts and most of the epistles were written only a comparatively short time after the founding of the churches to which they refer. They were written by apostles or their companions to infant churches or to apostolic delegates. There are however one or two clues. 1 Timothy 5:17-18 refers to the reward which should be given to elders who rule well, especially those who labour in teaching and preaching: the payment should be ‘double honour’, which is the ‘grain’ and ‘wage’ of the

Old Testament scriptures quoted in v.18. But it is interesting that the first of these quotations is used by Paul in 1 Corinthians 9:9 in support of the apostles' incontestable right to be maintained by the churches. Secondly, the enrolled widow was certainly supported by the churches (1 Tim. 5:3-16); this assistance was partly a pension for help already given. Thirdly, within a generation or so the Syrian churches were supporting a resident ministry: 'A genuine charmatist, however, who wishes to make his home with you has a right to a livelihood. (Similarly, a genuine teacher is as much entitled to his keep as a manual labourer.)' In referring to elders and deacons, the manual instructed the churches not to choose men eager for money, a point which may be significant because elsewhere the concern is that even a genuine charmatist should not become a burden on the church by staying more than a day or two in it.<sup>22</sup>

There is a further question to be answered, however: how far is it justified to draw a rigid distinction between apostles and their delegates on the one hand and elders with a settled ministry in a local church, on the other? The traditional Brethren position, more honoured in the breach than in the observance, is that missionaries and full-time preachers should be strictly itinerant, so that the growth of an indigenous eldership should not be stunted. But this tends to dismiss the evidence that Paul spent three years in Ephesus and eighteen months plus additional periods at Corinth; and that when he himself was absent, he was careful to send his various assistants to continue the task of church-building as well as evangelism (see 2 Cor. 7-13 *passim*; Phil. 2:19-29, Col. 4:12-13, and 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus). Titus' responsibilities were towards the local churches of Crete as a whole. Timothy's charge was however specifically towards the church in Ephesus (1 Tim. 1:3) and his instructions suggest a settled pastoral and teaching ministry which both he and Paul regarded as his prime responsibility at that time. That ministry, like Titus', aimed at building up the church and ensuring good order and practice rather than a wholly evangelistic ministry. Experience suggests that to be effective such a ministry requires time, attention and continuity, requirements which in themselves seem to make inroads into the principle of itineracy. A change in the character and requirements of ministry as local churches matured seems plausible and it is interesting that history associates the apostle John with one church in his old age and that in later years both he and Peter describe themselves as elders, though perhaps not in the technical sense.

But the New Testament recognizes too that a danger of given financial support to Christian workers is that the system will attract the idle whose motive is to take advantage of those who support them. Paul warned against this danger explicitly in 2 Timothy 3:1-9 and elsewhere he suggests that the motive of false apostles and prophets can be personal gain. The early patristic writings indicate that this soon became a considerable

problem in the church; it has continued to afflict it at a number of stages in history.

The prudential and practical arguments against financial support for a settled ministry in a local church are more cogent than the doctrinal argument which is to say the least, tenuous. The church at large has a good deal of experience with the arrangement and this suggests that it can present some significant problems.

First, there is the danger of idleness just mentioned. The more notable examples in history, like the clerk of *The Canterbury tales* and the Anglican clergyman of the eighteenth century, were perhaps those who lacked genuine Christian experience in times when the vocation was not unattractive in social and material terms. But anyone with an acquaintance with evangelical denominations and foreign missions will know that a more discreet form of idleness can be found among full-time workers there too.

This difficulty is very often avoided, but there can secondly be a danger that financial dependence neutralizes prophetic ministry; that the individual receiving financial support feels unable to speak fearlessly under the Holy Spirit against the sins and other shortcomings of those who pay his emoluments. This was exactly the difficulty which Paul sought to avoid by making his tents in Corinth. In former times, the Anglican minister — but not perhaps his curate — had no such constraint because of his parson's freehold: he could be turned out of his living only in the most exceptional circumstances, an arrangement which had of course its negative as well as positive sides.<sup>23</sup> In the nonconformist denominations, where the norm has been that the congregation themselves furnish their pastor's stipend in large part, the constraints can be real. They are not unknown either in the Brethren: the preacher who says what an assembly does not want to hear may well find that he is not invited again. No such financial pressure afflicts the person who has secular employment — though he should not underestimate the subtle pressures which are imposed by the desire to be well esteemed by fellow Christians.

Turning from the paid worker to the congregation which he or she serves, we must recognize the danger that his or her presence can encourage idleness on the part of those among whom he or she works, especially if they support the person ('We pay him to do the work'), and can stunt the development of spiritual gifts in the congregation at large and hamper the ministry of the whole church. In the past, there have been ample instances of this phenomenon both in Anglicanism and the nonconformist denominations where it is fair to say that until recently a one-man ministry often prevailed. It is this risk which chiefly concerns those with associations with the Charismatic movement as they watch some Brethren churches moving towards maintaining a resident ministry. Michael Harper and David Watson rightly warn against the danger that a

professional ministry will emerge to the detriment of the principle of the charismatic ministry of the whole people of God. Time and again, Anglican congregations have borne witness to the benefits of an extended interregnum to show the ordinary church member what he or she can do through the working of the Holy Spirit. And there is historically a clearly discernible, oft-repeated phenomenon by which the charismatic ministry of the whole church, born of a spiritual awakening, slowly wanes to give way to an official ministry. One of the causes is a withering of spiritual commitment on the part of the congregation and a growing willingness to leave such matter to representative professionals: this is a form of incipient sacerdotalism. There is, moreover, a further problem that such a professional ministry can become remote from the concerns and problems which press in on the ordinary believer in a secularized world, that the latter feels that the full-time man or woman does not have to live in the real world with which he has to grapple daily and therefore that they cannot effectively minister to his need or those of his unbelieving friends.

Professionalisation in this sense would be contrary to scripture. It would also be imprudent. Those churches with an experience of a full-time ministry note the practical limitations which it can place on church growth, particularly in an urban society. Research in the Anglican church indicates that 'In parishes of over 2,000 the single-clergy model church levels off at an average congregation of 175 regardless of parish population.' One full-time assistant adds about a further 90 and a third worker an extra 80 or so.<sup>24</sup> Since these figures are of Christmas communicants, the effective membership in Brethren terms would be rather smaller and the full-time worker's ability to perform even some of the roles outlined earlier in this paper to more than a comparatively small fraction of these numbers would be severely limited. David Watson is right: even a team of full-time workers cannot do the job envisaged in the New Testament without extensive support from other elders, deacons, and church members as a whole.<sup>25</sup>

It would be a tragedy if Brethren churches were to fall into these traps in moving towards the maintenance of full-time workers in local churches. But real as the difficulties are, they are no more than dangers against which to be warned, temptations to be avoided. There are in fact good practical reasons in favour of supporting full-time workers. In the past, Brethren assemblies have often relied for leadership and pastoral work on commercial and professional men who could organize their lives in order to give much time to the needs of the local church. Social organization makes that much more difficult now: the well-to-do are no longer a leisured class; professional men and civil servants customarily work much longer hours than was the case even before the second world war; there are in some parts of the country many fewer small businessmen in the assemblies who can put their resources, for example, their secretaries, at the disposal of the church. Perhaps the only development from which

the assemblies have been able to benefit has been the growth of teaching posts — and, contrary to general belief, they are not sinecures. At the same time, rising expectations have affected the church as much as other spheres: Christians read the New Testament and they see a dynamic mission, a quality of pastoral care and a common life which many Brethren churches seem to lack; and they ask why their elders are not delivering the goods. Many elders feel the answer is that there is too little time and their gifts are spread too thinly over too many responsibilities. The problem facing Brethrenism is not that the support of a full-time ministry is likely to stunt the growth of congregations around the 200 mark; it is that the lack of such a ministry is likely to result in the total dispersion of congregations to places where it is thought that proper pastoral care and teaching will be given.

It does not follow that the full-time worker will necessarily be idle; that the congregation will sit back and leave it to the professional; that they will idolize him, or despise him; that his ministry will be wanting in conviction or courage; that the ministry of the wider congregation will be stunted. These dangers exist. But if it must be so, then the New Testament is at best highly misleading on the question of the way in which local churches then functioned. There we see full-time or part-time apostles and prophets maintained by the churches and exercising a teaching and pastoral ministry for long periods in one church in co-operation with active elders and deacons, and supported by spiritual gifts widely distributed among, and exercised by, the local church as a whole. Possible pitfalls ought not to deter us from arrangements which are accepted by the scriptures. The practical experience of many local churches in our own times is that the paid worker's function is to identify, to draw out, to encourage, to develop and to organize the deployment of the charismatic gifts of the congregation as a whole, so that the church gradually begins to operate in the way that the New Testament suggests. The paid worker is not of course the only ingredient required to achieve that end but, as a matter of observed fact, it is commonly a necessary ingredient.

To revert to the explanatory model introduced near the beginning of this paper, the New Testament pattern is of churches rich in official ministry, some of it maintained at the expense of the churches, but also rich in the ministry of the whole church. Both ministries must of course be charismatic in their very nature if they are to achieve anything of lasting value. Whether full-time workers in local churches would be a benefit to Brethren churches would in the final analysis depend on the attitude and personal commitment of the congregations as a whole.

### *References*

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2. E. H. Broadbent, *The pilgrim church*, London: Pickering and Inglis, paperback 1974.
  3. On the later medieval period there is much of interest on this subject in Norman Cohn, *The pursuit of the millenium: revolutionary millenarianism and mystical anarchists of the middle ages*, London: Paladin, 1970.
  4. Gilbert, *op. cit.* pp.125-138 and 167.
  5. See J. R. W. Stott, *One People: Clergy and laity in God's church*, London: Falcon, 1968; David Watson, *I believe in the church*, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1978, pp.245-252; Michael Harper, *Let my people grow: ministry and leadership in the church*, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1977, pp.22-23. In many Anglican churches, worship and prayer are now often led by persons who are not members of the ministerial team.
  6. John Adair, *The becoming church*, London: SPCK, 1977, *passim*, especially pp.54-75.
  7. See *Bishops in the church: The addresses given at the 132nd Islington clerical conference, January 1966*, London: The Church Book Room Press, 1966, especially J. R. W. Stott, 'The New Testament concept of *episkope*', pp.9-16 and R. E. Nixon 'Bishops and Orders' pp.32-34.
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  12. Harper, *op. cit.* pp.49-51; 81-83; 184-193; & 198-201.
  13. Watson, *op. cit.* p.258.
  14. For the influence of the synagogue on the practice of the early church, see Ralph Martin, *Worship in the early church*, London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, new ed. 1974. See also the articles on 'elder', 'presbyter' and 'synagogue' in *The new Bible dictionary*, London: Inter-Varsity Press, 1962.
  15. *Ibid.* article on 'bishop'.
  16. D. Bridge and D. Hypers, *Spiritual gifts and the church*, London: Inter-Varsity Press, 1973, p.146.
  17. Lang, *op. cit.* pp.98-116.
  18. Quoted in *ibid.* p.112 and footnote.
  19. *Ibid.* p.106.
  20. *Ibid.* p.115.
  21. *Early Christian writings*, p.233.
  22. *Ibid.* p.234.
  23. For those now entering livings, this arrangement has been discontinued.
  24. Adair, *op. cit.* pp.106-108.
  25. Watson, *op. cit.* pp.245-297.