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Patterns of New Testament Ministry—

1. Elders

B. W. POWERS

THE NEW TESTAMENT contains a great many references to Christian ministry. These references reveal the widest diversity of terminology and function; some of these refer to ministries within the Christian congregation and some are ministries to those who are outside; some are apparently occasional ministries exercised by Christians in general as opportunity arises and some ministries seem to involve the formal choice and appointment of particular people to fulfil them on a regular, continuing basis. Of some ministries it is specifically stated that they are given by God (*cf.* 1 Cor. 12: 4-7 in context; 1 Cor. 12: 28; Eph. 4: 11, 12); of others no such comment is made.

When one is confronted by this plethora of terms and references, one is forced to recognise that the question of interpreting them and correlating them is quite complex. Moreover, the ministry developed in the early church: it was not something that the first Christians either had from the beginning nor were able to take over *in toto* from Jewish (or any other) sources. Therefore we must expect to find a fluidity of practice from place to place and from time to time. And we must allow for the likelihood that different speakers and writers may not always use their terms in the same way.

Clearly however some form of ministry, and some pattern of organisation, existed within the early church. Therefore in considering the ministry and organisation of the church today, the appropriate starting point is to seek to understand the patterns that are to be found in the New Testament. This in itself does not of course solve all our present day problems nor decide all the questions which are being asked. But it is a fundamental prerequisite to any modern reassessment of present roles, functions and status of ministers and laity—for to attempt such a reassessment without a clear grasp of what can be known of early church practice in the New Testament is to work in a vacuum and in fact to repudiate in practice the concept of Biblical authority in the basic area of the church's life.

We must be careful at this point. The mere fact that we are able to establish what the early church did in relation to a particular matter does not automatically require that the church today must do the same thing. We must rightly divide the Word of Truth. The Scripture contains material that is prescriptive (and therefore we are to obey it) and other material which is descriptive (it tells us what was done without it being a necessary consequence that we copy it). Some parts of Scripture are normative (we are given standards to accept and patterns to follow) while others are informative (our knowledge is increased about what was once done).

However, when in the New Testament we find patterns of ministry being tried, being found successful in the church, and being specifically commended and commanded for other churches to adopt, then the onus of proof lies with those who would advocate that the church does not need to use such patterns of ministry today. And there *are* such patterns of ministry set out in the New Testament. Numbers of writers on the ministry have emphasised how many facts about the early church we do not know, and how many important questions we ask which remain unanswered. This is certainly true: but we must not fall into the error of allowing what we do not know to divert our attention from what we can know from the New Testament, nor cause us to undervalue that knowledge.

The obvious starting point for a detailed investigation is with the concept of elders, who came to play a prominent role in the Jerusalem church, who were appointed by Barnabas and Paul for the churches they founded, who were to be appointed by Timothy and Titus in the churches where they were, and who are mentioned also in the writings of James and Peter. Paul also instructs Timothy concerning appointing deacons, so this aspect of ministry is logically considered next and will be treated in a later issue.

The Origins of the Eldership

ALL the early Christians were Jews or proselytes: even the extension of the mission into Samaria took place (Acts 8) a few years after Pentecost, while the first proclamation of the Gospel to Gentiles (Acts 10), which was some years later still, only resulted from a special divine prod given to Peter, and this initial instance was not followed up on any widespread scale until after a further period of time had elapsed. Even as late as Acts 11: 19 we find that 'those who were scattered abroad because of the persecution that arose over Stephen travelled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to none except Jews'; then the following verse recounts the beginning of the proclamation to Gentiles at Antioch.

In this period of time Christianity was regarded, both by Christians

and Jews, as a divergent sect within Judaism. Even after the success of the proclamation to Gentiles there was a strong and vocal group within the church who insisted that these new Christians should become Jewish proselytes—the discussion of the issue was the *raison d'être* of the conference of Acts 15 (in this connection see especially vv. 1, 5, 6).

Jewish worship and religious life centred around the synagogue; in view of this fact that the earliest Christians¹ were Jews, it is no surprise that the evidence indicates the initial Christian organisation more or less automatically patterned itself on that of the synagogue. The content of Christian worship was the same (though of course with a Christian orientation) as that found in the Jewish synagogue (*cf.* Acts 2: 42) and one of the earliest and most Jewish of the New Testament books even refers to the Christian assembly by the term 'synagogue' (Jas. 2: 2).

There were large numbers of synagogues in Jerusalem (different accounts set the number in the city in A.D. 70 at 394 or 480) and many of these were established to allow groups with a particular link or association to conduct their worship together (see Acts 6: 9). Initially, then, the church in Jerusalem was just an extra synagogue with a particular emphasis: the teaching that the expected Messiah has come.

The relevance of this for our present purpose is that it enables us to understand the development of one aspect of leadership in the church. 'A board of elders managed the affairs of the synagogue and of the religious community which it represented,' and as the early church was at first a variety of synagogue, this became its earliest pattern of government also.

The minimum requirement for the existence of a synagogue was a group of ten men to constitute this board of elders (*Pirqe Aboth* iii. 7). For the earliest church this board of elders² would have been the apostolic twelve³ appointed by Christ Himself—hence the formal election of a successor after the defection of Judas. That there was thought to be a specific number is shown by the way use is made of the quotation from Psalm 109: 8, 'His office (*episkope* "oversight") let another take': a vacancy existed and was to be filled up. The elders of the synagogue supervised the worship and the instruction of the members, exercised discipline and exercised oversight concerning the distribution of alms—all of which functions we can see exercised by the apostles in the opening chapters of Acts.

Then two new issues emerged which led to changes. Firstly, the ever-increasing size of the Christian congregation and the growing complexity of its administration led to the delegation of some of these tasks to a group of deacons (Acts 6: 1-6); secondly the dispersion of the church (Acts 8: 1) led to the geographical division of the one initial Christian synagogue. The extent to which these geographically separate groups of Christians organised themselves into distinct congregations, with their own regular worship, is very difficult to assess.

Acts 9: 31, for example speaks of 'the church (singular) throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria'. Certainly, however, there was a separately organised church in Antioch in Acts 11: 26. No comment is to be found in the New Testament concerning how such daughter churches in Palestine/Syria were organised: but references now appear to 'elders' in the church in Jerusalem (Acts 11: 30; 15: 2-6), and Paul and Barnabas appointed elders in every church they founded (Acts 14: 23).

Thus it appears that with the apostles moving out from Jerusalem on wider missions (*cf.* Acts 9: 32) their work at Jerusalem passed in part into the hands of elders who were not also apostles (*cf.* Acts 16: 4, 'the apostles and elders who were at Jerusalem') and that this eldership provided a pattern which in turn Barnabas and Paul followed.

The Nature of the Eldership

THE references in Acts 20: 17 ('And from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called to him the elders of the church') and Acts 21: 18 ('On the following day Paul went in with us to James; and all the elders were present') indicate that the eldership was a very clearly defined and specific role in the Church—there was no vagueness concerning whether a person were an elder or not. This suggests that the formal appointment referred to in Acts 14: 23 and Titus 1: 5 was a widespread or possibly universal custom.

No information at all is given concerning the manner of the appointment of elders in the Jerusalem church. However the whole church seems to have been involved in the choice of Matthias as the new apostle in the place of Judas (Acts 1: 15-26), and in the selection of the deacons (Acts 6: 1-6). It is possible therefore to infer that a similar approach was adopted when elders were chosen; but we cannot be sure. On the other hand, in the Pauline churches the choice of elders seems to have been made by an existing leader: Barnabas and Paul (Acts 14: 23); Timothy (1 Tim. 5: 22); Titus (Titus 1: 5).

An important element in the picture of elders which is given in the New Testament—and one that is ignored in some modern discussion of the ministry, especially those seeking to equate 'elder' in the New Testament with the minister in a church today—is that each church had several elders. No number is ever mentioned, and therefore presumably the number who were appointed would be determined by how many there were in a congregation who were suitably qualified (see 1 Tim. 3: 1-7; Titus 1: 5-9). But they are always referred to in the New Testament in the plural in relation to any particular church.

Thus Barnabas and Paul appointed elders in every church they had founded in Asia (Acts 14: 23): the elders of Jerusalem are always referred to corporately in the plural (Acts 11: 30; 15: 2, 4, 5, 22, 23;

16: 4; 21: 18); Paul called the elders of the church at Ephesus to come to him (Acts 20: 17); Titus is to appoint elders in every town (Titus 1: 5); the sick person is to call for the elders of the church (Jas. 5: 14). On the basis then of this very consistent, repeated testimony it would seem beyond dispute that a congregation which is patterned on the New Testament basis would have a number of elders, having the qualifications set out in the New Testament and exercising the roles referred to in the New Testament.

The Functions of Elders

THE main function of the elders of a church was the exercise of oversight. As in the Jewish synagogue, so in the Christian church, the elders guide and govern the congregation, ordering its worship, controlling its affairs, regulating the relationships of its members. (As already noted earlier, illustrations of these activities will be found throughout Acts, especially the early chapters.) The apostles were the first elders of the church: in Acts 1: 20 Peter quotes Psalm 109: 8 regarding replacing Judas: 'His office (*episkopē*, "oversight") let another take.' In Acts 20: 28 Paul says to the elders of Ephesus, 'Take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers (*episkopoi*) to feed the church of the Lord which he obtained with his own blood.' *Episkopos*⁴ is elsewhere in the New Testament (Phil. 1: 1; 1 Tim. 3: 2; Titus 1: 7) translated as 'bishop'—it refers to the *function* of an elder in exercising oversight (this can be seen particularly from Titus 1: 7 in context). 1 Timothy 3: 1 says that it is a good thing if anyone aspires to *episkopē*, the office of exercising oversight.

The manner of the exercise of the elders' oversight is thus described in 1 Peter 5: 1-4:

'So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ as well as a partaker in the glory that is to be revealed. Tend the flock of God that is your charge, not by constraint but willingly, not for shameful gain but eagerly, not as domineering over those in your charge but being examples to the flock. And when the chief Shepherd is manifested you will obtain the unfading crown of glory.'

Peter immediately goes on to indicate the response that the elders should receive: 'Likewise you that are younger be subject to the elders.'

A number of other passages call for a similar recognition of 'those who are over you in the Lord'. Thus this part-quotation from 1 Thessalonians 5: 12, 13 reads in full: 'But we beseech you, brethren, to respect those who labour among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work.'

Similarly Hebrews 13: 7, 17, 24 runs as follows: 'Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God; consider the outcome of their life and imitate their faith . . . obey your leaders and submit to them; for they are keeping watch over your souls, as men who will have to give account. . . . Greet all your leaders and all the saints.'

And in 1 Timothy 5: 17 we read: 'Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honour, especially those who labour in preaching and teaching.'

It would seem quite clear from the foregoing that the function of ruling, of oversight, is a major one for the elders of a congregation: but it should be noted that it is a function which is shared jointly by *all* the elders of a particular congregation and not exercised by one single individual. The one occasion in the New Testament where reference is made to one individual who is giving himself the preeminence in this way, it is to condemn him (3 John 9, 10). In the Jewish synagogue there was a chief elder, a ruler (*cf.* Mark 5: 36, 38; Luke 13: 14, etc.) but he acted as a president and did not exercise dictatorial control. Similarly in the early church the office of presiding elder seems to have emerged in James (Acts 15: 13-21), and possibly Timothy and Titus may have exercised that role at Ephesus (1 Tim. 1: 3) and in Crete (Titus 1: 5) respectively, but the elders as such clearly exercised their *episkopē*, their oversight, jointly in a congregation.

In line with the elder's task of ruling is the requirement of 1 Timothy 3: 4, 5: 'He must manage his own household well, keeping his children submissive and respectful in every way; for if a man does not know how to manage his own household, how can he care for God's church?' (So also Titus 1: 6.)

The second main function of the elder is preaching and teaching: 'he must hold firm to the sure word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to confute those who contradict it' (Titus 1: 9; *cf.* 1 Tim. 3: 2b). The task of ministering the word of God (together with prayer) was the prime calling of the first Christian elders, the apostles (Acts 6: 4), and the importance of this task was what led to their delegating other responsibilities.

It may well be that not all the elders shared equally in the preaching and teaching: it would seem from 1 Timothy 5: 17 that while all had joint responsibility in ruling, some had particular responsibility in preaching and teaching: 'Let the elders who rule will be considered worthy of double honour, especially those who labour in preaching and teaching.' In any case it is clear that the ministry of preaching and teaching is *not limited* to the elders. There is no suggestion for example that Stephen and Philip were elders, but they were very effective in their preaching (Acts 6: 10ff; 8: 5). What Timothy had heard from Paul he was to pass on to others who in turn were to teach yet others. What was required of those to whom Timothy committed the message, and who were themselves to teach it, was that they be believers (2

Timothy 2: 2).

The picture we have then is of a group of elders from the congregation, possibly with a presiding elder (who may or may not have been drawn from that congregation), who are responsible for the order in the congregation and who (jointly, if the Jewish pattern is applicable here) conduct its worship. They, or at any rate some of them, will themselves share in the ministry of prayer, preaching and teaching; but in addition there will be others who share in these things, both within the congregation and to those outside the congregation. This picture is reinforced by the description in 1 Corinthians 14: 26ff. of what happens when the congregation meets: the different individual members may each make a contribution—but in a controlled and orderly way (*cf.* vv. 33 and 40).

If the elders are thus responsible for the congregation's worship, this would seem to include also the conducting of the rite of Holy Communion. But if in fact the Lord's Supper is not conducted by a group of elders it would appear to be a joint activity in which the entire congregation all participated equally: there is absolutely no sign in 1 Corinthians 10 or 11 of one single person 'celebrating' the sacrament after having been duly authorised to do so by some authority, and administering it to the congregation. Certainly all the references to the activities of the Lord's Supper are couched in the plural (except for the section on individual personal self-examination in 1 Corinthians 11: 27-29). There is no suggestion in these two chapters, or anywhere else in the New Testament, of the idea of an 'authorised celebrant' for Holy Communion.

If one considers 1 Corinthians 11 in isolation, one could easily conclude that each member of the congregation acted entirely on his own in taking part in the Lord's Supper (see for instance verse 33—it could be held that only if each person acted on his own would this exhortation be needed). For myself, however, I think it more likely that once we recognise the role of a group of elders in a congregation, the arranging and conducting of the Lord's Supper would come jointly under them, as did also the other aspects of congregational worship.

Thirdly, an elder must be a man who will 'care for God's church' (1 Tim. 3: 5). Peter exhorts the elders among his readers to tend the flock that is in their charge, not as domineering over those in their charge, but being examples to the flock (1 Pet. 5: 1-3). The elders of a church are to visit the sick person who calls for them and pray over him and anoint him (Jas. 5: 14). The congregation is told it must obey and submit to its leaders 'for they are keeping watch over your souls, as men who will have to give account. Let them do this joyfully, and not sadly, for that would be of no advantage to you' (Heb. 13: 17). Paul tells the Ephesian elders that the Holy Spirit has made them guardians (*episkopoi*, 'bishops', 'overseers') 'to feed ("pastor") the church of the Lord' (Acts 20: 28).

Pastoral concern involves also the protection of the flock from the 'fierce wolves who will come in among you, not sparing the flock', and heretics also will arise from their own midst; therefore the elders must 'be alert' and on guard against this danger (Acts 20: 29-31). The elders are charged with a responsibility in the flock of being guardians of true doctrine against error and those who teach it (see Titus 1: 9-16).

We find in the opening chapters of Acts widespread evidence of how in practice the first elders, the apostles, demonstrated pastoral concern for the flock. And we note that when the church at Antioch sent relief to the church at Jerusalem by the hand of Barnabas and Saul (Acts 11: 30) it was sent to the elders at Jerusalem. Although presumably the work of dispensing this relief to the needy would have been undertaken by the deacons (see the kind of duty for which they would be responsible (Acts 6: 1)), yet nonetheless the responsibility, as a matter of pastoral concern, lay with the elders.

Qualifications of Elders

THE three functions of elders indicate the first qualification needed by elders: the ability to fulfil those functions. It is legitimate for a person to aspire to the role of bishop, or elder (1 Tim. 3: 1), but a person's suitability for the office must be recognisable by others. He must be known as a person capable of exercising wise oversight over others (as evidenced by his management of his own household). He must be known as a person who is an apt teacher, holding fast the sure word he has been taught and able to give instruction in sound doctrine to others and to refute error. He must have a genuine interest in and concern for the welfare of the flock of God (see Acts 20: 28-30; 1 Tim. 3: 1-7; Titus 1: 5-11; 1 Pet. 5: 1-3).

This presupposes a God-given ability in these fields of Christian ministry, and the prior training and exercise of that ability. 'He must hold firm to the sure word as taught' (Titus 1: 9): this indicates that the person concerned has proved himself to be an attentive and diligent student. A person should therefore not be appointed an elder in a congregation who is a recent convert (1 Tim. 3: 6) or who has not been adequately instructed in the Scriptures and in biblical doctrine, or who has not proven that he can effectively impart these truths to others, teaching the faithful and correcting those who are led astray in error.

Now, as mentioned earlier, if we take 1 Timothy 5: 17 at face value it clearly implies that all elders share in the function of ruling (and those who do this well merit double honour), while such honour is also especially merited by those who preach and teach—which indicates that not all elders are equally engaged in an active ministry of preaching and teaching. This verse may mean that there was 'a special class (of preacher-teachers) within the presbyterate'^a or alternatively it may mean

that some of the elders worked harder in preaching and teaching, or gave more attention to preaching and teaching, or, possibly, were better at it, than others.*

Without fully resolving these two variant interpretations, we can however take this as well substantiated by the passages we have noted in the Pastoral Epistles: *all* elders were required to be adequately taught and trained in the Scriptures and biblical doctrine, and able to teach others and refute error, as a qualification for appointment to the eldership; while *some* of the elders found their special role in the church in preaching and teaching. Those who labour in preaching and teaching are especially to receive double financial support from the congregation (the meaning of 'double honour'—see 1 Timothy 5: 18). This presumably is because their labours would prevent them earning a living themselves—see later, where the question of a 'full-time' ministry is discussed.

Timothy is obviously one of those who 'labour in preaching and teaching': much of the two epistles addressed to him is taken up with comments upon his role in preaching and teaching (1 Tim. 4: 6, 11, 13, 16; 6: 2b; 2 Tim. 2: 2; 4: 1-2; etc.) and in rebuking and refuting wrong teaching (1 Tim. 1: 3-7; 6: 3-5; 2 Tim. 2: 14; 4: 2-4; etc.). It is reasonable for us to take it that an elder who in this way is to have a special ministry in preaching and teaching, requires for his role as a teaching elder a longer and more thorough preparation than one whose main role may be in ruling. At any rate, in the two letters to Timothy, Paul again and again refers to the training and preparation, under God, which has brought Timothy to his present hour: he has been thoroughly grounded in the sacred scriptures from childhood (2 Tim. 3: 15); he has learnt from observing Paul's teaching, conduct and character (2 Tim. 3: 10-13), and he is to 'follow the pattern of the sound words' which he has thus learnt, to 'guard the truth that has been entrusted to "him" by the Holy Spirit' and to 'continue in what' he 'has learnt' (2 Tim. 1: 13-14; 3: 14).

The two epistles also give a great deal of guidance throughout on the way in which Timothy is to exercise his pastoral concern in the congregation. Anyone therefore who under God is called upon to fulfil the role of a Timothy as preacher, teacher and pastor in a congregation may legitimately be expected to have a similar level of equivalent and appropriate training and preparation to qualify him for his role.

We may say then that any potential elder must be adequately prepared for his role, must show ability in management and oversight, must be trained in the Word and apt to teach, and must have pastoral concern. He must show evidence of these things *before* he becomes an elder (for the possession of them must be recognisable in order for him to become an elder); and we may take it therefore that the congregation must provide scope and opportunities for Christians to be able to discover, develop and demonstrate these abilities: i.e. there

must in some way be the possibility for the emergence and ministry of the 'trainee elder'. Moreover, those elders who are to exercise a special ministry in preaching and teaching should have additional training and experience such as will equip them to fulfil the role of a Timothy in the congregation.

The person who is appointed an elder must have a Christian character. This is described in 1 Timothy 3: 2-7 in these terms: he 'must be above reproach, a one-woman man, temperate, sensible, dignified, hospitable . . . no drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, and no lover of money . . . he must not be a recent convert, or he may be puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil; moreover he must be well thought of by outsiders, or he may fall into reproach and the snare of the devil.'

According to Titus 1: 6-8 he must be 'blameless, a one-woman man . . . blameless (Paul repeats the word), not arrogant or quick-tempered or a drunkard or violent or greedy for gain, but hospitable, a lover of goodness, master of himself, upright, holy, and self-controlled.'

This is quite a list, and we may well quail before it. Which of us is sufficient for these things? Well might Paul say to Timothy (1 Tim. 5: 22), 'Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands' (i.e. to make a man an elder)! But elders *were* appointed in each of the churches; so we may encourage ourselves that by the grace of God the Holy Spirit will select and equip and empower men for this office in a congregation (Acts 20: 28).

Another qualification for the office of elder is that it is in the New Testament limited to men. This may be seen from three lines of evidence.

First, as we have noted, the initial group of elders in the first Christian congregation were the apostles themselves. These were chosen by Christ Himself, and were all men. When the ministry of the apostles broadened out beyond Jerusalem and elders were appointed who were not apostles, these also, quite clearly, were men. The reasons were because the pattern of the Christian eldership initially was that of the Jewish elders, and the Jews restricted this office very strictly to males, and also because Christ had only chosen men as apostles, and this fact was also pattern for the Christian eldership.

Secondly we have the specific reference to 'man' (as distinct from 'woman') in the discussion of the qualifications of an elder in 1 Timothy 3: 1-7 and Titus 1: 5-9. An elder is to be a 'one-woman man', that is, a person who is loyal to a wife and does not become involved with other women; but the point is also made here that he is to be a *man*. This is further reinforced by the fact that an elder is required to be able to manage his own household as well as a qualification for the role of ruling as an elder. This could never be said of a woman. (A deacon is also required to be a 'one-woman man' in 1 Timothy 3: 8-13, but there is in this discussion a very interesting comment, verse 11, for

which there is absolutely no parallel in the discussion about elders, and to this verse we shall return when we consider the question of deacons.)

Thirdly, the theological discussion of the role of women in the New Testament, when compared with the role of elder, shows that the two are mutually exclusive. A woman is not to exercise authority over a man (1 Cor. 11: 3; 1 Tim. 1: 12; etc.) whereas the function of the group of elders in a church is, as we have seen, to exercise rule and authority within the congregation.

I take it therefore that the fact that the New Testament does not ever refer to women as elders is not a coincidence but a reflection of a clear and deliberate policy in the New Testament church, and one that was specifically intended to be normative. I want to emphasise, though, that this does not mean that I would think women are thereby completely excluded from all forms of ministry in the congregation: I shall return to this question again in the appropriate place.

Appointment of Elders

I HAVE already mentioned earlier that we do not know very much at all concerning how elders were chosen, but that it appears very likely that in the Jerusalem church they were elected by some process in which the entire congregation was involved, while in the Pauline churches the choice of elders seems to have been made by the existing leaders (Barnabas and Paul in Asia, Acts 14: 23, Timothy in Ephesus, 1 Tim. 5: 22; Titus in Crete, Titus 1: 5). The selection would have involved the recognition of the qualification of the person for the office (*cf.* the parallel for deacons in Acts 6: 1-6, and the instructions of Paul to Timothy and Titus on whom to appoint, 1 Tim. 3: 1-7; Titus 1: 5-9).

In addition, there is presumably a recognition that the person himself is called of God to the office of elder. There is no word of Scripture precisely on this point; but there is the parallel of Acts 13: 2 when the Holy Spirit called Barnabas and Saul for their particular work and this call was recognised by the church; there is the certainty of Paul concerning his own call which he regarded as the foundation of his own ministry and to which he refers many times over in different ways (e.g. 1 Cor. 9: 16; Gal. 1: 15, 16; 1 Tim. 2: 7; 2 Tim. 1: 11; etc.). Moreover, Paul seems to be referring to some kind of calling of the Holy Spirit of Timothy in 1 Timothy 1: 18, a calling which was recognised by Paul and the church 'in accordance with the prophetic utterances which pointed to' him; though what form this took we are not able to know. Finally, we note that (1 Tim. 3: 1) a person is encouraged to aspire to the office of bishop (elder), and it is reasonable to take this to be an aspiration motivated by the Holy Spirit (see also Acts 20: 28), and that the aspirant for this office would testify (and

would be expected to testify) that he believed himself called of God to it.

To be an elder therefore a person must be qualified for that office (in the terms set out in the New Testament, as discussed above), and must be called to that office by the Holy Spirit. These qualifications and this call must be recognised: though at this point the Scripture gives us two patterns—the recognition may be by the whole congregation in some way (what I would call the ‘Jerusalem pattern’) or by a specific church leader or leaders (the ‘Pauline pattern’). This recognition takes the form of appointment to the office of elder, and to this we now turn.

In recognition of having qualifications for, and a call to, the office of elder, the person is now appointed to that office. We are given absolutely no information at all concerning the manner of this in the Jerusalem church, but in the case (Acts 6: 1-6) of the appointment of deacons the church brought to the apostles those whom they had chosen and the apostles accepted and endorsed this choice, and the appointment of the men to their rôle, by laying hands upon them in prayer. It is possible that a similar laying on of hands marked the appointment of elders.

It is not specifically mentioned anywhere in the Pauline corpus that the appointment of elders was by the laying on of hands, but this is a very reasonable inference from the references to that rite. In 1 Timothy 4: 14 Paul speaks of the occasion ‘when the elders laid their hands upon you’ and in 2 Timothy 1: 6 he refers to ‘the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands’: presumably both references to the one occasion, and that occasion the appointment of Timothy as an elder. Then in 1 Timothy 5: 22 when Timothy is told not to be hasty in the laying on of hands, this is in a context referring to elders (see vv. 17, 19) and presumably again the reference is to the appointment of elders and thus means, ‘Do not be too hasty in appointing men as elders.’

Having thus been appointed, a person would then function as an elder. There are three tantalising questions which arise here concerning the consequences of this appointment, questions about which we get little information from Scripture.

First, is appointment as an elder a life-long matter? That is, does this act place an indelible impress upon a man so that he is always to be recognised as an elder? The Scripture gives no direct guidance on this point, but the background of the New Testament record suggests that when a man has been qualified, trained and called to be an elder, he has entered upon a rôle which he will continue to fulfil thereafter. Perhaps this permanent rôle as an elder could be that gift of God which Timothy had by the laying on of hands and which he is exhorted not to neglect but continually to stir up and exercise, i.e. a rôle of ministry (see 1 Tim. 4: 14-16 and 2 Tim. 1: 6).

Secondly—a related issue—can a man be removed from his role as elder, or from the active exercise of that role? Again, we have very little to go on. Paul is willing to entertain an accusation against an elder if it is brought by two or more witnesses (1 Tim. 5: 19). The nature of what this charge could be is not specified, but from the wording of the following verse is presumably concerned with sin which the elder has committed, and the action to be taken is the public rebuke of such persons. What further action is to follow if they do not accept the rebuke and repent, is not stated. However in another context Paul mentions (1 Tim. 3: 20) Hymenaeus and Alexander, who have made shipwreck of their faith and who blaspheme; Paul has delivered them to Satan. In 2 Timothy 2: 16-18 he mentions Hymenaeus again and with him Philetus, who are teaching error. These men were obviously influential to rate mention, and may have been elders: but we really do not know that this was the case. Presumably an elder who falls into sin will be rebuked and if he fails to repent will not be allowed to continue functioning in the congregation; presumably an elder who falls into error will be prevented so far as possible from teaching in the congregation and will have his teaching refuted by the other elders. These seem reasonable deductions; to say more would be to enter the realm of sheer guesswork.

The third question is whether an elder was full time in the exercise of his role. It is very unlikely that this was normally the case. As we have seen, there would be a number of elders in each congregation and (initially at least) the eldership was patterned according to the Jewish model. Eldership among the Jews was not a full time occupation. Moreover, it is unlikely in the extreme that the typical congregation would be in a position to undertake the support of such a group of elders, if the elders had no other income source.

On the other hand, Paul emphasised very strongly that those who were taught the Word were responsible to share their material blessings with the one who was teaching them (Gal. 6: 6). He stressed his own personal right to support from those to whom he ministered (1 Cor. 9: 3-18), in which the crucial statement is verse 14, 'In the same way the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel'.

Moreover we have already noted in 1 Timothy 5: 17 that those elders who labour in preaching and teaching should be considered worthy of 'double stipend' (NEB), as should those who 'rule well'. It is likely that the reason is that a person who is occupied with the 'ruling' of a congregation, or with preaching and teaching, has his time taken up so that he cannot earn his living in the usual way. If he is provided with adequate support by the congregation, it frees him more fully to that extent to concentrate on the task to which he has been called, whether ruling or preaching and teaching. However, we note that there were occasions when the support which Paul received was

very meagre or non-existent, and in these circumstances he simply went back to his trade of tentmaking (see e.g. Acts 18: 1-4).

Thus there does not seem to be in Scripture the idea that an elder must be full time or that the appointment of a person as elder is to be dependent upon the ability of a congregation to support him fully. He is chosen and appointed an elder for quite different reasons, as we have seen. But then the congregation is to be exhorted and encouraged to give the best support it can (which may not necessarily be total support) to one or more men whom they know rule well, or labour in preaching and teaching. Where this is done (note that 1 Timothy 5: 17 only says the elders are worthy of it, not necessarily that they are going to receive it!) then the elders can fulfil their ministry more completely.

The aim is that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel, that those who receive the teaching of the Word should support the teacher; but many elders in a congregation may permanently continue in their own regular employment and even those who seek to give their whole lives to the proclamation of the gospel are free to decide, as Paul did, that they will renounce their rights to support from the congregation (see 1 Cor. 9: 15) or that they will accept such partial support as can be given and supplement this by their own working to earn an income.

To require that an elder (even a teaching elder) must always be full time in his work as an elder, and that he must always be fully supported by his congregation, is to lay a requirement upon him and the congregation which is not justifiable from Scripture and which could hinder the organisation and ministry of and in a congregation, and slow down the whole growth of the work of God in an area. What is to be desired in this regard is clear enough from Scripture: but then so is the importance of allowing for flexibility in particular circumstances, in which an elder may wish to 'make no use of his rights' in this regard if it is for the benefit of a congregation. We ought to beware of inventing and imposing rules in this matter which go beyond what we find is required in the Scriptures.

Summary

1. THE organisation of the early church in Jerusalem was patterned on that of the synagogue, with the apostles being the first elders.

2. In due course, with the growth and expansion of the church, other elders were appointed in Jerusalem, and the eldership became also the pattern adopted for the Pauline churches.

3. A number of elders were appointed for each congregation, jointly exercising the functions of eldership for that congregation, with sometimes reference being made to a person who functioned as a presiding or chief elder.

4. The functions of the elders were to exercise oversight (to have responsibility for the rule and ordering of the congregation and its affairs), for the ministry of preaching, teaching and worship in the congregation (though by no means undertaking this themselves to the exclusion of others) and for pastoral concern for the members of the flock. These functions were shared jointly by the entire group of elders, but some of the elders exercised a more specific ministry of preaching and teaching than did others.

5. Only those were to be appointed as elders in a congregation who were qualified for the office. Qualifications of an elder were: to be the husband of one wife, and managing his own household well; well trained in the Word and able to teach the faithful and to refute error; evidencing a pastoral concern for the flock; having a Christian character and respected in the community and amongst the outsiders. Only males were appointed as elders.

6. Those elders in the congregation having a particular ministry in preaching and teaching need an appropriately more thorough preparation and training to equip them as a Timothy in the congregation to proclaim the Word and effectively refute error.

7. Selection and appointment of elders may be by the involvement of the whole congregation or by the church leaders, the actual act of appointment as an elder being a rite of laying on of hands by the other elders.

8. It is likely (though not certain) that elders once appointed would continue to exercise their ministry for a lifetime; but could be restrained by the church from the exercise of any ministry in the event of unrepented sin or doctrinal error.

9. There is no reason for believing that the appointment of elders necessarily involved a full time ministry for them, nor their complete financial support by a church; however, a congregation has a responsibility to support the elder or elders who minister the Word to them, though an elder may on occasion choose, in part or completely, to forego this right to support, and work for his own support.

¹ In fact the very use of the term 'Christians' of the members of the church in its earliest days is something of an anachronism, as this term only came into use after the preaching to Gentiles at Antioch (see Acts 11: 26), and does not seem to have had much currency in Jewish-Christian circles. The Jewish Christians referred to themselves as 'brethren' (cf. Acts 1: 15, 16).

² *Presbuteroi*, sometimes transliterated into English as 'presbyters'.

³ Peter specifically describes himself as an elder in 1 Peter 5: 1, and possibly so does John in 2 John 1 and 3 John 1.

⁴ It should be noted carefully that in New Testament times *episkopos* is a functional word referring to what an elder does, and not a technical term for a church official. Thus in 1 Peter 2: 25 Christ is described as 'the Shepherd and Bishop ("overseer", "guardian") of your souls'.

⁵ Thus D. Guthrie on this verse in his Tyndale Commentary, *The Pastoral Epistles* (London, 1957). Cf. also C. J. Ellicott in his commentary on this

verse: 'The concluding words, "in preaching and teaching", certainly seem to imply *two* kinds of ruling presbyters, those who preached and taught, and those who did not.'

- * Thus E. K. Simpson in *The Pastoral Epistles* (London, 1954) on this verse: 'Another view seems, however, defensible, that two classes of presbyters are not predicated but that presbyters pre-eminently painstaking "in word and teaching" are singled out as worthy of generous treatment.'