

1 Biblical Church Government

I believe it would be impossible to exaggerate the importance of the eldership for the sake not only of the local church but also of the national church. The issues concerning a biblical view of eldership are quite crucial. As I pray for the revival of the Church in Scotland and beyond, I find myself increasingly praying for the reformation in our view of the eldership.

The Church

Before we deal with the office of the elder in some detail, we should consider briefly a little about the Church in which the elder holds office. In the New Testament several metaphors are used to describe the Church of Christ. The Church is depicted as a *body* in which believers are members. Or as a *flock* and believers are sheep in that flock. The Church is also seen as a *household* or *family* in which the believers are members. At other times it is a *building* into which the believers are being built as 'living stones'.

Whichever metaphor scripture uses, integral to the biblical teaching about the Church is the *headship of Jesus Christ* over the Church. He is the head of the body, he is the head of the family, he is the headstone or the cornerstone of the building, he is the Chief Shepherd of the flock. Wherever these metaphors occur in the New Testament to describe the Church they preserve the basic truth of the headship of Christ. We are bound to say, therefore, that the New Testament teaches the Church is only truly itself when it is distinguished by this headship and Lordship of Christ.

The Authority of Christ

Our starting point must be, therefore, the understanding that the overseer (elder) must be governed, led and directed by Christ as the head of his Church. The conclusion one has to draw from Christ's headship of his Church is that the Church is not a democracy. A democracy is ruled by the will of the majority, according to their wishes, with the right to decide its own aims, constitution and functions. It is a common misunderstanding that the Church is a democracy in this sense. But it is of profound importance that we correct such a wrong view, because the Church of Christ in the New Testament is never a democracy. If anything, it is a monarchy where Christ is the King and the Head. To him belongs all authority. As we shall see, his authority in the Church he delegates in some measure to those he chooses to be elders.

The Nature of Biblical Government

We need to clarify three things about the specific nature of biblical church government. First, it is *spiritual government*. It is concerned with the spiritual life, well-being, guidance and direction of God's people.¹ Therefore its disciplines are spiritual disciplines and its aims are spiritual aims. Secondly, true church government is *pastoral government*. Its emphasis is pastoral care rather than legal rule. Thirdly, true church government - and this is most important of all - is *biblical government*. Its laws and principles are not derived from human wisdom but from God's. So whenever we think about church government, we must think about biblical laws, biblical revelation and biblical principles because these are the only foundations on which the government of the Church may be built.

We know that the authority of Scripture is vital in guiding our personal lives. It is just as vital for shaping our communal life as the Church of God. All offices within the Church need to be derived and understood only from Scripture - not from profession, nor from convenience but only from Scripture. Only then will our understanding of eldership be accurate, and our exercise of eldership effective.

The Biblical Vocabulary of Eldership

Eldership in Judaism

The biblical vocabulary helps us to understand the nature and calling of the elder. The origin of the concept of the eldership goes right back to the roots of the Old Testament revelation. Moses is told by God to gather the elders of Israel together and say to them, 'The Lord God of

your fathers appeared to me' (Ex 3.16). We can trace the biblical concept of the elder right through the Old Testament.²

In the course of Jesus's ministry we frequently read in the Gospels about the elders. However badly they may have been leading God's people, however corrupt they may have become, elders appear in the Gospel as rulers of God's people.³ This demonstrates that the apostles were not introducing something new when they ordained elders. They were building on the foundation of previous biblical revelation. The eldership is something that goes back to the roots of Judaeo-Christian history. The government of the church by elders is a pattern found throughout the whole Bible.

The Old Testament word for elder is very significant. It probably originally meant somebody who had a beard, the idea behind it being someone who was reasonably mature. Clearly an elder was someone recognised as belonging to the *older* age group, but not necessarily the *elderly* age group. We may have misunderstood the vocabulary since we tend to think of elders as 'the elderly'. The emphasis is more likely to have been on the wisdom and maturity which comes with years. Certainly that is the emphasis that we need if we are going to understand the progression from the Old Testament vocabulary into the New Testament.

Did you know that the President of the United States has only one qualification and that is he must be over the age of thirty-five? That is the only qualification. Now you may think that is not a very adequate qualification. But it is a significant thing that their law says in effect he need to be (literally) a 'bearded individual' - he needs to be a man who will in some sense command respect and be able to exercise authority. That intention is exactly the meaning behind the biblical word for elder which is that the office of President should only be held by a man with the wisdom of maturer years.

However, note that Paul writes to Timothy and says to him, 'don't let anyone despise your youthfulness'.⁴ What he is saying is that spiritual authority does not come *automatically* with the years; spiritual authority comes from being *an example* to the flock which is what Paul goes on to tell Timothy he is to be: 'Don't let anyone despise your youthfulness', he says, 'but be an example to the believers in speech, life, love, faith and purity'. A godly example is what conveys spiritual authority. We see this in our own fellowships. We discover those who in years may be comparatively young but who have risen to a place of spiritual stature and maturity which many who are much older may not have achieved.

Christian usage

In the New Testament we find two Greek words for eldership (*presbuteros* and *episcopos*) which have given to us our English words Presbyterian and Episcopal. The word *presbuteros* which is usually translated 'elder' probably refers to the qualities of the office - the character of the man, the kind of person he needs to be. The word *episcopos* (translated 'bishop' in the AV but 'overseer' in most modern versions) probably refers to the *function* he fulfils. Certainly there is no doubt that the New Testament uses these two words interchangeably to describe the same people.⁵ Indeed, the New Testament evidence obliges us to deduce that the eldership is the one ruling office in the early Church. The vast majority of modern scholars would not dispute this.

Ruling and Teaching Elders

There are clear New Testament grounds for distinguishing two aspects of the work of elders which lead to the development of two categories of elder: the ruling elder and the teaching elder. In 1 Timothy 5.17 we read, 'The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honour'. Clearly the reference is to ruling elders, 'the elders who *direct the affairs* of the church well...'. But there follows this phrase, 'especially those whose work is *preaching and teaching*'.

When we look carefully at that statement we see there are two conclusions one may draw. The first: teach as their main ministry. The natural reading of Paul's comment suggests that

there are two separate ministries which elders fulfil. All elders rule, but some elders also teach and preach.

There are no grounds for suggesting that ruling elders should never preach or teach. But it is possible to infer that some elders who need to be supported by the church to give themselves mainly to the ministry of preaching and teaching. Such an influence is supported by Paul's following comment, 'For the Scripture says, "Do not muzzle the Ox while it is treading the corn" and "The worker deserves his wages"' (1 Tim. 5.18). The apostle is addressing the need for the church to set aside some of its elders to give themselves to labour in this teaching ministry alone. That is to be their main contribution to the church's life.⁶

So far, therefore, we may deduce three things about eldership:

1. It is marked by plurality that is, there are several elders in each church
2. It is marked by equality that is, there is no hierarchy within the eldership; the office of minister or pastor finds its significance within the institution and not outside of it.

This equality within the eldership is such a fundamental principal in my view that I am not entirely happy to make a distinction between ministers and elders. All ministers (so-called) are elders. Their function may be that they minister the word but nonetheless they are still elders. There is no hierarchy within the eldership.

3. It is marked by diversity - that is, although the *status* of all elders is equal, the *function* of elders will inevitably be different; some will excel in some gifts, some in others; some will excel in some qualities and others in different qualities.

¹ It is true that historically in Scotland Kirk Sessions have had certain civil powers. But essentially, the government of elders is a spiritual government.

² See for example Judges 8.14; 1 Samuel 8.4; 2 Kings 19.2; Ruth 4.2; Ezra 5.5; Ezekiel 8.1; Isaiah 24.23 etc.

³ Eg Matthew 15.2, 16.21, 26.3; Mark 7.3, 8.31, 11.27, 14.43; Luke 7.3, 9.22, 20.1 etc.

⁴ 1 Timothy 4.12

⁵ See Acts 20.17,28; 1 Peter 5.1,2; Titus 1.5,7; 1 Timothy 3.1,17

⁶ We will comment in a subsequent study on Paul's statement in 1 Timothy 3.2 that elders should be 'able to teach'.