

3 The Choice and Appointment of Elders

Firstly, elders were essentially appointed by the Holy Spirit. In Acts 20.28, that significant passage where Paul calls the elders to meet him at Miletus, he identifies the fact that the ultimate appointment comes from God. It is, he says, 'the Holy Spirit who made you overseers'. In the deepest sense, that should always be true. Appointments to the eldership should be recognisably God's appointment.

But secondly, the apostles themselves were the instruments of the Holy Spirit in making the appointment of elders. The first is in Acts 14, when Paul and Barnabas have completed their first missionary journey. There we read that Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord in whom they had put their trust (v 23). Thirdly, the apostles at times delegated the authority to appoint elders. For example Paul reminds Titus that the reason he left him in Crete was that he might 'straighten out what was left unfinished and appoint (or ordain) elders in every town, as I directed you' (Tit 1.5). While the ordination and appointment of elders has to do with apostolic direction, clearly it is given to Titus by the apostle. However, the principle is clear enough in the New Testament that the Holy Spirit appointed elders, generally working through the apostles, though at times they authorised men such as Titus and Timothy to undertake this great responsibility.

The Meaning of 'Ordination'

The Greek word for 'appoint' or 'ordain' is a very significant and interesting word. It can carry three different meanings and it may be that in the New Testament it is used at times with all three of its possible connotations. Firstly, it can mean simply 'to stretch out the hand'. Secondly, it can mean 'to appoint by a show of hands', so when they appointed elders, some conclude, this was by the election of the people of God who appointed by a show of hands. Thirdly, it can mean 'to appoint or elect' without regard to the method.

I am inclined to think that the appointment of elders, as in Acts 14 for example, was by the 'stretching out of hands' in the sense of laying hands upon them. That means the elders' 'appointment' or 'ordination' meant that hands were laid upon them. Negatively, in this regard, we find reference to *not* laying hands on anyone suddenly - that is, not appointing or ordaining people to service without due regard for the need for time to assess and understand the gifts and calling of the individual. But, whatever method was used for selecting and ordaining elders, there are two primary things we must have in mind.

The Office Seeking the Person

The principle here is simple: the office is such that all selection of elders needs to be made on biblical criteria, never on worldly criteria. No one should be chosen for the eldership because he has been successful in other spheres of life, or because he is a person of significance or influence or leadership in commerce, industry or the professions. This is one of the things for which we are paying a price in the churches in our day. In the past, we have been moved by worldly considerations in terms of the selection of elders. Nor should the choice of future elders be on the grounds of popularity. It is a grave error to think that the most popular person is the best qualified person to exercise godly leadership in a congregation. We must, therefore, proceed on the basis of biblical criteria alone.

Readers may ask, 'But what are these biblical criteria?' They are set out for us in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus. When God is raising up people of such quality, we shall certainly see Him bringing them to the fore in the fellowship in which they serve. Again, you may ask, 'How will that be evident?' In various ways we will see people emerging in the life of the congregation who are gifted, godly, qualified leaders. They will gradually come to our notice and will almost be 'displayed' by God before the fellowship of His people as potential leaders and elders. God produces them: we simply recognise them. And the outcome will be that pattern which is evident in the church in Antioch in Acts 13: 'it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to separate these men for the ministry'. Thus it was 'they laid hands on them and sent them forth'. Now of course this process required God-given discernment and

wisdom, for which we need to pray. I believe this to be cardinal importance. And this is what I call the first main emphasis. Elders are called and equipped by God and then are recognised and appointed by us.

The Person Seeking the Office

But that is only one side of the picture. That is, if you like, the office seeking the person. There is another side. I wonder if you have ever noticed in 1 Timothy 3.1 that the person may seek the office? 'Here is a trustworthy saying: If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer he desires a noble task.' We are so unused to this idea that I rather think our immediate reaction is to say, 'How utterly improper and unacceptable that anybody should seek the office of an elder!' The future elder, we feel, should be a bit like the candidate for the Speaker's chair in the House of commons who feigns the utmost reluctance to take on such a high position.

Let me suggest to you that it is very difficult to hold that view in the light of what Paul writes in 1 Timothy 3.1. Here Paul clearly says to Timothy, 'If anybody has set his heart on being an overseer, he desires a noble task.' Let me put it to you further that if we believe in the equality of all elders, teaching and ruling, you would never expect those who are called to the teaching eldership to say, 'Well, I have never thought about going into the ministry but, if you drag me, I shall go.' The person comes and says, 'I believe the hand of God is upon me. I believe the Spirit of God is persuading me. I believe that God is calling me to the ministry and I want the church to test my call.' Nationally, the church tests the call of teaching elders. I have been involved in the selection schools for candidates for the ministry and what we are doing there is simply saying to these people who come, 'We are here to test our call but you yourselves need to be sure that God has called you.' But also locally, we must test the call of potential elders in our congregation.

Seeking Service not Office

I wonder if we have given enough emphasis to this issue in our thinking about the eldership? 'If anyone desires the office of an overseer, he desires a good thing.' It may be that they seek the eldership with humility of mind and not because they are interested in the office as such. You see the essence of the elder's ministry is not office, but service. So because certain ones have begun to recognise that God has laid his hand upon them and given them a burden for the flock of God, they may well begin to know something of this desire of which Paul is writing. Ought we not to expect some people to come to us and say, 'I want to share something with you'? For our part, we ought to have the discernment to know whether it is because they have an arrogant desire for prominence or whether they have a humble, godly burden for caring for the flock of God. 'God is calling me to this ministry.'

We Need to be Consistent

If we are going to be thoroughly biblical, ought we not to be biblical in this matter as well as others? Yet too often we are not, when it comes to 'the person seeking office'. Might this be one of the evidences that we do not in fact view the ruling and the teaching elder as in true equality? In light of all this, I have doubts in my mind as to whether we go about the choice of elders in the right way and here I am thinking aloud and asking questions. I have three questions.

Firstly, I wonder if we give enough weight to the fact that it is God who produces those elders who are appointed by the Holy Spirit. So often we wrest the initiative from God. 'We need ten new elders,' we say, 'let's look around and see who the most suitable (or the least unsuitable!) of those who are available'. But the reason why we need ten is because the administration in which we are involved is such that we must have ten. Should we not rather say, 'Is it obvious to us that God is raising up godly people amongst us for this ministry and, if not, could it be true that we would be better without the wrong kind of elder'? Lawrence Eyres, who has written an excellent treatise on eldership, says this: 'When an arbitrary number is the main criterion for choosing some to be elders, the church will certainly pay for its folly when they turn out to be spiritually unqualified and there is often no end to the payment.'

I am bound to say too that this does concern me and I acknowledge that my own thinking and practise in the past has too often been, 'We need so many elders to deal with so much work that we are engaged in and to pastor so many people.' It may well be right for us to cry to God to produce that number we need, if we are truly convinced of the need but simply to say that because the administration requires this number therefore we will ordain this number is an extremely dangerous policy. On to my second question.

Secondly, I wonder if we take enough time in prayer, thought and consultation before we set about appointing elders? I am not going to comment on that except to remind you that the Lord spent the night in prayer before he appointed his apostles. I leave that with you for your own further discussion and reflection. Thirdly, I wonder if there ought not to be a period of time between the selection of elders and their ordination in which we engage in instruction and preparation for and training? I find it of interest that the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland now insists on this and elders-elect have to be examined by a sub-committee of the Presbytery to ensure that the instruction has been properly carried out. It is understandable that there should be a disparity between the prolonged period that the teaching elder will receive and the period of preparation that the ruling elder will receive. But when the difference is that the ruling elder has none (as in Scotland too often is the case), that is surely wrong and so I wonder whether we need to rethink the whole area.

Conclusion

My three questions - and I repeat I am thinking aloud - are intended to challenge us all to think biblically. Do we give enough weight to the fact that it is God who produces elders, and is that conviction reflected in the way that we go about seeking and ordaining them? Do we take enough time in prayer, thought and consultation before we set about appointing them? Ought there not to be a recognised period of time between the selection of elders and the act of ordination, in order that instruction and preparation may be thoroughly given? It is commendable that more and more Kirk Sessions are engaging in ongoing training. But my concern is with the serious need for preparation before ever elders are ordained.

In the final article in this short series, we will consider something of the work of the elder.