A Biblical View of Eldership

Rev E J Alexander

These articles on Eldership are edited versions of an address given by Rev Eric Alexander at a Rutherford House conference in 2009.
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. 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.
The Biblical Qualifications for the Eldership

All our doctrinal foundations are in Holy Scripture, and that is therefore the charter from which the very existence of eldership arises. 1 & 2 Timothy and Titus are often called the Pastoral Epistles because they deal with such themes as church order and the lives of those who are office bearers within the church. In considering the biblical qualifications for the eldership, I want to base my comments on 1 Timothy 3:1-7.

Here is a trustworthy saying: “If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer he desires a noble task. Now the overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect. (If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God’s church?) He must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgement as the devil. He must also have a good reputation with outsiders, so he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil’s trap.” In this passage (cf. Titus 1.6-9), we have a fairly detailed list of qualifications for the office of elder and I believe it is important for all who aspire to the eldership (v 1) to be aware of and study these. For example, in v 5 Paul sees the elder in a situation which is parallel to the manager of his own home. “If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God’s church?”

Caretakers of God’s Church

The clear implication is that elders are called to take care of the church of God. Not, you will notice, their church but God’s church. They are to be caretakers. We use the word of someone who is taking care of another’s property and in that sense the caretaker is self-evidently not the owner; the place he is looking after doesn’t belong to him. We have a lot of caretakers in the centre of the city of Glasgow where I minister and some time ago one of them was delighted to show me round a vast office building for which he was responsible. It was a most beautiful place. But everywhere we went he said to me, “Come and I’ll show you my managing director’s office … Come and I’ll show you my boardroom … Come and see my general office …”. He talked as if the whole building belonged to him!

We have to be careful not to slide into that kind of attitude towards the church. All too often many office-bearers tend to speak and think like that office caretaker. But we must recognise afresh that the church of which we are caretakers is God’s church and not ours. It is God’s church in that he has a particular love for it having purchased it with the blood of His Son. We are to understand that he has ordained and appointed elders in order to express through them the profound care he has for the church. It is as though God is taking this extraordinarily precious possession of his and saying, “Care for this for me.” Can you imagine the Crown Jewels being entrusted to you and some high officer of state saying, “Will you look after these for me?” Imagine it - you would drop everything you were doing and you would do all you possibly could in order to discharge such a commission faithfully. Do we not realise that the living God has presented to us what are going to be the jewels in his crown on the Last Day? For the church of his only begotten Son is nothing less than his “crown jewels”. And he says to you and me, “Care for that for me!”

We should not therefore be surprised that God gives to us extraordinary qualifications for the eldership. We would expect him to be exceedingly careful about this when he has bought this church with the blood of Christ. He is continuing to build his church through the work of Christ in our generation and he is beautifying it by the work of the Holy Spirit so that one day it may appear in all its glory. Can you understand why the qualifications of the church’s “caretakers” are of such a profoundly challenging nature?

Qualifications

I want to consider these qualifications under six areas of living. Please don’t think I am trying to compartmentalise them; simply identifying them under six headings for the sake of clarity.
1. The Elder’s Personal Life
Paul comes to the elder’s personal life as the first priority in v 2 where he says, “Now the overseer must be above reproach”. That simply means that the primary qualification for Christian leadership in the church is not that we are greatly gifted or well educated but that we have a consistent personal character. That is the first and the last thing that Paul writes about. Notice in v 7, “He must also have a good reputation with outsiders, so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil’s trap”. So the primary emphasis is on the elder's personal life, “above reproach” amongst those who are around him within the fellowship and of “good reputation” amongst those who are outside the church of Christ, that is in the world. Paul spells that out in a little more detail in v 2, for example, where he speaks about the need to be “temperate, self-controlled, respectable” or (orderly) and so on. And one of the places where that self-control will reveal itself, says Paul (v 3), is in the use of alcohol - “...not given to drunkenness”. (Cf v 8 where the same standard is set forth for deacons).

The whole of this interest in the Christian character is quite fundamental. It is for this reason that the general testimony of Scripture is that my usefulness in the service of God is closely tied with my personal character, so that what I am matters more to God than what I do. Inner consistency in my own life is therefore going to be the crucial thing in my usefulness. That is why when Peter is speaking about the task of the shepherd he says elders must be examples to the flock of God (1 Peter 5.3). That is why when writing to young Timothy, Paul tells him not to mind about his age but to be an example: “Don’t let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity” (1 Tim. 4.12). The point is that men and women are going to be far more impressed by what we are than by what we say or do. That is why the primary area in this study must be our personal lives.

2. The Elder’s Domestic World
“The overseer must be ... the husband of but one wife” (v 2). Much discussion has arisen about what is intended by this requirement. However, I think the most obvious meaning is likely to be the most accurate, namely, that the one who is being called to the eldership will need to be an example in the realm of the biblical norm of absolute faithfulness within the marriage bond. I believe that is what Paul has in mind here. He is referring to an exclusive, permanent, loving relationship between one man and one woman.

Paul goes on to elaborate on this domestic issue. A leader in the church of God must first prove himself to be a leader in his home who has gained the respect of his own family. “He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect. If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God’s church?” (vv 4-5). Quite simply, Paul is saying that our family life ought to be a microcosm of the church of Jesus Christ. The children of such an elder should obey him because they respect his wisdom, his selfless care for his family and the quality of leadership and example which he is providing. This is a qualification for the eldership because that ought to be how he will act within the church of God. Paul’s point is that if he is not living like that within his own home there is very little likelihood that he will suddenly start to live like that within the church.

3. The Elder’s Relationships
The third area is that of human relationships beyond the home. “He must also have a good reputation with outsiders, so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil’s trap” (v 7). Again in verse 2, “...not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome ...”. We all know that some people are peacebreakers rather than peacemakers. But the elder, on the contrary, must be gentle, meaning patient and forbearing with people - long-tempered not short-tempered. That is extended not only to our dealings with people and our attitudes towards them, but also to our words when we speak about them. Notice v 11: “In the same way, their wives are to be women worthy of respect, not malicious talkers but temperate and trustworthy in everything”. The issue of how we (and our wives) talk about other people is important enough to be a criterion for the eldership.
In our human relationships with those outwith the church we also need to be an example. We all know there are some people whose human relationships leave an enormous amount to be desired. It is very damaging to the church when an elder has the reputation, within or outwith the church, for being a frosty, difficult, angular, obtuse character. Alas, there are such elders. Do you see how what they are doing is disgracing the name of Christ? The elder, the servant of God, says Paul, is to be gentle and that can only come from self-control.

4. The Elder's Business Life
Fourthly, we have the sphere of financial affairs. There are two places where Paul touches on this: “Not a lover of money ...not pursuing dishonest gain” (vv 3 & 8), the second of which refers to deacons. The elder must be crystal clear about his motives in serving God and his people and financial gain must never be one of them. Each of these two phrases makes a specific point. The first, “Not a lover of money” indicates that elders’ attitudes towards money must be that of sitting so lightly to it that they have learned to live both with and without it. The second phrase, “not pursuing dishonest gain”, takes a step further and pleads for total integrity in all our financial dealings. (Note that although this comment here is under the category of qualifications of deacons, in Titus 1.7 the same phrase is one of the qualifications for elders.) It is vital for us to learn this attitude of absolute integrity with regard to material things. Without such integrity, all we are teaching and saying will lack credibility.

5. The Elder's Spiritual Maturity
“He must not be a recent convert or he may be conceited and fall under the same judgement as the devil” (v 6). The Greek word recent suggests the meaning of newly planted. The force of this metaphor taken from nature is that a plant has to send its roots down deeply before it can produce fruit convincingly. If someone has only just come into the kingdom of God and only recently come to faith in Christ, that person ought to be allowed time to mature. Candidates for the eldership must first prove themselves and demonstrate to the fellowship the reality of grace in their lives before they are placed in positions of leadership. That is what Paul is saying.

6. The Elder’s Teaching Ability
The final qualification for the eldership of a teaching ability needs careful consideration. It is stated at the end of v 2: “The overseer must be ... able to teach”. Weymouth translates as “a gift for teaching”. The reason this is so important is that one of the chief ways in which leaders will care for God’s family is by feeding the flock of God. This is the significance of Peter’s words when he says to the elders, “Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care” (1 Pet. 5.2). What is the greatest task of the shepherd? The shepherd’s task of course is to protect the sheep and to lead and guide them. But his most basic concern is to take them to good pastures - to feed them. Only as he ensures they have adequate pasture can they be nourished and mature and grow.

By the same token, our great task as under-shepherds of the flock of God is to take the flock to rich pastures. The clear implication is that the concern of the ministry will be about where the sheep are taken to be fed. This is why it is quite wrong to make a division between a pastoral ministry and a preaching ministry. We have all heard it said of some minister: “He is a great pastor but a dreadful preacher!” That is a distortion, it is ridiculous. The pastor is literally the shepherd because “pastor” means “shepherd”.

Therefore, every elder, whether his ministry is public teaching or of a different sort, ought to be supremely burdened that the flock is being fed. This means that when I go into the homes of my people I ought to be concerned to know that the word of God, in whatever way it is being ministered to them, is being taken in, understood and applied to their lives. Someone is going to ask, “But how can this be true for someone who is not a teaching elder?” Able to teach is included here by Paul because he says there will always be people in the congregation who will say, “I couldn’t understand what the minister was saying on Sunday”. It is then the elder’s task to say, “Can I help you? What was it that you couldn’t grasp? Let’s look together at the Bible passage the sermon was on. I will try and help you understand the points you couldn’t
grasp”. Able to teach. It may well be that the elder has an aptitude for explaining and teaching in that one to one situation which is greater than the aptitude of the one who is doing the public preaching. That is of enormous importance.

Prayer
There is one other qualification for the eldership which isn't included in the passage from 1 Timothy on which this study has been largely based. We find it tucked away in a comment that James makes in his letter. I am referring to the verse about those who are sick: “Is anyone of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him ...” (Jas 5.14f). Most people who are interested in what James writes here are concerned about the question of divine healing. But it is easy to miss a much more fundamental truth which points to a qualification for elders hidden away here. “Is anyone among you sick? He should call for the elders ...” Why should the sick person call for the elders? Not because they are doctors. Not because they have some divine gift for healing. But because the person who is sick need to be prayed for.

Who are the praying people in the congregation? The elders! This is what will distinguish them - they will be praying people. That is perhaps the greatest qualification and it is certainly the most fundamental need within any fellowship of God’s people. The minister who as teaching elder does not pray might as well not bother ministering. The elder, who is a ruling elder, who does not pray has disembowelled his ministry because this is the cardinal thing.

Conclusion
The standard set in the New Testament for the eldership is high. But as I said in my previous article, 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 the eldership are quite crucial. As I pray for the revival of the churches in Scotland and beyond, I find myself increasingly praying for the reformation of our view of eldership.
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 Ghost and to all these men of faith and understanding that God was calling them 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 inacceptable 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 if 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.
4 The Elder’s Task

In this final article on the eldership I want to concentrate on the ministry and function of the elder, focussing on the nature of the elder's task and then on the manner in which this task must be performed. To help us in this I want to think with you about a most significant passage, 
1 Peter 5.1-4.

Practical Reasons for the Eldership

Let me first of all set these words in their context. These verse are linked with the previous section by the little word translated ‘So’ in the RSV, and strangely omitted altogether in the NIV. Peter says, ‘Therefore, to the elders among you I appeal….’ It is a serious omission on the part of the NIV to leave out the word ‘therefore’ because it indicates to us that the apostle is writing his comments to elders in the light of what he has just been saying. In 4.12, Peter has been warning his readers about the fiery trial or ordeal through which Christians may have to pass. ‘Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you.’

God’s Provision for Life’s Trials

He tells them how they are to come through this fiery trial and counsels them as to how they should face such trials. He goes on to conclude this exhortation in 4.19 by saying that ‘those that suffer according to God’s will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator.’ Now the question at once arises, ‘What will their faithful creator do to sustain them in their trials?’ One aspect of the answer is provided at the beginning of chapter 5: their faithful creator will provide shepherds to care for his flock and to pastor them through days of adversity. Here, therefore, is the calling and the function of the under-shepherd. Christ, the Chief Shepherd, who will one day give us the crown of glory, in the meantime has appointed us as under-shepherds to shepherd the flock of God through the trials and pains of life in this world. Can you see what an important part this plays in our understanding of the ministry of the elder? An essential element in God’s care for his people in a fallen world is that he provides elders for the church. That then is the immediate biblical context out of which Peter speaks.

Weakness and Inadequacy

But there is also in 5.1 a personal context: ‘To the elders among you I appeal as a fellow elder, a witness of the sufferings of Christ.’ Peter is writing both as an elder and an apostle. The implication is that he has already received that same commission from the Lord Jesus which he is now passing on to them. ‘Feed (pastor) my sheep,’ Christ had said to Peter by the lake side. Surely Peter is providing great encouragement here, because the commission he is giving us is the commission he himself received when he was most conscious of his own failure, weakness and inadequacy. It was out of the ashes of his failure that God raised up Peter to a place of usefulness and service. Alongside the high demands of the eldership, therefore, we must set this truth that God takes up the weak things of the world, delights to use earthen vessels, and places the glorious treasure of the Gospel in them. That is the implication of Peter’s calling himself a ‘fellow-elder.’

Caring for God’s Flock

Let us take this yet a stage further. His words, ‘To the elders… I appeal as a fellow-elder,’ are closely allied to the theme of oversight. ‘Be shepherds of God’s flock, serving as overseers.’ And he develops further his commission: ‘Tend the flock of God,’ Peter’s language in describing the eldership is pastoral and it has a biblical foundation. God has a ‘flock’ which is his people and he is their shepherd. God has a two-fold means of expressing his care for his flock. First, he sends Christ as the Good Shepherd to die for them. Secondly, he appoints elders as the under-shepherds to live for them. There are two emphases in what Peter has to say: the first is on the nature of the task - ‘tend the flock’ [RSV], and secondly on the manner in which this task is to be undertaken: ‘Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care… not because you must, but because you are willing… not greedy for money, but eager to serve….’ So there are these two sides: the nature of the task and the manner in which the task is to be fulfilled.
The Nature of the Task
The word that Peter uses simply means to shepherd the flock of God. The NIV translates it that way. The AV has 'Feed the flock of God.' The RSV has 'Tend the flock'. He is of course giving the very same command which he himself received from the lips of Jesus. It was to be a ministry of general care for the sheep, perfectly portrayed for us in the ministry of him who is the Chief Shepherd as Peter calls him in v 4 of this passage.

Sacrifice
The Lord’s ministry as the Good Shepherd and his perfect care for the flock provide the pattern for our own ministry as elders, a pattern expressed in various ways. Jesus as the Chief Shepherd gives his life for the sheep in atoning grace. Although our giving of ourselves to the flock cannot be redemptive, it is none the less a giving of ourselves utterly to them with the same self-sacrifice which marked the giving of Jesus. Such self-giving is fundamental in the ministry of elders. They will be marked, Peter is about to say, by eagerness not reluctance, and they will serve not because they have to, but because they mirror the zeal with which the Lord Jesus gave himself utterly to the finishing of his Father’s work.

Recall how when the disciples come back from Samaria where they had been buying the lunch, they said to Jesus, 'Master, eat,' and he replied: 'I have food to eat that you know nothing about.' These are some of the saddest words in all the Gospels as is seen in the disciples’ reply, ‘Has somebody given him something to eat? Where did he get his lunch from?’ Jesus answers them, ‘My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work.’ Contrary to our thinking that bread and butter is what we need in order to be strong enough to do work, Jesus says that doing the will of his Father is his sustenance, his life, and it is how he is nourished. This selfless caring of the Lord Jesus has to be ours also. He gave himself. We too must give ourselves in sacrificial service. ‘I run to do your will, O my God!’ People ought to be able to look at us - not because we are self-consciously displaying an attitude, but because we cannot hide it - and see an absolute consecration to the will of God in every part of our life. And it should be a reflection of Jesus’ self-giving.

Getting to Know our People
You remember the Lord tells us that he knows the sheep by name and they know his voice. Learning to know people and getting inside their lives takes time - but we must, for this is the essence of true care. For some of us remembering people’s names is a great problem. But it is essential, and you will know what it means to you when somebody remembers your name! There are of course other major aspects of the Chief Shepherd’s care for his sheep. They must be led to the pastures to be fed. And there are other sheep who as yet have no shepherd. Leading the sheep to be fed and searching for the sheep as yet outwith the fold - these concerns should also be ours.

Overseers
‘Be shepherds then,’ says Peter, and adds, ‘serving as overseers.’ ‘Overseers’ carries the meaning of ‘looking over’, or ‘keeping an eye on’. You know how people will say of their children when they are going away, ‘Keep an eye on them for me.’ What they are saying is, ‘Look after them. You do for them what I would do for them if I were here.’ That is what God is saying to us concerning the flock: ‘You keep an eye on them the way I would have done.’ Because ‘the eyes of the Lord run to and fro over the whole earth’ on behalf of his people. He has his eye upon us constantly. The oversight, you see, is not an official, but a pastoral care.

The Nature of the Ministry
Notice next the manner in which this task of shepherding is to be undertaken.

Not in the Wrong Spirit
‘Not by constraint,’ says the RSV (5.2). The NIV has ‘not because you must’. Not with a grudging spirit which constantly needs to be prodded but ‘because you are willing’. The NIV adds ‘as God wants you to be’. The RV has, ‘according to God’. Peter is saying that God has
given freely and willingly to us, so our service to him needs to be with the same absence of compulsion and the same willing freedom of spirit and enthusiasm to serve God and his people.

Let me illustrate this. One morning I spoke separately to two men both involved in ministry of some kind. The first one who came to see me told me the whole of his story. I knew something of his situation and it is true there were difficulties; but his great cry was that in his difficulties he was not being appreciated. It can be a grave problem when one is not being appreciated. Because people were not appreciating him he was in the doldrums and in great distress. When he left me, I felt a tremendous cloud over my soul coming from the attitude of this man to his ministry. Certainly he had problems but there was no awareness of the sheer privilege and joy there is in serving God.

Less than an hour later somebody else came to see me who was also involved in serving God in a situation which frankly would have made us wither if I thought I was going to be in it. His sphere of ministries was full of problems, all kinds of incredible difficulties. Into the bargain, he was deprived of nearly everything that most other people had. He sat down and said, 'I'm just here to share some of these things with you and talk them over to see if we can come to some kind of conclusion about how I should respond. 'But,' he said, 'I want to say to you first of all, over and above anything else I say, I am overwhelmed at the goodness of God in giving me the privilege of serving such a Master.'

There was an immense lesson for me in that. Being under-shepherds entrusted by God with the care of his flock is a privilege that surpasses any other in the whole world. It would be demotion to be Prime Minister of this country or President of the United States compared to this! And you and I need to grasp that there is something altogether glorious about our calling. I sometimes say to my fellow-ministers that there are occasions when I have been in my study preparing to minister the word and I have got up from my desk and walked around the study floor saying to myself, 'How amazing it is to be paid to do this!' I do believe we need that sense of the enormous privilege there is in serving the living God - however difficult our sphere of ministry.

Not for the Wrong Motives
Secondly, not for the wrong motives. ‘Be shepherds of God’s flock... not greedy for money, but eager to serve’. The NIV is here translating it specifically in terms of financial gain. But that may be to narrow it down too much. Peter’s meaning no doubt includes the idea of financial gain and clearly such a base and despicable motive to use the service of God for such an end would be to prostitute it. However I think we must widen the meaning to include all forms of self-seeking, self-interest and self-advancement in the service of God. It is possible to abuse the service of God in such a way that we are really seeking glory for ourselves rather than his glory. By contrast, the whole basis of the eldership is that we should eschew all self-seeking so that our goal will be the glory of God and the well-being of his people.

Such aims will save us from certain kinds of discouragement, because if our concern is that we be appreciated or that we get self-fulfilment out of what we are doing then we will be bound to find ourselves submerged in despair. Whereas if the glory of God and the well-being of his people become by his grace the most dominant motivation in our lives then that will save us from discouragement.

Not in the Wrong Way
Thirdly, not in the wrong way. ‘Not lording it over those entrusted to you’ (5.3). ‘Not domineering’ is one translation. While the apostle’s thought may be closely allied with the spirit in which we serve, he is dealing with the specific temptation to domineering, overbearing, and in some cases harsh and uncaring. Paul describes the opposite attitude for us in 2 Timothy 2.24: ‘The Lord’s servant must not quarrel; instead, he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth’. The servant of the Lord must be
gentle. That is, the manner in which we are to have the oversight over God’s flock must never be one of over-bearing superiority but of humble gentleness. Peter’s opposite is, of course, ‘being examples to the flock.’ It is what I am in the service of God that really matters.

Younger people and others within the church of God who have their hearts set on growing up into Christ should be able to look at those of us who are elders and say, ‘That’s the kind of person I want God to make me.’ That is what an example is. When the salesman shows you samples he says, ‘This is what you will be getting if you buy my product.’ Likewise, we should be God’s samples of what Christian men and women will one day become.

Submission to the Elders
‘Young men, in the same way be submissive to those who are older’ (5.5). I would suggest that here Peter is speaking about the response to the eldership in the congregation: those the elders are serving should gladly submit to those who are over them in the Lord. The way grace will be seen in a congregation and pride will be absent will be the way people respond to leadership. Compare how in Hebrews 13.17 the writer urges his readers: ‘Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you.’ Such submission puts an end to a great deal of the murmuring that goes on in many congregations through little, irritated groups which gather to try to get their own way in certain things. The biblical pattern is the congregation is to submit to those chosen by God to rule. If the elders are not fulfilling their task well, those in the congregation must pray for them that they may be changed. In the meantime they need to submit, and it is important for us to see that, not as a suggestion, but as a biblical command.

Church Membership
Incidentally, this is one of the areas from which I press upon the necessity of the church membership. There are some who say, ‘I don’t need to be a member of any church. I can just attend and be part of the worship without needing to be a member of a church. I don’t see church membership in Scripture.’ I always say to such people, ‘The Scripture says you must submit to those who have the rule over you. Here is a command which it is impossible for you to obey if you are not a member.’ When we become members of a church we put ourselves under the government of the elders in that church.

The Crown of Glory
In conclusion, notice that Peter puts the whole issue in the same context as we have just seen in Hebrews 13.17. ‘When the Chief Shepherd appears,’ he says, ‘you will receive the crown of glory’. In the light of our thinking about ‘caretakers’ - and that is what we are - all of Jesus’s teaching in the Gospel parable about stewards implies the master is going to return and require an account of those who were appointed stewards during his absence. The caretaker or steward has to give an account to the head of the firm who returns from his business trip abroad and asks, ‘I left you in charge while I was away. How have you discharged the stewardship I put in your hands?’ ‘Have your elders been exercising the ministry of the caretaker?’ says the writer of the Hebrews. ‘Obey them and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account.’

The reason we need to give ourselves to a biblical view and practice of the eldership is that the Chief Shepherd is going to return in glory one day and he is going to sift through our service. As Paul tells us, God is going to be concerned with how we have been building. Have I been building gold, silver, precious stones, the costly and permanent materials? Or have I been building wood, hay and stubble, the cheap and temporary materials? The day will declare it, says Paul, for the Chief Shepherd will appear and we want, do we not, to receive the crown of glory from him, and to know that he will say to us, ‘Well done, you have been faithful over a few things, enter into the joy of your reward.’
It is true that historically in Scotland Kirk Sessions have had certain civil powers. But essentially, the government of elders is a spiritual government.

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.

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.

1 Timothy 4.12

See Acts 20.17,28; 1 Peter 5.1.2; Titus 1.5.7; 1 Timothy 3.1.17

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

The same word translated therefore in Romans 1.12

John 21.15ff

John 4.33f

Psalm 40.8; cf John 5.19,30; 6.38ff, etc.

John 10.4.14ff

John 10.11,15,18

John 2.17

John 4.32

John. 4.33f

Psalm 40.8; cf John 5.19,30; 6.38ff, etc.

John 10.4.14ff

Zechariah 1.11; 4.10; cf Proverbs 15.3.


1 Corinthians 3.12-15

Matthew 25.21,23