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1-800-611-8080 / www.cgom.org
PO Box 54621, Tulsa, OK 74155-0621

WHAT IS AN ELDER?

...a Biblical perspective

Over two millennia a distorted understanding of church leadership has evolved.

What does the Bible teach?

James McBride

Picture the scene in Rome a decade or two after the church there was founded. Comparatively few of its million or so inhabitants are Christian. They are scattered around its five square miles of splendour and squalor. Each Sabbath they assemble in small groups for fellowship, worship and instruction - usually in the homes of fellow-Christians. When Paul writes to them he greets several men and women who are hosting such assemblies (Romans 16). Phoebe, a Christian stalwart from near Corinth, conveys his message.

How were they organized? The Scriptures give guidelines, often ignored, that are as applicable today as in the first century. We can best understand the role of an elder if we can view the structure of the New Testament church.

The Small Church

For clarity of understanding it is important that we do not view the structure of the early church through modern denominational eyes. By contrast with modern 'mega-churches' the first Christians met face-to-face in household groups. There are numerous examples. Apollos hosted a church at his home - at that time in Ephesus (I Corinthians 16:19). Archippus, too, a resident of Colosse (Colossians 4:17), had a senior responsibility in the church he led in his home. And Nymphas, possibly in Laodicea (v.15). Paul acknowledged several such groups in Rome (Romans 16). His emphasis on the need for elders (and deacons) to be 'good family men' strongly indicates they were meeting in their homes, where such an instruction would be apt.

All these 'house churches' in a city were in fraternal communication. Each had its leader but all worked as one team - for example in the anointing of the sick (James 5:15). The city of Ephesus in Paul's day had an estimated quarter million population. There was, following Paul's ministry there, a substantial well-structured Christian church - with several closely-connected elders (Acts

20:17). Although the brethren usually assembled in homes (v.20), they also came together - *eg* in Corinth for the Lord's Supper (I Corinthians 11:20). So the 'church in [city]' could be anything from a handful to hundreds with the larger ones meeting in several assemblies.

Structure

It's clear that - as in any 'club' - some structure was essential to preserve order. Modern hierarchies have, however, strayed from the New Testament model.

In the primitive church there was a simple basic pattern largely derived from the synagogue. Paul calls only for 'overseers and deacons' to be appointed, as in synagogues, to guide the church in each city. He addresses the Philippians through these (Philippians 1:1) and gives instruction as to their necessary qualifications (I Timothy 3, Titus 1). In its beginning the church wasn't divided along denominational lines - all Christians in a location were, simply, 'Christians'. In modern terms all Christians in London or New York or Tulsa *etc* would be 'one church', though meeting in various locations in each city: 'the church of God in Los Angeles' *etc*. It's a pattern all Christians ought to emulate! [For an overview of how the church organization developed after the apostles request the articles *Governance in the church of God* and *The Small Church*]

The primitive church continued the pattern set by the synagogue. In Jerusalem, for example, there were hundreds of meeting places - an estimated four hundred plus! They were based around the like-minded: trades, language, national groups (*eg* Acts 6:9) *etc*. Each was organized on a similar pattern. The most respected leader of the Jerusalem assemblies urged the Gentile Christians to look to the synagogues as an example: "*For Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times, and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath*" (Acts 15:21).

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Gifts of Leadership

The assemblies in each city appointed such leadership as was necessary: a 'spiritual guide' (pastor, overseer, elder) and men or women who cared for the vital administrative functions of the assembly ('deacons') - such as treasurer, material welfare *etc.*

Within the assembly the brethren were gifted by Christ through the Spirit for a variety of functions. Some brethren were 'prophets', some gifted for evangelism or for speaking in a language they hadn't learned *etc.* Wrote Paul: "To each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good" (I Corinthians 12:7). He adds "all these are the work of the same Spirit, and he gives them to each just as he determines" (v.11). In other words, all Christians are 'ministers' of the church (Ephesians 4:12) and 'stewards' of the Gospel.

The 'spiritual gifts' are dispensed by Jesus Christ as he sees fit, largely based on an individual's personal qualities. The gift of the ability to teach (Romans 12:7), for example, would be a gift essential for the oversight of an assembly (I Timothy 3:2). Not all who are so gifted, of course, would also have the other qualities required of an elder (vv. 1-7). Certain men are signaled by the Holy Spirit as 'overseers' (Acts 20:28) as they exhibit the necessary spiritual gifts coupled with the desire to take on that role.

God's Shepherds

Paul was deeply concerned that the business of each assembly 'should be done in a fitting and orderly way' (I Corinthians 14:40). As God's representative he and his 'apostolic delegates' (such as Timothy and Titus) roamed the Empire to establish order in the various churches. From his letters and from Luke's accounts of his travels - and from Peter's writings - we can glean a relatively clear understanding of that structure Jesus had imparted to the church through them, and the role of the leadership.

Drawing on contemporary shared experience, the apostles drew the analogy of 'shepherd' for the work of an elder. Writes Paul to the Ephesian elders: "Guard yourselves and all the *flock* of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be *shepherds* of the church of God" (Acts 20:28). And Peter: "Be *shepherds* of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers" (I Peter 5:2). The tender care elders are to exercise is summed up in the twenty-third Psalm which portrays the attitude of 'the Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep' (Hebrews 13:20). The caring shepherd is out on the mountainside alongside his flock. He provides for them, ensures their nourishment, guides them along the right track, binds their wounds, protects from danger.

The spiritual analogy is obvious. The elder is supportive of those entrusted to his care - 'helpers of [their] joy'. He toils beside them in the work of the Gospel - not a remote overseer cracking the whip over slaves! He protects from

and combats destructive false teachings that lead to division (II Peter 2:1). He oversees the spiritual growth of his flock, providing sound Bible-based instruction, preparing them for 'works of service' (Ephesians 4:12). And he follows the guidance of the 'Chief Shepherd', Jesus: "*You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave - just as the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life for many*" (Matthew 20:26-28). On another occasion Jesus told his future leaders: "*The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep*" (John 10:11).

The message is clear. Elders are men who dedicate themselves to serve those entrusted to them by the chief shepherd. It's an awesome responsibility, and they are accountable to 'the Chief' for their performance. But given human nature, it's not surprising that we are given detailed instructions for the task.

Choosing an Elder

The early church was sundered by factions (Gk *heresies*). Paul dealt with them in Corinth, where he had laboured long (I Corinthians 3). When Peter wrote, heresy and division was widespread. By century end John found true Christians were being hounded from the organized body (III John). In Crete, Titus was confronted *right in the assemblies* by "*rebellious people, mere talkers and deceivers...they must be silenced because they are ruining whole households [ie house groups] by teaching things they ought not to teach*" (Titus 1:10-11). Instructs the apostle: "*Warn a divisive person once and then warn him a second time [ie if necessary]. After that have nothing to do with him*" (ch 3:10).

Faced with such false teaching Paul, through his delegates Timothy and Titus, gave specific guidance concerning the selection of those who would oversee the flock. The criteria are laid out in I Timothy 3 and in Titus 1. [The *Churches of God Outreach Ministries* can provide *Guidelines* for the selection of elders by an assembly. It is available from any of our addresses]. Given the widespread division in the church of God in century twenty-one, no less attention must be paid to how leadership is selected!

We can, too, glean from the Scriptures just how elders were appointed.

Selection

'Ordination' has today assumed an almost mystical significance and is often accompanied by elaborate ritual. Not so in the New Testament. The term 'ordain' [Gk *kathistemi*] is simply *to appoint to a position*. It is a formal recognition of those men or women who have shown to the brethren by the fruits of their lives that they fulfil the criteria for office.

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Apart from the appointment by Jesus of The Twelve, the first indication of an appointment to office in the church is in Acts 6. with the appointment of 'The Seven' (Acts 6; 21:8). The procedure closely reflects the appointment by Moses of a support network for the Israelites: "*Choose you some wise, understanding and respected men from each of your tribes, and I will set them over you*" (Deuteronomy 1:13). The apostles, similarly, appointed men to oversee a need in the fledgling Jerusalem church: "*Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the Word. This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose [list of names]. They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them*" (Acts 6:3-6). We meet this same pattern in the Syrian churches: "*Paul and Barnabas had elders elected for them in each church*" (Acts 14:23). [The KJV here says 'ordained': the Greek word used - *cheirotoneo* - implies a prior popular selection.] The key elements for such appointments, then, are three-fold: the candidates are *qualified, selected* and *appointed*.

The work of the Holy Spirit in them, their qualification for the responsibility, as measured by the apostolic guidelines (I Timothy 3, Titus 1), is evident in the service they have given over time to that assembly. This is evident to the brethren - the candidates are, again based on Paul's guidelines, a 'popular' selection. They are then set aside for formal appointment.

One Body

From the Biblical perspective, the church of God is one Body - many parts, but each contributing to the well-being and proper functioning of the whole. This refers not only to individual brethren but also to congregations. The apostle Paul again: "Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one Body and one Spirit..." (Ephesians 4:3-4). Whatever differences there may be in a congregation, the divine principle is that they be handled peaceably and with humility and with tolerance.

Not since the death of John, however, have there been inspired apostles who can give authoritative guidance. While they lived they had a hand - often literally! - in the appointment of elders. Paul appointed some in Syria, for example, but also delegated the task to others, as Timothy and Titus. Today, too, it is important to have external input in appointing elders. It's all too easy for an assembly to appoint someone who supports a cherished local heresy! Or an individual who is richer or smarter or more charismatic. Some form of scrutiny by a trusted senior leader from another congregation is advisable - if not essential. Wrote Paul, "He must also have a good reputation with outsiders so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil's trap" (I Timothy 3:7). This could refer equally to the general public *and* to the larger

church!

Accountability

Given the teaching role of an elder, James's guidance is vital: "Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly" (*ch* 3:1). Recall that James was writing to 'Israelite' Christians (*ch* 1:1) who would be meeting in smaller assemblies following the style of the synagogue (*ch* 2:2). It is generally accepted that the messages of Jesus to the seven churches in Asia through the apostle John were addressed through 'angels' to the collective leadership in each city. They are *held responsible by Jesus Christ* for the integrity of the assemblies they guide - morally, ethically, doctrinally (Revelation 2 & 3). Assuming the role of an under-shepherd of Christ's flock is indeed an awesome responsibility!

After the one-off council (Acts 15) in which the apostles established the fundamental role of the Law for Jew and for Gentile Christians, each assembly was solely responsible to hold to the true faith. Scattered worldwide, they had no overarching authority to impose doctrine. No other doctrinal issue - of many - was, in New Testament times, taken before a similar council.

Today we do not have inspired apostles like the Twelve or Paul. But we do have the inspired Word of God as our guide and the Holy Spirit may give individuals insight into its meaning. The leadership of each assembly is responsible to pass on to his potential successors the true faith as it was delivered by the apostles (II Timothy 2:2). False teachers abound - then and today, claiming divine inspiration, yet distorting the inspired teachings! Each elder, each assembly, each Christian is responsible to Jesus for how they interpret the Word.

The letters written by Paul addressed the needs and shortcomings of each young church to which it was addressed, though with universal application. The brethren are to 'prove what is acceptable' (Ephesians 5:10). They are to 'contend as one man for the faith of the gospel' (Philippians 1:27), to 'work out your own salvation' (*ch* 2:12) and to guard against false teachers in their own assembly (*ch* 3:2, Colossians 2:8, I Corinthians 16:13). Believing it would be his last ever visit to the elders at Ephesus (*vv.* 25, 38) Paul exhorted them to "*Guard yourselves and all the flock over which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers.... Be shepherds of the church of God*" (Acts 20:28-31).

Paul's warning to the Christians in Corinth is instructive. He tells them that whoever is building an *ecclesia* "his work will be shown for what it is because the Day will bring it to light" (I Corinthians 3:11-15). He urges such to use imperishable materials. Not until the resurrection will the quality of a leader's - or any individual Christian's -

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work become clear! Paul continues: *"Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait till the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men's hearts"* (ch.4:5). Awesome responsibility indeed, and one to be undertaken with 'godly fear'!

Respect Your Elders!

On the other hand, with such a burden of responsibility on elders, it's not surprising that the inspired Scriptures urge the brethren to be supportive of them. *"Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith"* (Hebrews 13:7).

The inspired writer continues: *"Obey your leaders and be submissive. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you"* (v. 17). He adds: *"Now we ask you, brothers, to respect those who work hard among you and are over you in the Lord and who admonish [counsel] you. Hold them in highest regard in love because of their work. Live in peace with each other"* (I Thessalonians 5:12, 13). The purpose is not to elevate the leadership on a pedestal – but simply to ensure a proper environment in which they can exercise their responsibilities.

Given the scenario depicted here for the structure of the New Testament church, for the most part the matter of 'ministerial salaries' is irrelevant. The work of a dedicated elder overseeing a small group, coupled with the delegation of church functions, may not be onerous. However, the Scriptures are clear that 'you shall not muzzle the ox' (I Corinthians 9:9). Paul advised Timothy: *"The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honour, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching. For the Scripture says 'Do not muzzle the ox while it is treading out the corn' and 'The worker deserves his wages'"* (I Timothy 5:18). If a congregation expects its elder to labour much they are responsible before Christ, and answerable to him, to adequately and generously support him materially.

Essential Role

There can be no Biblical argument for thinking that leadership within an assembly of Christians is superfluous. What is unbiblical is men and women (whether officially 'appointed' or not) lording it over the flock for personal advantage—whether financial or to deliberately undermine the faith or for personal power and influence. What is also unbiblical is a local assembly torn by indecision and doctrinal squabbles through lack of, or lack of voluntary submission to, qualified leadership - and focused inwardly rather than fulfilling the role for which Jesus Christ raised it up.

So – maintain vigilance. An assembly that's at peace with itself and willingly subject to wise and compassionate leadership is an assembly well fitted to fulfil its assigned work for the Saviour—locally, and within the wider Body of Christ.

Some Definitions:

Minister: usually the *Gk* diakoneo and its cognates: all Christians 'minister' - serve - the church (Ephesians 4:12, Acts 11:29). The term 'deacon' is also applied specifically to brethren officially appointed to an administrative function in the assembly

Steward: the 'manager of a household'. Used in the New Testament for a) preachers and teachers (I Corinthians 4:1), b) assembly overseers (Titus 1:7), c) believers in general (I Peter 4:10). The term is used by *CGOM* to apply to the host of any local assembly that lacks an appointed elder

Angel: a 'messenger' - usually a created being (Hebrews 2:7), but also applied to humans (James 2:25, Luke 7:24, Revelation 1:20 *etc*). In Luke 9:52 the 'messengers' (*Gk* angels) are some of the apostles

Apostle: 'A person sent'. Applied to Jesus (Hebrews 3:1), and to 'The Twelve' and Paul, who were personally taught by Jesus and whose writings are divinely inspired (John 16). They are 'apostles of [Christ]' (Ephesians 1:1 *etc*, 11 Peter 3:2), identified by the 'signs of an apostle' (II Corinthians 12:12, Hebrews 2:3-4). There were also 'apostles [*KJV* messengers] of the churches' - brethren who as messengers to other assemblies represented a congregation (II Corinthians 8:23). Paul also included some of his companions in preaching the Gospel as 'apostles' (I Thessalonians 1:1, 2:6)

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