

1. A Biblical View of the Eldership

Revd Eric Alexander

The first in a series of three articles on the Eldership

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 Church in Scotland and beyond, I find myself increasingly praying for the reformation of 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 the sheep in that flock. The Church is also seen as a household or family in which believers are members. At other times it is a building into which 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 on the corner 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 this 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 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 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. All the Church's authority derives from Him. So it is primarily the spiritual government 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 be 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.

In the course of Jesus' 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. 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 to 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 one 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 needs 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'. 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 anybody 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 have not 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. 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 is that all elders rule. The second is that within the ruling eldership are some who also preach and 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 there are some elders who need to be supported by the church to give themselves mainly to the ministry of preaching and teaching. Such an inference is supported by Paul's following comment, "For the Scripture says, 'Do not muzzle the ox while it is treading out 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.

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

It is marked by plurality-that is there are several elders in each church.

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.

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.

To be continued

© The Revd Eric J Alexander 1997

Minister of St George's Tron Church of Scotland, Glasgow

[Back](#)

A Biblical View of the Eldership

The third article in a series by Rev. Eric Alexander

The Choice and Appointment of Elders

There are two emphases in the New Testament, both of which deserve equal weight. The first is that elders are clearly appointed by the apostles and by men such as Titus. Let me indicate some of the ways in which elders were appointed in apostolic times.

The choice of elders

First, 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 appointment of elders is in Acts 14, when Paul and Barnabus have completed their first missionary journey. There we read that Paul and Barnabus 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 they at times 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.

First, 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 of hands upon them. That means the elders' 'appointment' or 'ordination' meant that hands were laid upon them. Negatively, in this regard, we find references 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

Firstly, 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 the Biblical criteria alone.

Readers may ask, 'But what are the biblical criteria to which you are referring?' When God is doing the appointing, we shall certainly see Him bringing them to the fore in the fellowship in which they are to serve. Again, you may ask, 'How will that be evident?' Something will happen whereby 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.

I began this article by indicating that it is really God Himself who appoints elders. Because He creates in them the necessary gifts for leadership, they therefore emerge from within their fellowship in such a way that discerning eyes should be able to see that they are a potential elders. We as pastors need to pray that God's hand will increasingly be upon such persons so that we may ultimately in the will of God be able to say, as they said of Paul and Barnabus when they were sending them out, 'it seemed good to the Holy Ghost and to us to separate these men for this ministry'. Thus it was they laid hands on them and sent them forth.

I believe this to be of 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 important emphasis is on the word 'recognise'. The part we play is simply to recognise people whom God Himself has appointed.

The person seeking the office

Secondly, that is only one side of the picture. That is, if you like, the office seeking the person. But 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 the 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. The whole idea is that he or she pretends reluctance. 'No, I do not want this honour,' and the candidate runs away and they grab him and drag him to the Speaker's chair.

We almost expect that when people say, 'We invite you to become an elder,' the greatest reluctance is the proper response. 'No, no, no,' he ought to say, all the time dying to be chosen! Is that not exactly how we think of the appointment of elders by and large?

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 into it and persuade me, I shall go.' Not so. The person rather 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 this ministry and I

want the church to test my call.’

Nationally, for the wider church we must do this testing of the call. 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 your call but you yourselves need to be sure that God has called you.’ But also locally, we must do that testing in our congregations.

Seeking service not office

I wonder if we have given enough emphasis to this issue in our thinking about the eldership, ‘If any one 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 led 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 in others? Yet too often we are not biblical when it comes to ‘the person seeking the office’. Might this be one of the evidences that the truth is we do not in fact view the ruling and the teaching elder as in true equality? In the light of all this, I have doubt 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.

1. 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 are 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 than we would be in having them?’

Lawrence Eyres, who has written an excellent treatise on the 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 scripturally unqualified and there is often no end to the payment.’

I am bound to say to that this does concern me and I speak admitting my own thinking and practice 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 that is what we are convinced of, but simply to say that because the administration requires this number, therefore we will ordain this number is to ignore the fact that God produces them and they should emerge as godly people out of the congregation. On to my second question.

2. 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.

3. 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 and training of elders. 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. That is of the very essence of the distinction of the teaching elder's ministry. 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 this whole area.

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 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 excellent that more and more kirk sessions are engaging in ongoing training. But my concern is that there should be serious consideration given to preparation before ever elders are ordained.

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

[Back](#)