

# Eldership – A spiritual office

## Introduction

The title of this paper may seem to be an obvious statement; yet all over the country this statement of fact is being ignored, misunderstood, contradicted and abandoned. It is time to make the Biblical truth plain – eldership is a spiritual office and only a spiritual office.

## The problem stated

In an age where Biblical ecclesiology is little understood and where men simply build their own church structures to please themselves, or worse, where they copy worldly management structures, elders are given multiple wrong responsibilities.

I have seen or heard of the following:

- An elder who never teaches or cannot teach. [Cf. an elder must be ‘able to teach’, 1 Tim 3:2, Gk. *didaktikos* = ‘skilful in teaching’.]
- An elder is given responsibility for taking care of the elderly, running social activities and such like.
- An elder runs the youth groups as a social activity not spiritual oversight.
- An elder runs the management of the church: compiling the calendar, managing the audio recordings, arranging the notices, and so on.
- An elder is responsible for the cleaning of a church building.
- An elder is an estate manager, letting out the church building and trying to raise money.
- An elder leads a church choir and musicians.
- An elder runs a management team of sub-managers.
- An elder manages projects.
- An elder just co-ordinates with social services or other council offices.
- An elder just acts as a public relations manager.
- An elder just administrates or acts as a general manager.

We could go on, the tasks are endless. I am not talking about overall, distant responsibility but actually doing these jobs as an elder.

### **Biblical church**

In a truly Biblical church none of these matters ever apply. This would be a small church meeting in a home according to NT instructions (mutual edification, breaking bread, one another, informality, no instrumental music etc.).

However, taking for granted that almost all modern churches are unbiblical, I will endeavour to offer advice for folk in such places.

## The reason for the problem

In short, it is ignoring or misunderstanding Biblical statements about leadership.

### There are two sorts of leadership responsibility

There are only two offices in the church, one is for spiritual matters the other is for practical issues.

Leadership of the church is by a team of equal elders who care for souls. Management of practical issues is by a team of deacons who have no spiritual authority but serve the church in mundane matters.

## Eldership ministry

### Care of souls by various names

*Elders are shepherding teachers*

He Himself gave ... pastors and teachers. Eph 4:11<sup>1</sup>

Elders are the ministers God gives the church to care for the souls of the flock; thus they can be called shepherds or pastors (Eph 4:11; 1 Pt 5:2). The word 'pastors' (Latin *pastores*) only appears in Eph 4:11<sup>2</sup> which is a translation of the Greek word *poimen*, meaning a shepherd or herdsman; the implication is one who takes care of others; the root word from which *poimen* derives means 'to protect'. The example of Jesus shows that shepherds must lay down their lives for the sheep. The concept of an authoritarian shepherd (common today) is a disgraceful perversion of the Biblical idea. [I will examine the matter of teaching later.]

The word 'elder' (Gk. *presbuteros*)<sup>3</sup> obviously implies an older, wiser person who is able to guide and support younger people. Clearly young people should not be elders; in any case one apostolic qualification is that an elder must have a family and be experienced. However, there are other names and descriptions of elders.

- They are also called 'bishops' [1 Tim 3:1, 2; Titus 1:7; Gk. *episkopos*] or overseers, guardians, one who looks over someone to help them.
- They are also occasionally called 'helmsmen' [pilot or guide, 1 Cor 12:28, Gk. *kubernesis*].<sup>4</sup> Thus someone who steers the church rightly. Elders are 'wise guides' delegated under the guidance ministry of the Holy Spirit.
- 'Rulers': one who goes before to help, serve and lead others, to guide and direct, [Heb 13:7, 17, 24; Gk. *hegeomai*]. One who goes before as a guardian and leader, to care for [1 Tim 5:12, *proistemi*].
- 'Stewards', someone entrusted to manage a person's household for him [Titus 1:7, Gk. *oikonomos*].

<sup>1</sup> I.e. 'Pastor-Teachers'; one office, that of the elder. The Greek is conclusive, there are only four gifts mentioned here not five. Paul groups shepherds and teachers together.

<sup>2</sup> However, the verb *poimaino*, to shepherd, is employed by Jesus to Peter (Jn 21:16), by Peter to other leaders (1 Pt 5:2) and by Paul to the Ephesian elders (Acts 20:28).

<sup>3</sup> Hence 'Presbyterianism', where a church is ruled by elders and not prelates.

<sup>4</sup> Some Bible versions translate this as 'administrators' (wrongly) and then this is used to support the false idea that a church can appoint administrators of various kinds. Thus NAS, NASB, RSV, NKJV etc. The 'Bible in Basic English' correctly has 'wise guides'.

- They are also called ‘fathers’ (1 Thess 2:11) or ‘nurses’ (1 Thess 2:7).

The name is not important but the ministry is one of caring like a shepherd to the sheep, a father to his children or a nurse to her patient. It involves guidance, like a pilot, and guardianship.

It is noteworthy that Paul never uses authoritative terms, which he could have done, for elders because, like Peter (1 Pt 5:2-3), he downplays authority and position but emphasises caring ministry.<sup>5</sup> In fact the most powerful word for authority used domestically in the NT is that of a mother running a household [1 Tim 5.14, *oikodespoteo*, to be master or mistress of a household, keep house, manage one's household]. This word (which includes the word despot) is the only domestic word that contains the idea of management or ruling and it never applies to churches but to the family. The apostles elevated the role of a housewife above that traditionally held.

Paul identifies a plethora of qualifications and characteristics of such men and since this is common knowledge, I don't need to expound them here. Check out the Pastoral Epistles. The important point is that elders care for souls.

**You must support the weak.** Acts 20:35 [Paul's command to the Ephesian elders.]

In short, elders do two basic things.

### **Feeding**

Jesus said to him, ‘Feed My sheep’. Jn 21:15

The first priority is that they feed the flock. That is they give the necessary spiritual food to the sheep. Today even this is misunderstood and great failings appear everywhere.

Since the Reformation, churches have failed to properly feed the sheep by concentrating on magisterial<sup>6</sup> sermons as the only method of feeding. This is a huge mistake. Due to the specific requirements of the Reformation, such preaching was necessary to overcome the massive problems the reformers had to face in constant opposition and even against threats for their life. The preaching of men like Calvin, Bucer, Luther, Farel, Bullinger and Zwingli are edifying and impressive and by this they were able to achieve the work that God gave them.

But sermons are not an apostolic method for building up the church. Preaching is the NT method of evangelism. Preaching is a declaration of the truth of the Gospel, a proclamation of the Lordship of Christ, an announcement of a new order, a command to repent. In fact there are many meanings for the various words translated as preach in the NT.

But preaching is not the method for feeding the flock.

*Feeding involves instruction by discussion and dialogue*

Feeding the flock involves didactic instruction, edification, encouragement, prophetic exposition, admonition and sometimes discipline. This requires much more personal application. To feed a person you need to know what food they need and how much they

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<sup>5</sup> The NT does not use ‘lords’ (*katakuriuo*), ‘princes’ (*archon*), ‘kings’ (*basileus*) or governors (*ethnarches*) to describe elders.

<sup>6</sup> Displaying great authority.

can take. Some, as Paul explains, can only manage milk while others need red meat. This means that you must first understand them, listen to them, consider them.

If you give an immature person red meat, you will discourage him and confuse him; he cannot chew it. If you give a mature person milk, they will get bored and will not be fed at all.<sup>7</sup>

Thus a 'one size fits all' sermon is hopeless for the flock. A sermon suits evangelism because the one message is what all the hearers need but a sermon is no good to instruct the sheep. The sheep need individual edification. This poses a number of issues.

First, any teaching to the whole church must be performed in manner that suits all the different sorts of people and scratches where they itch. Thus teaching must be based on dialogue. Through asking questions and opening up the talk for discussion you learn what people require and then apply God's word to each of those situations.<sup>8</sup> Thus prepared sermons are not the answer. Even Calvin, with his magisterial sermons, did not use notes but spoke from experience.

This is why dialoguing was the method Jesus used to teach his disciples and what Paul did in teaching the church at Troas

Now on the first *day* of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul, ready to depart the next day, spoke to them and continued his message until midnight. Acts 20:7

'Spoke' (KJV 'preached') is the Greek word *dialegomai* which means: converse, discourse, discuss, argue, debate, dialogue with someone. Paul's word ('message' is *logos*) was a discourse, a discussion, a dialogue.

You cannot instruct people if you don't listen to them. You need to discuss issues with them to find out where they are and then apply your instruction to their needs.

### *Didactic instruction*

Second, feeding involves didactic instruction.

If you instruct the brethren in these things, you will be a good minister of Jesus Christ, nourished in the words of faith and of the good doctrine. 1 Tim 4:6 ['Instruct' here means, metaphorically, 'to supply from one's own resources'.]

I teach everywhere in every church. 1 Cor 4:17 ['Teach' is *didasko*, meaning didactic discourse, to impart instruction.]

Able to teach. 2 Tim 2:24 ['Teach' is *didakticos*.]

You need *someone* to teach you again. Heb 5:12 ['Teach' is *didasko*.]

Elders need to teach didactically, that is they must instruct people. There is no place for simply preaching happy thoughts, pleasant observations of a text, technical stuff copied from commentaries, preaching some agenda, generalised encouragement or telling funny stories. Teaching the flock is a serious business that is educational.

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<sup>7</sup> Note that when Seeker Sensitive churches in America focused on attracting outsiders and dumbed-down the ministry, eventually hordes of mature believing families left the church because they were not being fed.

<sup>8</sup> This is why God ordained small house churches.

*Personal application, counselling*

I kept back nothing that was helpful, but proclaimed it to you, and taught you publicly and from house to house. Acts 20:20

Corporate instruction in the main meeting has to be followed up constantly with application, one-to-one counselling at home. Pastoral visitation is a thing of the past today. People only get a pastoral visit when there is some dire counselling need or some disciplinary matter. But historically pastors visited all the flock all the time, applying the word to homes. Yet today there are so-called 'elders' who never visit the flock to apply teaching, ever. This is a huge mistake. Richard Baxter transformed a whole market town through his assiduous home visitations. Though he was an Amyraldian, his practical pastoral studies are very valuable.

*Edification*

*Let it be* for the edification of the church. 1 Cor 14:12

Let all things be done for edification. 1 Cor 14:26

*We do* all things, beloved, for your edification. 2 Cor 12:19

Necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers. Eph 4:29

Godly edification which is in faith. 1 Tim 1:4

The Greek word *oikodome* means to build something up. The only way you can build a person up in church is by teaching them, instructing them through explaining God's word. It is the word of God itself that builds a person up, not the teacher, '**Unless the LORD builds the house, they labour in vain who build it**' (Ps 127:1). The teacher is merely a conduit that allows the words of God to be received and understood. The teacher understands God's word and processes it rationally and then communicates it effectively. Thus edification builds character and mature character leads to ministry.

A good teacher always builds people up. When you speak to a teacher, even socially, you leave having been helped; it is in the nature of a God-given teacher to edify.

ESTABLISHMENT AND ENCOURAGEMENT

**To establish you and encourage you concerning your faith.** 1 Thess 3:2

Edification also includes the idea of encouragement or consolation (comforting). Teaching gives a person the knowledge to understand or do something but encouragement gives a person the inspiration to achieve it. It literally means to inspire courage. Encouragement gives support, confidence, hope and stimulation.

The way this is done is by a person coming alongside another and supporting him, just like the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, comes alongside us to help and guide us.

This is the basis of the Greek words used:

- *Paraklesis*: a calling near, summons, (esp. for help) supplication, entreaty, exhortation, admonition, encouragement, consolation, comfort, solace; persuasive discourse; instructive, admonitory, conciliatory, powerful, hortatory discourse.
- *Parakaleo*: to call to one's side, encourage, summon, call upon, involving exhortation, entreaty, comfort, instruction, admonishment, exhortation, strengthen by consolation.
- *Sumparakaleo*: to call upon or invite or exhort at the same time or together, to strengthen (comfort) with others.

Thus edifying ministry must come alongside a person and not be aloof from them. The concept of sermonical, magisterial, pedantic, pedagogic, authoritarian ministry is as far as the east is from the west from Biblical teaching. This is why Biblical teaching ministry must involve home visitation where the word is applied. That is the best way to get alongside a person.

I say this with conviction: those so-called church leaders who preach and never apply the word themselves in person in home visits is failing God and failing their ministry. If you are too busy to apply the word in people's homes, you are doing the wrong things or your church is far too big. Mend your ways before you have to give an account before God on the Last Day.

**Establish you in every good word and work. 2 Thess 2:17**

Edification also involves the idea of establishment (Gk. *sterizo*). This literally means laying a foundation for someone to build upon, to make someone stable, to make someone firm.

### *Prophetic ministry*

**If anyone speaks, let him speak as the oracles of God. If anyone ministers, let him do it as with the ability which God supplies, that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. 1 Pt 4:11**

Rational instruction in doctrine is good; expository teaching is good; explaining the Bible is good: edification is good; but prophetic ministry is best.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones famously said that good ministry was '*logic on fire*'. Logic is in the cognitive ability of the man to process doctrine and communicate it while prophecy is the fire.

Prophecy in terms of the authoritative prophetic office is finished. Jesus himself told us this when he explained that John the Baptist was the last of the prophets.<sup>9</sup> This is why no one in the NT says, '*Thus says the Lord*' or '*the Lord says*' in a direct way. No man today has prophetic authority to command fire from heaven, part a sea, make iron float, stop the rain and so on.

However, God still gives prophets to the church and these people teach in bringing the very words of God to people.<sup>10</sup> Prophetic ministry is teaching in such a way that people feel that God is speaking to them in person. Prophecy has always been about a man being the spokesman of God.<sup>11</sup>

Prophetic ministry, having spiritual authority, is not just plain instruction but also contains admonition, correction, encouragement, exhortation, comfort and power.<sup>12</sup>

### **Defending from predators**

**For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the**

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<sup>9</sup> Matt 11:13, 'For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John'. :k 16:16, 'The law and the prophets were until John'.

<sup>10</sup> 1 Pt 1:212, 'holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit'.

<sup>11</sup> Very occasionally a prophetic teacher may be given foresight exceptionally under the New Covenant, such as John Foxe, or Alexander Peden. This however is unusual.

<sup>12</sup> 1 Cor 14:3, 'he who prophesies speaks edification and exhortation and comfort to men'.

disciples after themselves. Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone. Acts 20:29-31

But there were also false prophets among the people, even as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them, *and* bring on themselves swift destruction. And many will follow their destructive ways, because of whom the way of truth will be blasphemed. By covetousness they will exploit you with deceptive words; for a long time their judgment has not been idle, and their destruction does not slumber. 2 Peter 2:1-3

I found it necessary to write to you exhorting you to contend earnestly for the faith. Jude 1:3

Wage the good warfare. 1 Tim 1:18

The second great priority of elders is to protect the sheep from wolves. Again this is largely a failure today.

Peter explains that the devil prowls around like a restless lion seeking whom he can devour. Now that initially means temptation to sin and rebel through casting thoughts into the minds of saints, but it secondly occurs through proxies. The greater danger today is the devouring of saints through accepting heresies. If a person sins they can receive forgiveness through confession and the cleansing of the blood of Christ; hallelujah. However, if a saint swallows a serious heresy it can ruin their whole life. What do you think Satan is more interested in?

It is the job of elders to understand the current heresies and aberrant practices (and there are thousands) and protect the flock. An elder does this through these means:

#### *Warnings*

Watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears. Acts 20:31

When an elder learns of a current threat, he warns the saints all about it. He explains what the true doctrine is and then shows how the heresy perverts this doctrine and how it poses a threat to faith. If saints heed the warnings this saves so much counselling and grief than if they imbibe the heresy. Sadly, far from doing this, so many elders actually endorse the heresy today.

#### *Instruction*

If the saints are properly instructed in doctrine it is far harder for Satan to get them to fall into some perverse heresy. Doctrinal instruction is of huge import for the saints and a big part of the job of elders; yet today theological teaching is hardly occurring anywhere. Very few elders really instruct in doctrine, yet doctrine is the foundation of character and grace. Note, for example, 2 Pt 1:2, 'Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord'. Saints multiply grace in their lives through knowledge of the doctrines of God and Christ.

#### *Admonishment*

We urge you, brethren, to recognise those who labour among you, and are over you in the Lord and admonish you. 1Thess 5:12

When a saint has accepted a heresy it will be necessary to admonish them. This is less than discipline but more than instruction. It is a loving confrontation to get them to cast away

the heresy and repent. Admonishment involves the ideas of warning, exhorting, encouraging, confronting, with a view to get a person to change their ways.

### *Discipline*

Discipline is what happens when all else fails. If a person has accepted a heresy and refuses to be instructed and repent it is necessary to enforce discipline. If you fail to do this, the heresy will spread like a cancer in the flock. Notice the case of Hymenaeus and Philetus whom Paul disciplined for teaching a heresy about the resurrection (Hyper Preterism; 2 Tim 2:17-18, cf. 1 Tim 1:20).<sup>13</sup>

Now some leaders consider this to go too far. In fact many elders consider that church members can think whatever they want about doctrine and have multiple different views on cardinal orthodoxy, but this is false.

Firstly, Paul commands the church to all think the same thing. There must be a unified doctrinal position.

**Be of the same mind. Rm 12:16 [Lit. 'thinking the same thing'.]**

**Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and *that* there be no divisions among you, but *that* you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment. 1 Cor 1:10**

**Being of one accord, of one mind. Phil 2:2 [Lit. 'thinking the one thing'.]**

**Let us be of the same mind. Phil 3:16**

When Paul affirms that there must be no divisions amongst us, he means no divisions at all; that includes division of doctrine.

This has been the case throughout church history and it is why the church fragmented. When individuals in the church refused to repent over doctrine they seceded and formed a new church. While we can differ on minor issues, crucial orthodox matters must be agreed in union. However, today worldly toleration has become accepted and thus it is deemed a greater virtue to tolerate all sorts of unorthodox doctrine in a church. This is unbiblical and a big mistake. In any modern evangelical church there are people sitting next to each other holding theological views that are diametrically opposite.<sup>14</sup>

Secondly, erroneous doctrines damage people and ruin the church. They spread like a cancer.

**But shun profane and idle babblings, for they will increase to more ungodliness. And their message will spread like cancer. 2 Tim 2:16-17**

I have heard from sad pastors of churches that split after a couple took on false teachings and then actively proselytised this error throughout a local church. This is not uncommon.

Doctrinal error breeds because it is supported by the work of Satan to dismantle and damage the church. Heresies must be nipped in the bud. One of the reasons that the reformers were so successful is that they took this seriously.

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<sup>13</sup> Delivering to Satan is the most extreme form of discipline and involves casting someone out of the church.

<sup>14</sup> E.g Calvinism vs. Arminianism; Premillennialism vs. Amillennialism; Trinitarianism vs. Unitarianism; Total Depravity vs. Pelagianism; Biblical sanctification vs. antinomianism; rationalism vs. mysticism; election vs. self-determination etc.



Finally, Christ is united. We cannot stand as a testimony to the Lord Jesus and all think something different about cardinal issues; that presents a fragmented Christ. If we are all servants of one Lord then we must all believe the same basic doctrine.

### Is Christ divided? 1 Cor 1:13

#### WHY THIS DOCTRINAL WEAKNESS HAS OCCURRED

The modern church has failed the sheep in very many ways. Some of them include the following:

- New and young church members were not catechised. Throughout history catechetical instruction was the norm. It was the way that immature Christians learned basic foundational doctrine. This is vital for a stable Christian life and a necessary platform for growing in grace and knowledge. Once you have this basic theological groundwork, weekly instruction in the church has something to hang on to and the person grows in knowledge in a stable way. The catechism is a continual framework to undergird further instruction. A printed catechism is also a very useful document to consult; just look at the huge continual benefits of the Shorter and Larger Westminster Catechisms over 400 years.<sup>15</sup> People should not be considered as functioning church members until they have mastered this.
- Modern churches have no decent confession of faith. Throughout history sound churches had an excellent confession of faith that all members subscribed to. Such examples include: the excellent *Belgic Confession* of Guido de Bres, the *Westminster Confession*, *The First London Confession* and the *1689 Confession* of the English Baptists, the *Helvetic Confession*, the *Irish Articles*, and so on. Modern churches have people that believe a myriad different things because they have no formal, pure doctrinal position.
- Doctrinal instruction is ignored. Doctrinal instruction is more important than anything else. Expository teaching is good, and this can gradually give doctrinal instruction over time, but expository ministry must be partnered with doctrinal didactics. You cannot grow mature believers without sound doctrinal instruction. Sadly, for various reasons, most churches do not do this and have not done it for decades.
- Outside influences. Because people do not get continual pastoral home visits to cement their instruction they are left to form their own theological understanding by reading books, listening to messages and watching videos. These can be from all sorts of heretical sources and there is no oversight. I have seen members of evangelical churches adopt: occultism, mysticism, Trinitarian errors, Ebionism, Erastianism, Baptismal regeneration, Nestorianism, Evolutionary theory, and much more, from outside sources.
- Fear of naming names. If you are going to confront heresy then you must also identify the heretics. The church has done this effectively since the sub-apostolic age; many writings of the church fathers were confronting heretics by name.<sup>16</sup> However, today many are afraid to be seen as intolerant and fail this urgent duty. Luther and Calvin were effective teachers because they not only taught the people doctrine but they also identified heresies and condemned those who taught it, naming names and explaining their errors.<sup>17</sup> In fact, they often used extreme language in this fight – and it is a fight (1 Tim 6:12). In defending the truth Jesus called the Pharisees ‘liars’, ‘vipers’ and ‘hell-

<sup>15</sup> The introductory courses or commitment classes that some churches have is not catechetical instruction in doctrine but something far short of it.

<sup>16</sup> E.g. ‘Dialogue With Trypho’, Justin Martyr [100-165].

<sup>17</sup> E.g. Calvin’s attack of Pighius or Luther’s attack of Schwenkfeld.

bound' to their face; he even called the king 'a fox'. We must name names when condemning heresy (though we do not need to be nasty or intemperate).

As a result of all these things, predators have devoured the saints in huge numbers. Hardly any people in modern churches have any clue about sound doctrine at all. Even worse, most church leaders don't either.

This is proved by the wide variety of errors that are commonplace today; such as: Arianism, Gnosticism, Docetism, Sabellianism (Modalism), Arminianism, Millennialism, Pelagianism, Amyraldism, Socinianism, Universalism, Antinomianism, Sacramentalism, Sacerdotalism, Moral Government, Hyper-Preterism, Unitarianism, mysticism, occultism, Necromancy and authoritarianism – we could add more. These are all present in churches that call themselves evangelical. Never in all church history have so many heresies been actively present at the same time. It is incredible that Gnostic Docetism should be resurrected today or that any 'evangelical' could be a Necromancer.<sup>18</sup>

This is because: a) elders did not know the truth; b) elders did not apply the truth; c) elders did not warn about lies; d) elders failed to act when heresies took hold.

### **Summary**

Elders are concerned with the spiritual life of the sheep. They must instruct the flock in the truth of God and this means doctrinal didactics personally applied. They must also protect the sheep from harm and this means dealing with heresies and acting promptly.

Eldership is a spiritual office.

## **What eldership is not**

### **It is not a single dominant leader**

Everywhere in the NT it is 'elders' plural that are the fathers of the local church, 'appoint elders in every city as I commanded you', (Titus 1:5, plural in the Greek). There is never a case that a church is led by a single elder or a dominant elder. Overarching authoritarian bishops emerged after the death of the apostles gradually over 200-300 years.

Note that Peter describes himself as a 'fellow-elder' in a local church even though he was a first rank apostle (1 Pt 5:1, *sumpresbuteros*, a fellow elder). Similarly the apostle John was a local elder at Ephesus.

It is impossible to make the case that there is a single authoritarian leader in the local church; there is no Scripture anywhere to defend this.

### **It is not merely a spiritual counsellor**

The tradition arose in Presbyterian, Baptist and Independent churches that there were two types of elder: the first was a preacher, the second was a ruling elder that counselled but did not teach. This is an error.

All elders must be skilled in teaching, as I have demonstrated already. If a person cannot teach then he cannot be an elder.

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<sup>18</sup> Note the current 'grave-sucking' of Word of Faith leaders or Benny Hinn's 'anointing' from Katherine Kuhlman's grave.

If a person cannot teach then that shows that he does not understand theology and has no grasp of doctrine. This means that he cannot even counsel properly because he does not sufficiently understand God's word. The basis of counselling is truth and counselling is practically applying doctrine to life.

### **It is not a manager**

Very many elders in modern churches are merely managers. Indeed, many were appointed to eldership because they were already managers in the business world and this was considered enough to qualify them for eldership. This is a fallacy.

The qualifications of eldership have to do with spirituality, shepherding and fathering not managerial competence. In fact, many modern characteristics of management disqualify a person from eldership, such as: being ruthless, hiding the truth, pressuring staff to work harder; being double-minded (saying one thing to higher management and another to staff), getting rid of weak links, making constant targets for performance, setting policy by market research, having authority by status, and so on.

The people of God are not managed in the worldly sense, they are nurtured and cherished; they are fathered; they are shepherded; they are protected. Jesus said that the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. This is the opposite of modern management.

Shepherding is self-sacrificial, very unlike modern managers. In fact when Jesus said that he was the door of the sheep he was referring to the practice of Judaeen shepherds to build a sheepfold but without a gate, a space was left empty. When the sheep were rounded up at night for protection in the fold, the shepherd actually slept in the opening; he was the gate. Any predator had to come through him. No human manager acts like this.

### **It is not a young man**

The clue is in the word 'elder'. Today we have situations where very young men have high positions of leadership in large churches where virtual youths are dominating much older, mature believers. This is wrong. It is not surprising that so many problems occur in these churches. I have literally seen a teenager who had been converted only a few years made an elder. What is worse is that this was a person who could not teach and had no experience in counselling but he was compliant – which is what domineering single leaders desire.

What about 1 Tim 4:12, 'Let no one despise your youth'? Paul is not addressing Timothy as an elder here but as an evangelist and apostolic worker. Timothy only had authority as a delegate of Paul, acting on his behalf and even then in a time of transition and development before the church was fully established. (Note that elders do not appear in Acts until chapter 11 and the seven [c. 6] were not yet called deacons.)

### **It is not a woman**

Despite the claims of Feminism, leadership in the church is male. Paul makes this eminently obvious in 1 Tim 2:11-12:

**Let a woman learn in silence with all submission. And I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man, but to be in silence.**

The main task of eldership is to teach the brethren. Women are not allowed to teach men (they may teach other women) so they cannot be made an elder. Again Paul follows the synagogue practice here where women were also not allowed to speak or to teach.

Woman can participate since Paul allows them to pray (1 Cor 11:5) but when there is teaching going on, they must be silent. I have experienced women interjecting in teaching

because it touched some nerve; this damaged the whole import of the teaching and caused disruption. I have also seen women do this repeatedly and damage a church. In the worst case, I have heard of a woman causing a church split because she was offended by the teaching of the pastor.

Paul also explains that women are more prone to deception, ‘For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived, fell into transgression’, 1 Tim 2:13-14. I have seen this multiple times in recent church history. In fact, many sects and factions have a predominant number of women; indeed many sects were initiated or led by women.<sup>19</sup>

Women should be honoured and have a very important place in the church and can do things that men cannot, it is just that they cannot lead or teach men. Paul and Jesus had many women supporters, but they did not teach. In fact, motherhood and homemaking need to be championed these days because it is a hugely important job, which only women can do well. In the past women that concentrated on their God-given tasks enabled great men to emerge, such as Monica [332–c.387] the mother of Augustine.

To encourage women reading this, women must be honoured, cherished and championed; they must not be ignored or trivialised. They are a vital part of the church and fully equal with men in salvation. But we must honour God’s word and understand that they have a different function from men in the church. They are not lesser; they are just different.

#### **It is not a financial expert**

It is common that someone with expertise in finance or accounting is made an elder and put in charge of the treasury. Needless to say, this is not a qualification for eldership, but it may help a person be a good deacon since it is a practical issue not a spiritual matter.

#### **It is not a musician**

Many churches have appointed musicians to the eldership on the basis that they led worship and the music group. This is not a qualification for eldership. Indeed, a truly Biblical church does not even have instrumental music, just as the early church, the later churches,<sup>20</sup> the Reformers or even Spurgeon, had no instrumental music.

#### **It is not some performance specialist**

Today churches appoint all sorts of people to the eldership, such as those qualified in drama, arts, dance, and such-like. Needless to say, there is not an iota of Scriptural support for this.

#### **It is not a psychotherapist**

Many appoint professional counsellors to eldership. In fact, professional qualifications in modern counselling therapies are a disqualification for church ministry since the training and history of this profession is founded upon lies and occult ideas, which developed the profession.

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<sup>19</sup> E.g. Christian Science, New Thought, the Shakers, Theosophy, many liberal churches, some Unitarian churches, some Pietist churches, many Holiness Movement churches, some Methodist churches, some Higher Life churches, and very many Pentecostal churches. The vast majority of witches are women and not men. The majority of New Agers are women. Names include: Anne Lee, Maria Woodworth-Etter, Aimee Semple-McPherson, Mary Baker-Eddy, Kathryn Kuhlman, Annie Besant, Mdme. Helen Blavatsky, Agnes Sanford, Alice Garrigus, Joyce Huggett, Ruth Carter Stapleton, Ivey Campbell, Marilyn Hickey, Faith Forster, etc.

<sup>20</sup> Organs were not widespread until the 13<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> centuries even in Catholic churches. Pianos or harmoniums were not common in dissenting churches until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Luther called instrumental music the ‘ensigns of Baal’. John Chrysostom [c.347–407, early father] said that music fostered pagan emotionalism.

Freud was a charlatan who falsified his data, blatantly lied about his claimed successes, abused his patients and was fascinated by sex. Jung was utterly saturated in occultism and quite disturbed. Adler majored on introspection. They all disagreed with each other, as all psychiatrists today do. Jung disassociated himself from Freud; Adler argued against Freud. In fact, all the therapies contradict each other. Different therapies state that the human personality problem (neurosis)<sup>21</sup> is based on: a patient's beliefs, sensitivity, emotional state, maladaptive conditioning, sexual issues, the environment, personal loss, parental deprivation, inherited factors, trauma, introvert or extrovert personality, and so on. Each discipline promotes its own causes and expensive remedies but studies show that doing nothing or talking to friends leads to better success than all of them.

None of this is a qualification for eldership.

## The necessity of deacons

Now because the ministry of elders is so important and so time-consuming, it is vital that they do not waste their time on mundane matters, even if these have some import – such as feeding the poor. Thus the apostles (acting as the first church elders though this title was not given until Acts 11) stated: 'we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word' (Acts 6:4). Thus God equips the church with deacons whose job it is to deal with practical issues that affect the church.

In a Biblical church (i.e. that has no dedicated building etc.) this is pre-eminently helping the poor amongst the flock. Sadly in modern churches it involves a host of jobs, many of which are connected to a building.

All churches need deacons, and here is another misunderstanding, deacons are not a spiritual office.

All over the country we find churches where deacons are given various responsibilities. Very often a church will have a deacon, or deacons, that rules the church as leader. This was prominent in independent free churches. Instead of an elder there was one or two deacons that governed the church. This is a travesty; deacons have no spiritual authority and they are not leaders of men; they are support staff aiding people in need.

Though they are not called deacons this early on in church history, we find this ministry exemplified in the choosing of Stephen, Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas for leading the distribution of food to the poor (Acts 6:5). It is interesting to note that when these men were set aside and the eldership ceased mundane tasks, the church increased (verse 7).

Therefore, if a church has a need of administrative jobs then deacons must be appointed to the task. These men must fulfil the qualifications Paul lays down in 1 Timothy because it requires spiritually-minded men to even do mundane tasks in church.

This is a formal position; it requires ordination, setting apart for ministry. Administrators are not some ordinary job that a church appoints to do this or that task, there is no such office. If there is a need, then the church must appoint and formally ordain a deacon to do that task or God is dishonoured.

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<sup>21</sup> A type of mental illness in which a person persistently over-reacts emotionally and behaves in an inappropriate way, while knowing that it is irrational to do so (e.g. phobia, anxiety). By contrast, in psychosis, this insight is lost and the person loses grip on reality.

Sadly today we see huge numbers of office staff and administrators doing all sorts of tasks that have no character and spiritual qualifications and were never formally ordained. No wonder things don't work in so many churches. Such churches have no deacons.

So deacons must be spiritual people (Paul lists the qualifications in 1 Tim 3) but their tasks are mundane. Note Acts 6:3, 'Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business'. A deacon must be a man full of the Holy Spirit.

The emphasis of a deacon's ministry is service. The word *diakonos* means: a servant, one who executes the commands of another, an attendant or one who serves food and drink. Deacons serve and so those who hold this office must be observed to have a serving spirit; that is why Paul commands that they be tested first (1 Tim 3:10). Administrative tasks do not elevate deacons; there is no place for pride. Their work is a service to all.

Sadly, I have observed administrators in churches swagger about as if they were leaders who expect some sort of submission from lower ranking members. This is anathema; deacons are servants of all. In any case, in church everyone should be submissive to everyone else: 'all of you be submissive to one another, and be clothed with humility, for "God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble"' (1 Pt 5:5). No one (including elders) has any dominant authority over others; no one can command members to do their will.

With deacons working effectively to manage the practical needs of the saints, elders can concentrate on spiritual matters and the church can progress smoothly and effectively, being a good testimony to the Lord.

## **The importance of Biblicity**

Churches may decide to appoint all sorts of leaders with a variety of titles and that is their prerogative; however, such churches cannot consider themselves evangelical. If you want to be a Bible-believing, Gospel proclaiming (evangelical) church then you have to abide by God's word.

God's word is very clear on church leadership; it is that churches are only led by a plurality of elders who care for souls and lead the church as fathers and guides. The only other church office is that of deacons who are not leaders but who serve the church in practical matters. Therefore, both these offices have multiple qualifications, which Paul explains in detail. There are no qualifications given by Paul for any other office.

### **The long history of elders**

The leading by elders had a long pedigree, at least going back to the formation of the people of God after the Exodus. In fact even in the Patriarchal age elders were seen as the leaders of the tribe (Gen 50:7; Ex 3:16, 18, 4:29, 12:21). However, a formal leadership was given to 70 elders when the burden of leadership became too heavy for Moses to bear (Num 11:16).

The normal leadership of tribes in the Ancient Near East was by elders.

Through disobedience, Israel had to be governed first by temporary judges and then, when the people rejected the Lord as their king (1 Sam 8:7), by a human king.

In later years Israel developed the synagogue system because people that lived distant from the temple could not get there very often, neither could they leave the farmland and

livestock for long periods of time. So regional synagogues developed (Ps 74:8).<sup>22</sup> During the exile these became the central points for unifying the people and they became a prominent feature on the return to Jerusalem while the second temple was being built, which took many years.

In the time of Jesus, synagogues were of great importance in enabling religious worship and instruction regionally and these became the pattern for the New Covenant churches. The apostle James even calls the church a 'synagogue' (Jm 2:2, Gk. 'assembly' is *sunagoge*). No serious Bible scholar doubts that the pattern of the early churches was based upon the synagogue system where leadership was by elders and elders alone.

The church should have continued in that simple system where small local congregations were led by fathers who were called elders. But the ambition of men led to corruption and the gradual emergence of a system of monarchical bishops; i.e. a man ruling over other elders (bishops), hence regional governors and the later diocesan system. By the time of Cyprian [died 258] this was formalised. From there it was a short step to a monarchical hyper-bishop that was later called a pope in the west and a patriarch in the east or an archbishop in Anglicanism.

The Reformation never fully reformed ecclesiology (how could it, there were far too many earth-shattering reforms to make in one generation) and this led to hangovers from the Roman Church into Protestantism. This was never properly addressed and thus we have the man-made system of hierarchical leadership to this day with multiple authoritarian unbiblical leaders and prelates and a host of co-workers. Apart from classical Presbyterians, most other denominations either copied the hierarchical system of Rome and Canterbury (with different names) or found that these gradually evolved over time. Even church reform movements all developed hierarchies with the Charismatic Movement just being the latest in line.<sup>23</sup>

However, whatever the vagaries of history, those who wish to honour God and be Biblical must do what God commands, follow apostolic precedents and obey Scripture.

Despite history and men's failings, the Bible has no hierarchy of leadership.<sup>24</sup> It only has elders.

## Conclusion

There are only two offices in the church. The first is the elders (always plural,<sup>25</sup> always working in a team, always equal, never a senior partner).<sup>26</sup> They are the ones given the

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<sup>22</sup> 'Meeting places' (NKJV) is translated as 'synagogue' in the KJV, ASV and WEB. The Hebrew *mo'ed* means: appointed place, appointed meeting, appointed time referring to a sacred meeting place, hence synagogue. The Psalmist bewails the enemy that has attacked the 'congregations' (v4, plural *mo'ed*), that has cast fire into the sanctuary (v7, *miqdash*, sacred place) and burned the synagogues (v8). These all refer to the synagogues that were in regions and not to the singular temple in Jerusalem. One can argue about the date referred to here but not that there were synagogues in existence.

<sup>23</sup> Apostle = Archbishop; elders = bishops; house-group leaders = local vicars and rectors.

<sup>24</sup> It doesn't even have a separation of clergy and laity, all the people are the *laos* ('people'). Elders are part of the *laos* but have a responsibility to guide. There is no clergy.

<sup>25</sup> Acts 11:30, 14:23, 15:2, 4, 6, etc. 1 Tim 5:17; Titus 1:5; Jam 5:14; 1 Pt 5:1, 5. The two singular uses in the NT are just a grammatical necessity (1 Tim 5:19; 1 Pt 5:1). A church always has 'elders' plural, not one elder.

<sup>26</sup> We could spend a lot of time on this matter but that is not my purpose here. There is no such thing as a senior pastor (try and find one in the NT), the very term is an oxymoron. There are no single dominant leaders in a Biblical church, the very thought is authoritarian and very wrong.

responsibility by God to care for the souls of the sheep. They are the fathers in the church and this is a spiritual office. Elders are under-shepherds acting on behalf of the Great Shepherd.

Deacons are the only other office; there is no other.<sup>27</sup> Deacons have no spiritual authority whatsoever, they do not care for the souls of the sheep. Their job is practical to deal with all the pragmatic administrative matters to keep the elders from wasting time better spent. Their prime task in the NT is delivering food and aid to the poor.

For a church to fulfil God's wishes, it must properly delegate responsibility. Elders must not act like deacons and deacons must not act like elders. Any confusion on this will lead to a variety of problems amongst the sheep.

Mark this well, confuse these jobs and the sheep will suffer and the testimony of God will be tarnished.

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<sup>27</sup> Apostles, prophets and evangelists have no authority, as such, in the local church unless they are also elders. Apostles are missionaries sent out from the church to lay foundations of a new church; there is no such thing as an apostle in charge of elders (that is an archbishop). Prophets were very active in the early church until the publication of the NT and the whole Bible, then the office diminished. It is now active in teaching and exhortation. When churches had no sacred texts they needed prophets. Evangelists are sent out from a church to evangelise new areas and then work with an apostle to build a new church. Timothy was an evangelist who worked with Paul. It is common that apostles, prophets and evangelists are also elders (1 Pt 5:1). Modern titles such as Moderator, Regional pastor, worship leader, house-group leader, Archbishop, Rector, Cardinal, Vicar, Dean, Reader, and so on are human fabrications that have no Biblical authority.