

ELDERS AND THE ELDERHOOD

IN PRINCIPLE, IN PRACTICE

GAULT, J. M.

Copyright © Hayes Press 2016

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form, without the written permission of Hayes Press.

Published by:

HAYES PRESS Publisher, Resources & Media,

The Barn, Flaxlands

Royal Wootton Bassett

Swindon, SN4 8DY

United Kingdom

www.hayespress.org¹

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from the

Revised Version Bible (1885, Public Domain).

1. <http://www.hayespress.org>

FOREWORD

CHRISTENDOM HAS DEVELOPED various forms of church leadership. A well known example is the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church, with the Pope at its apex and authority delegated downwards through cardinals, bishops and priests. The Anglican Church has its organisation of archbishops, bishops and clergy. The Orthodox Eastern Church is a federation of regional churches, each headed by its own bishop, with the Patriarch of Constantinople as head of the Federation. Each of these religious systems has proved to be of enduring strength and cohesion, but they are of human design and contrast sharply in many respects with revealed truth of Scripture.

As the “free church” movement flourished in the wake of the great evangelical revival under the Wesleys, there was a broad division of view about forms of church government. Some favoured the integrating of their churches in close unity. Others insisted on a “congregational” pattern, with strong emphasis on the independence of each local church.

The nineteenth century saw a deep spiritual revival through the so-called “brethren movement”. This derived from a new appreciation of such vital scriptural truths as believers being “all one in Christ Jesus”, fellow-members of one Body, and the blessed hope of the Lord's return for His Church. The Holy Spirit stirred the hearts of many Christians towards the simple observance of the Remembrance of the Lord Jesus. It was a movement of great significance and potential. Had it developed to its logical conclusion in fulfilment of scriptural principles of church association and leadership it could have been a great power for God. Sadly, at an early phase the movement split into two main camps. One group adopted a highly centralised system of leadership, first based in one of its London assemblies, but later vested in a succession of outstanding personali-

ties. The other branch of the movement went to the opposite extreme by developing a form of congregational rule well summed up in the description “the rule of the assembly by the assembly for the assembly”.

Within this second group, a century ago, the Holy Spirit stirred concern about a truly scriptural basis of leadership. Experience had shown that diverse teaching and practices had developed as a result of the existing “congregational” arrangements. This could only be remedied by a return to the inter-assembly cohesion and unity which obtained in apostolic times. After futile attempts to bring about reformation within the “Open Brethren” movement, there was established assemblies in fellowship on the pattern of New Testament churches of God. Scriptural principles of leadership were sought out and applied. Their wisdom and effectiveness have been confirmed by experience for well over a hundred years.

This book summarizes those principles and illustrates how they have worked out in practice both in apostolic and in modern times. It is commended to the reader as a lucid and constructive contribution to the subject, pointing the way to God's plan for Christian leadership.

CHAPTER 1: RULE AND AUTHORITY

ADAM, HEAD OF THE CREATION

The delegation of divine authority to men goes back to the very beginning of the human race. “Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth”. (Genesis 1:28).

In his ordained vocation, Adam, the first man, was given supreme authority to rule upon the earth. He had been created with the God-given ability to rule and govern. As lord of creation he had the physical and intellectual qualities which were necessary to enable him to carry out this responsibility, and it would appear he did this for some time. God tested Adam, however, and it is the sad record of God's Word that the man who ruled the earth failed to rule himself. He would not obey the command of the Lord, but became disobedient and brought disaster not only upon himself but also upon the whole of the creation under his control.

“And unto Adam he said, Because thou has hearkened unto the voice of thy wife, and hast eaten of the tree, of which I commanded thee, saying, Thou shalt not eat of it: cursed is the ground for thy sake; in toil shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life; thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; and thou shalt eat the herb of the field; in the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return” (Genesis 3:17-19).

“For the creation was subjected to vanity, not of its own will, but by reason of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself also shall be

delivered from the bondage of corruption into the liberty of the glory of the children of God” (Romans 8:20-21).

The inherent ability to rule has been present in mankind throughout its history, as has also been the tendency to disobey. Fallen man prefers a dominant role rather than a submissive one. The history of the nations is replete with instances where this power to rule has been pursued ruthlessly by many individuals. The lust for power has often been satisfied only at the cost of human lives and suffering, and has produced the general belief that power has a corrupting influence.

Power and authority are relative things, however, and individuals on a smaller scale have also pursued their petty ambitions for rank and prominence over their fellows. Whatever the scale of the struggle for power, it betrays the same common trait which is one of the less likeable of all human characteristics. Christian congregations have not been immune from it. The desire for pre-eminence has often been the cause of much unhappiness among Christian men and women. The preference to rule overrides the duty to obey, and many become self-choosers, pleasing themselves in matters of doctrine and practice rather than being prepared to submit to the divine will as discerned by others who are in a God-given position of authority. An instance of this is recorded where the Apostle John condemned the desire of Diotrephes who loved to have the pre-eminence among his fellows, (3 John 9) which had resulted in his unwillingness to receive the Apostle. It appears that Diotrephes was concerned to safeguard his status at all costs, even to the extent of “casting (others) out of the church” (3 John 10).

The Lord's Teaching About Precedence

The Lord Jesus when He was with His disciples in the Upper Room had an important lesson to teach about this matter of precedence and pre-eminence among them. He changed the whole perspective of what is

normally the practice in the kingdoms of the world by declaring that in fact the opposite applied to His kingdom.

“And he said unto them, The kings of the Gentiles have lordship over them; and they that have authority over them are called Benefactors. But ye shall not be so: but he that is the greater among you, let him become as the younger; and he that is chief, as he that cloth serve” (Luke 22:25-26).

It is remarkable that the disciples who had been with the Lord so long and had witnessed so often His gracious acts of love and mercy, who were aware of His humble background and knew His teachings so well, should have been guilty of disputing among themselves about precedence. Possibly it was His frequent references to His kingdom which first caused speculation among them as to which of them was to be the greatest in that kingdom, for they would think in terms of the nations of the world and their systems of rank and honours.

On the occasion of the Lord's mild rebuke to them about this kind of thinking (Luke 22:25-30) it is all the more surprising that they should have been discussing the matter. Earlier that evening they had witnessed His great example of humility in the service of others when He had washed their feet. Not only had He demonstrated by His actions, but He had also explained by His words, “Know ye what I have done to you? Ye call me, Master, and, Lord: and ye say well; for so I am. If I then, the Lord and the Master, have washed your feet, ye also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that ye also should do as I have done to you” (John 13:12-15).

Also they had witnessed the institution of the Breaking of the Bread, and heard the poignant words which He had spoken about His body and His blood; yet it seems that the seating arrangement at the table may have been their main pre-occupation and they were discussing among themselves which of them was to be the greatest. (Luke 22:24). Jesus had to explain to them that the standards of His kingdom were different from

those of the kingdoms of the world. For those who would serve Him, there was the glorious example of His own service, in which He spent Himself in the service of others, without expectation of honour or reward.

His words were, "... but he that is the greater among you, let him become as the younger; and he that is chief, as he that doth serve" (Luke 22:26). Nevertheless the Lord went on to assure them that service to Christ would not go unrewarded. In particular He acknowledged the fidelity of His apostles: "Ye are they which have continued with me in my temptations; and I appoint unto you a kingdom, even as my Father appointed unto me, that ye may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom; and ye shall sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel" (Luke 22:28-30).

The apostles learned their lesson that day, and they never forgot it. Their subsequent history, and that of the churches among whom they served as contained in the Word of God, has no record of any honours having been given to them, or to any others. The unique authority which they had was because of their personal witness to the risen Christ and to His teaching. They were men of distinction because of that, but they served the churches of God to the very end which for most of them, if not all, was the death of the martyr. Whatever systems of priestly classes or ranks may have developed in Christendom later, such had no precedent in the early churches and certainly no authority in the Word of God.

CHAPTER 2: ELDERS IN ISRAEL

THE RULE OF ELDERS in human society is a practice which is very old. It is still to be found among the more primitive tribes and peoples and is a tried and proven form of government and means of the administration of justice. It is a form of authority which is very natural. Almost instinctively the experience and wisdom of older men is recognized by the group, whether it be the family, the tribe or the nation.

The practice of the rule of elders is also recorded in the histories of ancient civilizations. In Egypt, for instance, although the Pharaohs ruled, and their rule was despotic, yet the Bible records that there were also elders in the land of Egypt (Genesis 50:7). Although the power of the Pharaoh was absolute he obviously took counsel from the elders of his people. There is also the mention of the elders of Moab and of Midian (Numbers 22:7).

In modern times many nations have their “upper house” in which the elder statesmen and experienced administrators of the nation wield some influence in controlling the legislation that a lower house may have passed. The prudence of such an arrangement has been proven time and time again.

Elders in Israel

When we consider the early history of the nation of Israel, we see a clear picture emerging of a structured elderhood. Divine approval was evidently given to the rule of elders among God's people. The children of Israel had their elders even during the days of their servitude in Egypt. Moses was instructed to call together “the elders of Israel (Exodus 3:16) to hear the Lord's plan for their deliverance. Those elders would be the heads of households, the senior men who were recognized by the Lord as

the rulers of the people, and as such He gave instruction that they should be appraised of His plan to deliver the nation.

After the exodus from Egypt the elders of Israel are seen to be recognized as the representatives of the people (Exodus 17:5). Moses was commanded to smite the rock in the sight of the elders of Israel (Exodus 17:6). Later, when the burden of the administration of the people became too much for Moses it was necessary for him to delegate his authority to others. His early training in Egypt may have illustrated the value of elders in the administration of a nation, but it was the good advice of Jethro, his father-in-law, which led Moses to appoint a body of elders to assist him in the government of the people (Exodus 18:21-22).

He chose from among the existing elders, men who were the heads of tribes who were wise, and known; and he made them the heads of the people. “So I took the heads of your tribes, wise men, and known, and made them heads over you, captains of thousands, and captains of hundreds, and captains of fifties, and captains of tens, and officers, according to your tribes” (Deuteronomy 1:15). Their primary function was to “hear causes between brethren” (Deuteronomy 1:16) and to “judge the people at all times” (Exodus 18:26).

Later, under the instruction of the Lord, Moses chose seventy men out of the elders of Israel who were to “bear the burden of the people” with Moses. The Lord gave His seal of approval by placing His Spirit upon them (Numbers 11:25). In this way the structure of the elderhood of Israel developed under the guidance of God, ranging from captains of ten at the one end of the scale, to the ruling council of the seventy at the other. Each group had its own level of responsibility, and each played its part in the government of the people.

When the nation became established in their land, during the period of the monarchy the elders were seen acting together in important events. It was the elders of Israel who came to David in Hebron after the death

of Saul to make a covenant with him and anoint him King (1 Chronicles 11:3). It was the elders of Israel who, together with Absalom “were pleased” with the counsel of Ahithophel in the conspiracy of rebellion against David (2 Samuel 17:4). Later, in the more settled days of Solomon's rule, when the ark of the covenant was being placed within the house of God, the elders of Israel were seen as part of the administrative infrastructure of the kingdom (1 Kings 8:1-3).

Even in the time of the captivity elders were recognized in leadership among the exiles (see Ezekiel 14:1; 20:1,3). When the time of the restoration came elders were seen functioning under the control of Joshua and Zerubbabel in the work of rebuilding the house of God (Ezra 5:9; 6:14). In the days of our Lord's life on earth the elders of Israel were still carrying out their work although the nation was under the domination of Rome and a puppet king was on the throne. There are numerous references to them in the Gospels. Every synagogue had its group of elders and these men were the leaders of the local communities. They had a two-fold function in that they presided over the affairs of the synagogue and its religious services and also judged in matters of dispute between individuals. Their oversight included the spiritual and material affairs of the Jewish communities.

The Jewish ruling Council, the Sanhedrin, was also seen very much in operation during the last few days of our Lord's life on earth, and the Lord made it abundantly clear to them that the responsibility was theirs corporately for having led the people astray, and finally for having rejected Him as their Messiah. He said, “The Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and the third day be raised up” (Luke 9:22).

CHAPTER 3: APOSTLES, PROPHETS AND ELDERS

BEFORE WE MOVE ON TO consider the function of elders and the Elderhood in the churches of God in the apostolic era, it is necessary to examine first of all the unique place and work of those who were known as apostles and prophets in those early days.

Apostles

The first churches were specially privileged to have the personal presence of those disciples of the Lord who were also His apostles. The essential qualification of these twelve men for this office was that they had been eye-witnesses of the life and work of the Lord Jesus and could personally testify to His resurrection. They had also been taught by their risen Lord “the things concerning the kingdom of God” and had received His personal commission to preach the gospel and make disciples of all the nations. They were empowered to display the “signs of an apostle” (2 Corinthians 12:12). God bore witness with them, “... both by signs and wonders, and by manifold powers, and by gifts of the Holy Spirit, according to his own will” (Hebrews 2:4).

Moreover, they received their own personal revelations (see 1 Corinthians 11:23 and 2 Corinthians 12:1-7). Consequently they had an authority which was special to them and by their teaching they established the churches of God in a pattern of doctrine and practice which they had received by the personal spoken revelation of the Lord (Acts 1:3). Later they were joined by the apostle Paul who also had received his apostleship and special personal revelations from the Lord Himself (see 1 Corinthians 15:5-10). These men, by their spoken and written ministry established under the guidance of the Holy Spirit the body of doctrine,

“the faith” (Jude 3) described also as “the pattern of sound words” (2 Timothy 1:13). Their teaching became known as the “apostles' teaching” in which the church of God at Jerusalem is recorded as having “continued stedfastly” (Acts 2:42). Moved by the Holy Spirit their written ministry contributed largely to the completion of the canon of Holy Scripture. In due course their remarkably specialized work came to an end and the office of the apostle ceased with their passing.

Prophets

The role of the prophets appeared to operate alongside and to complement that of the apostles. Prophets were a gift of the risen Christ to the churches (Ephesians 4:11). Until the divine revelation in the written word was complete the gift of the prophet was vitally necessary. They were men specially led by the Holy Spirit to preach and teach the mind of the Lord and, when the Scriptures were complete, the gift of the prophet receded while that of the teacher increased. Prophecy is described as speaking unto men “edification, and comfort, and consolation” (1 Corinthians 14:3). We discern therefore that the prophet spoke his message by direct revelation from the Holy Spirit.

These two great offices, the apostles and the prophets, were used by God to establish the first churches of God. They laid the foundation of Christian teaching and established the divine principles which would be built upon by others who would follow, and which would be the only true foundation. “Being built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the chief corner stone; in whom each several building, fitly framed together, groweth into a holy temple in the Lord (Ephesians 2:20-21).

Elders

We shall make a more detailed study of the work of the elder later. At present it is sufficient to note that the office of the elder is quite dis-

tinct from that of the apostle and prophet, although apostles are also described as elders (e.g. 1 Peter 5:1, 2 John 1, 3 John 1). We know too from their epistles in our New Testament that the apostles Peter, John and Paul were in fact prophets as well as apostles. However, the office of the elder, and the need for such men in the churches continued after the apostles and prophets had all passed away, and as we shall now see, elders were appointed in all the churches.

CHAPTER 4: ELDERS IN EVERY CHURCH

AT JERUSALEM

In the early days of the church of God at Jerusalem, which had its beginning on the day of Pentecost, those who were in the church were under the care of the apostles. The work of the apostles included the oversight of the church and its affairs and they themselves were its first elders. Later, it is recorded that as the disciples increased in number, so also the administration of the church increased and the apostles found themselves overstretched with the care of the everyday affairs to the detriment of the ministry of the Word. Also, the apostles knew that to fulfil their commission they would be absent from Jerusalem for long periods of time, and that in their absence it would be necessary for the care of the church to be in the hands of responsible men. Those who had this responsibility were known as elders and they were closely associated with the apostles in the joint care of the church and are seen working with them in Acts 15: 2, 4, 6, 22, 23 and 16:4.

In Other Churches Also

The missionary apostles carried the message of the gospel wherever they went, taught newly converted disciples and planted churches of God in many places. We read particularly of the work of Paul and Barnabas in Acts 14. The churches which were planted during their outward journey at Antioch in Pisidia, Lystra, Iconium and Derbe were visited again by them on their return journey when, we read, (Acts 14: 23) they appointed elders in every church.

It is important to note that the elders were not appointed on the outward journey, but rather on the return journey. The apostles would be able

to discern on their return visit which of the brethren had been led by the Holy Spirit to carry out the work of the oversight of the churches, and those they would appoint as the recognized elders of the church. We should consider the importance of what took place here. There was the coming together of two things; the work of the Holy Spirit in those brethren and the recognition of that work by the apostles.

When Paul addressed the elders of the church at Ephesus he made reference to this work of the Spirit: "Take heed unto yourselves, and to all the flock, in the which the Holy Spirit hath made you bishops" (overseers or elders) (Acts 20:28). The word "made" has the meaning "to place" or "to constitute" which is the work of the Holy Spirit, while the word "appoint (ordain in AV) as used in Acts 14:23 and elsewhere means "to choose by the holding up of the hand" which is the recognition by men of the work of the Holy Spirit. Such an action by the elderhood of "holding up the hand" or "pointing out" an individual as an elder is necessary so that his position is clearly understood by the church, and does not envisage the voting of elders into office by the congregation.

In Every Church

As the churches grew in number and were spread through many lands, it would have been difficult in a practical sense for the apostles to have continued to appoint all elders personally. Consequently we read that the work of appointment was delegated to others (Titus 1:5) although with clear guidance as to the kind of men who were to be looked for (1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9). In this way, the Lord through the apostles, provided for the continuing care and oversight of the churches. The teaching of the apostles was passed on to others who in turn did the same and so the future was provided for. The Christians in every place had Spirit-led individuals who would teach, shepherd and generally oversee the work of the Lord after the passing of the apostles.

The Post-apostolic Era

It has been suggested by some that after the apostles had passed away there could be no recognition of new elders. Therefore by inference, there is no authority for the appointment of the elders in churches of God today. For such to be the case, it would have to be accepted that the Holy Spirit ceased to make men elders or overseers. It is difficult to sustain such an argument, however, implying as it does that the Lord did not intend there should be elders after those appointed in apostolic times had passed away.

Having caused churches to come into existence and having provided for their care by elders, there is no record in Scripture that He envisaged the care of the churches being provided for in any other way. In effect with the passing of those great men the need for elders would become all the more urgent and their appointment would surely become a vital and continuing necessity. This ongoing recognition of elders and their appointment in the churches must have become the responsibility of the existing elderhood, and they would appoint elders in the way already described.

This matter of the delegation of apostolic authority to others is important to the understanding of the elderhood today. Titus was not an apostle, yet he was urged to appoint elders in every city (Titus 1:5). Nor was Timothy an apostle, yet Paul wrote to him giving detailed instruction about the credentials for elderhood. This implies that Timothy was responsible with fellow elders where he was working to discern the Spirit's work in others and appoint suitable men. This authority to the elderhood to appoint elders is also confirmed by the events described in Acts 20:17-35. The apostle Paul was returning to Jerusalem and, knowing that he would not visit Ephesus again, called the elders of the church at Ephesus to a final solemn meeting with him. His parting words are important in that he clearly passed on to them the responsibility for the care of the flock. He knew that the days of apostolic itineration would soon be over and the responsibility would rest entirely with them. There was a clear warning included as to the dangers that existed from false teachers,

and his words have a great poignancy: “And now I commend you to God, and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up, and to give you the inheritance among all them that are sanctified” (Acts 20:32).

In this incident there is an entire absence of any suggestion that the care of the churches should cease after the passing of the apostles and of the elders whom they had appointed. On the contrary there is the clear statement that the work must continue, and from the apostle's words there is no doubt as to whose responsibility it was.

CHAPTER 5: ELDERS - BISHOPS

HAVING ESTABLISHED that elders were appointed in every church, it is necessary, for a full understanding of their work and responsibilities, to examine the relevant original Greek words which are variously translated in the English versions of the New Testament. These are “**PRESBUTEROS**” and “**EPISKOPOS**”

Presbuteros

This word has the primary meaning of someone who is advanced in years, or senior. It is the word which typifies the whole concept of the rule of elders. The man who is described by this word is a man of years and experience; of wisdom and understanding in God's will and its application to His people. The maturity of such an individual is not necessarily related to his age. Maturity may come to some earlier than to others, particularly so in the things of the Lord. Experience and knowledge of the people of God linked with wisdom and understanding in applying scriptural principle to the affairs of the church is something which can, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, come relatively early in life to certain men. Generally speaking therefore, the elder in a church should be a senior person, if not in age, certainly in experience and wisdom.

Episkopos

This word has the literal meaning of an overseer (epi, over; skopeo, to look or watch). It emphasizes a different aspect of an elder's character and responsibility and implies an ability to oversee the affairs of the church. The apostle Paul when writing to the Church of God at Corinth spoke of the need for “all things (to) be done decently and in order” (1 Corinthians 14:40). This is the work of an overseer in the church and he, together with his fellow overseers, will see that the church functions properly in

its worship and witness, that it will be seen in its locality as a true lampstand of divine testimony.

Apply to the Same Person

That these two words refer to the same person is clear. When the apostle Paul sent for the elders (presbuteros) of Ephesus to come to meet him at Miletus (Acts 20:17) he later addressed them as bishops (episkopos) (Acts 20:28). The apostle Peter also used both words for the same persons, addressing them as elders (presbuteros) and referring to their work as overseers (episkopos) (1 Peter 5:1-2). Presbuteros and episkopos together describe beautifully the office and work of the elder. The one word describes what they were personally, senior and experienced men in the things of God, and the other describes their function and responsibility in the churches of God.

IT IS MOST UNFORTUNATE that after the apostolic era this blend of the two words to describe the same person became misunderstood. The term bishop began to be used erroneously to denote an individual of superior rank, and the ecclesiastical hierarchies of bishops, archbishops and other ranks and dignities had their beginning.

The Qualities of an Elder

We have already noted that in the appointment of elders two things came together; the work of the Holy Spirit, and the discernment of that work by the elderhood. One could then ask what qualities or characteristics would be evident in those who were being moved by the Spirit in this way. The apostle Paul in his letters to Timothy and to Titus gave them guidance on this very matter.

“Faithful is the saying, If a man seeketh the office of a bishop (overseer), he desireth a good work. The bishop therefore must be without reproach,

the husband of one wife, temperate, soberminded, orderly, given to hospitality, apt to teach; no brawler, no striker; but gentle, not contentious, no lover of money; one that ruleth well his own house, having his children in subjection with all gravity; (but if a man knoweth not how to rule his own house, how shall he take care of the church of God?) not a novice, lest being puffed up he fall into the condemnation of the devil. Moreover he must have good testimony from them that are without; lest he fall into reproach and the snare of the devil” (1 Timothy 3:1-7).

“For this cause left I thee in Crete, that thou shouldest set in order the things that were wanting, and appoint elders in every city, as I gave thee charge; if any man is blameless, the husband of one wife, having children that believe, who are not accused of riot or unruly. For the bishop must be blameless, as God’s steward; not self-willed, not soon angry, no brawler, no striker, not greedy of filthy lucre; but given to hospitality, a lover of good, soberminded, just, holy, temperate; holding to the faithful word which is according to the teaching, that he may be able both to exhort in the sound doctrine, and to convict the gainsayers” (Titus 1:5-9).

In each of these extracts from his letters, the apostle gives a pen-picture to his two co-workers as to the kind of men they were to look for, and to recognize as elders in the churches. The two descriptions are, as one would expect, remarkably similar. Sixteen different qualities are described in the letter to Timothy and fifteen in that to Titus. Of these, eleven are common to both.

One could be cynical and question whether such paragons of virtue could possibly exist. is the standard too high? Indeed, a very high standard is set by the apostle as a measure of the men who are to have the oversight of the churches of God. Such men will require not only to have the ability to rule and care for the saints but will also be expected to be examples to them.

One cannot fail, however, to envisage the kind of men the apostle had in mind - men of maturity, honest, sincere and highly respected by their fellows in the world; temperate in their words and actions and masters in their own households. Their excellent characters will be complemented by their spiritual qualities - faithfulness to the Word of God; ability to teach the sound doctrine; courage to defend the faith against those who would attack it. Many of the qualities listed need no elaboration, but some justify comment, particularly those which are common to both epistles. That the elder had to have one wife only, to be temperate in his habits and to have a healthy attitude to money were things which by the men and women of the world, as well as by his fellow believers, were expected from him as a professing Christian. No doubt they were particularly relevant to the moral climate of the early Christian period, but they are no less relevant today. Moral standards may vary from time to time, but, in every age, only the highest standards should be expected from Christians, and particularly from elders of the churches.

Also topical in today's moral and social decline, as well as in the apostolic days, is the important stress put upon the domestic and family life of the elder. He was to be head of his house with his authority accepted by all the family. His affairs were to be in order, his house was to be open to those in need, and his children were to be obedient to the Word of God. In spiritual matters too, he was to be mature, although such maturity was not always to be related to age. He was to be respected by those in the church as a wise and reliable individual whose judgement, not only in spiritual matters, but also in affairs in general, could be relied upon with confidence.

If this picture of the elder is a forbidding one, we must remember that the Holy Spirit has so drawn it. It will be appreciated that few elders would claim they have been able to maintain these ideals all the time. There are wide variations of personality and spiritual condition, but such is the pattern outlined by the Holy Spirit. This will be the standard in the minds

of the elderhood as they look for and discern an exercise towards oversight work in others. Such also will be the personal image in the mind of each elder to which he should strive to attain, and from which he must try never to fail.

CHAPTER 6: THE WORK OF ELDERS

WE HAVE SEEN THAT ELDERS in their work of overseeing the affairs of the church would take care of the business of the church, the orderly conduct of its services and the planning of its witness. They would ensure that all was done “decently and in order”. While this is obviously an important part of their work, there is a greater emphasis in Scripture upon the pastoral work which they are required to carry out.

The Lord used the work of the shepherd as the lovely illustration of the way in which elders should care for those in the churches of God. He saw His disciples as sheep in a flock, with all the characteristics and propensities which sheep have and He made it clear that the pastoral work was the paramount function which elders would carry out.

The apostle Peter had personally been so instructed by his Lord on that memorable morning in Galilee when He said to Peter, “Feed my lambs ... tend my sheep ... feed my sheep” (John 21:15-17). The apostle had not forgotten the great lesson he had learned that day, for when writing to elders in churches of God, he said, “Tend the flock of God which is among you, exercising the oversight ... making yourselves ensamples to the flock” (1 Peter 5:2-3). Similarly, the apostle Paul exhorts the elders of Ephesus, describing the people of God as “the flock” by saying, “Take heed ... to all the flock, in the which the Holy Spirit hath made you bishops (overseers), to feed the church of God, which he purchased with his own blood” (Acts 20:28).

The shepherd character of the elder is therefore of great importance and so that we can more fully understand this work we shall relate it to the

way in which a shepherd tends his sheep by feeding, leading, protecting and caring for the flock.

Feeding

This is perhaps the first thing which comes to mind. Shepherds must find good feeding grounds for the sheep. In Palestine this was a particular problem. Good pasture lands with plenty of water were extremely scarce and consequently very precious. Because of this, shepherds required a thorough knowledge of the land and its climate and had to be able to judge where the flock would find the best food.

The elders of a church have the responsibility to ensure that the children of God are fed on the best spiritual food. It is a primary duty of the elders to provide an adequate balanced diet. The young of the flock need the “milk of the Word” whereas the more mature can absorb “the sound teaching”, but all require to be taught for sound growth and good spiritual health. “Man doth not live by bread only, but by every thing that proceedeth out of the mouth of the Lord doth man live” (Deuteronomy 8:3).

Leading

Our Lord and His disciples were familiar with the shepherds of their day who led their flocks. They were shepherds who went in front of the sheep and the sheep followed. How important therefore that the shepherd knew where he was going and what were the best pastures for his flock. To follow the shepherd, the sheep had to trust the shepherd. The Lord referred to this quality of leadership and confidence in the flock: “He goeth before them, and the sheep follow him: for they know his voice. And a stranger will they not follow” (John 10:4-5).

This necessary quality in the elders of a church cannot be over-emphasized. Elders must lead, and lead in such a way that the saints will follow with confidence. A knowledge of God's Word and of the days in which

we live, together with soundness in judgement and confidence of action will inspire respect and a willingness to follow in those being led. “For that the leaders took the lead in Israel, For that the people offered themselves willingly, Bless ye the Lord” (Judges 5:2).

Protecting

The Lord described Himself as “the door of the sheep” (John 10:7), and how that anyone entering by any other way was a thief and a robber. Protecting the flock from wild animals and evil men could be very dangerous and there was the danger that the shepherd could lose his life. The writer to the Hebrews who described the Great Shepherd of the sheep as having been “brought again from the dead” (Hebrews 13:20) possibly had this thought in mind.

There is a protective role for the elders of the churches today. The apostle Paul warned the elders of Ephesus about the “grievous wolves” who would enter among them and who would not spare the flock. In that day false teachers were a grave menace to the churches and they are no less active today. The need to protect the children of God has never been greater. Satan is attacking the very fundamentals of Scripture. The authority of the Word of God is being questioned, the deity of Christ is being disputed and His character besmirched. Moral standards have fallen, and together with materialism, the spiritual lives of the saints have been threatened. The great movement towards ecumenism has accelerated. The elders of the churches must be able to discern the evils of our day and seek to minimize their effect upon the people of God under their care.

Caring

The lovely illustration which the Lord used of the shepherd searching for the one sheep which was missing from the flock of one hundred (Luke 15:3-7) depicts the loving care which shepherds can have for their sheep.

To search for the least, to restore to the flock, to care for the sick and the wounded is the very essence of a shepherd's work. This too is an essential part of the elders' role. There are those who are easily led astray; some who are not strong in the faith; others who are easily hurt by the experiences of life. The recovery of such and the healing ministry which they need is a very important responsibility of elders.

Such are some of the qualities necessary in those who exercise the oversight. To care adequately for a church of God calls for an intimate knowledge of all those who are in the church, linked with a love and a care for them. Discernment and sensitivity are required so that the church is led wisely along the right paths and cared for sympathetically. The ability to teach and guide in doctrinal matters requires also a sound understanding and personal commitment to the doctrines of Holy Scripture and an understanding of the times in which we live. This will involve considerable self-sacrifice. The Lord said, "I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd layeth down his life for the sheep" (John 10:11), illustrating the degree of devotion expected from him. Under-shepherds must also be willing to sacrifice time, energy and all other resources, if such are required by those who are under their care.

Elders working together

We do not find in Scripture any reference to an elder working alone. (The two letters of the apostle John, although superscribed as from "the elder", were personal letters from him to certain individuals). One elder may visit the sick as his special gift, another may encourage the young, and yet another comfort the aged, each doing the particular work for which he is best suited. Yet in all these and other matters they will pray together and work together in full fellowship, and the burden and responsibility will be shared.

The appointment of elders in plurality has already been noted in the churches visited by Paul and Barnabas (Acts 14:23) and in the churches

in Crete by Titus (Titus 1:5), indicating that in every church there were two or more elders.

CHAPTER 7: THE CARE OF ALL THE CHURCHES

WHILE THIS MINISTRY of elderhood or oversight was primarily one where each group of elders cared for their own local church, we must now examine how they also had a care which was much wider in its scope. The picture which emerges in the New Testament is one in which the churches of God, as they were planted in many places, are seen as a fellowship of churches, united and uniform in their doctrine and practice, and caring for one another in love.

It is strongly taught by many Christians that each church should stand on its own and be independent of any other, but such teaching is not supported by the Word of God. In fact the opposite is clearly seen in the following examples of how the early churches had a love and care for each other, and a desire to have fellowship together in meeting each other's needs.

Churches of God Linked Together

This fellowship of the churches of God is underlined in Peter's first epistle. It was addressed to Christian Jews in churches of God in five Roman provinces: Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bythinia (1 Peter 1:1). Addressing them as one, he called them: a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, an elect race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, a brotherhood, a flock (1 Peter 2:5, 9, 17 and 5:2-3). He was not addressing them in these terms exclusively but in the sense that they were part of the greater whole, the churches of God throughout the world, to which the terms primarily applied.

He also addressed the elders of the churches in these areas: "The elders therefore among you I exhort" (1 Peter 5:1) "Tend the flock of God

which is among you, exercising the oversight..." (1 Peter 5:2). The churches were seen as one flock and the elders among them were also seen as one elderhood. There must also have been the means whereby the apostle's letter could be communicated to the elders and to all the flock and its message implemented. This could have been possible only if there were established channels of communication and an understanding among the churches that they had a mutual responsibility to work together as one people.

There are other examples of churches being linked together in fellowship. The apostle Paul asked the churches at Colossae and at Laodicea to read the letter addressed separately to the other church, and again the book of Revelation was sent to the seven churches in the province of Asia, prefaced by a letter written to each of the churches separately. The church at Antioch determined to send relief to the churches in Judaea who were affected by the famine in the reign of Claudius (Acts 11: 28-30). Each of the disciples at Antioch gave according to his ability and the relief was taken to Judaea by Barnabas and Saul. It was sent to "the elders" who were obviously responsible for its distribution. Two things emerge here: firstly the church at Antioch was aware of the need of their brethren in Judaea, and secondly there was the channel through which the help could flow, namely the elders of the churches in Judaea. Obviously those elders were in a position to act together to administer the aid which came to them.

In a similar way the churches of Macedonia and Achaia made a contribution to the poor among the saints in Jerusalem (Romans 15:25-27). The apostle Paul speaks of the collecting of help in the churches in Galatia and he requests similar provision by the churches in Achaia which he would arrange to be taken to Jerusalem (1 Corinthians 16:1-4). Paul also refers to the liberality of the churches in Macedonia who gave "beyond their power" (2 Corinthians 8:1-9, 15).

Such a fellowship as is seen being enjoyed by all the churches of that day could have been possible only by an elderhood functioning in a corporate manner, able to consult together and to administer to meet the need of a given situation when it occurred. Such must have been well pleasing to God “Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity” (Psalm 133:1).

Corporate Responsibility of the Elderhood

The unity of the elders thus observed was also able to provide a corporate leadership to the churches as a whole and the elderhood had the collective responsibility for all that took place among all the churches.

An example of the plurality of elders in a local church and the elderhood of several churches in united action is seen in the commendation of Timothy to the work of the Lord with the apostle Paul. Timothy was from Derbe (Acts 20:4), one of the churches in which Paul and Barnabas appointed elders (Acts 14:23). He was “well reported of by the brethren that were at Lystra and Iconium” (Acts 16:2) and no doubt on the strength of that report he went out into the work of the Lord with Paul and Barnabas. Later Paul speaks of “the presbytery” (the elderhood) having been involved in the imparting of the gift to Timothy (1 Timothy 4:14).

The operation of a united elderhood is seen on an even wider basis when the brethren at Antioch sent Paul, Barnabas and others to meet the apostles and elders at Jerusalem to discuss the problems raised by the teachers of Judaism. The conference at Jerusalem which then took place and which is recorded so fully in Acts 15 is an important example of how vital matters of doctrine and practice were decided and passed to the churches for their acceptance. The particular problem which was discussed in Acts 15 was potentially a dangerous one in that a deep division between Jewish and Gentile believers could have followed. Such may

have resulted had not the need to talk and act collectively been understood by those who had the oversight of the churches.

Another example of this corporate responsibility and of the submission of one and another to it is seen in the case of the apostle Paul when he submitted the manner and content of the Gospel which he was preaching to the scrutiny of the apostles and elders at Jerusalem (Galatians 2:1-10). Great man though he was, who could have claimed the authority of his own special revelation, he still submitted himself to the others. It cannot be assumed that the discussions among the apostles and elders on important subjects were always harmonious and led easily to decisions. Indeed, Galatians 2:1-15, Acts 11:1-18 and 15:39, would seem to indicate otherwise, and that in effect straight talking took place. Agreement was reached only after deep thought and much prayer, and a willingness to submit to one another.

These were chief men, strong in personality, deeply convicted as to their calling, custodians often of direct personal revelations from their risen Lord. How marvellous it was that they were willing even to countenance the need to discuss together their mutual problems and to integrate their teachings into "the pattern of sound words" which would be taught to all the churches.

It is also important to note that this collective responsibility was contained within the elderhood and not shared with the congregations. We do not read of any occasion when important matters of doctrine were discussed with the saints in the churches. It was the burden of the elderhood and was not passed to the churches as a whole, except for fellowship in prayer.

CHAPTER 8: THE PROCESS OF DECISION TAKING

IT IS IMPORTANT TO the understanding of the work of the elderhood that we should examine in greater detail the remarkable conference of the apostles and elders which took place at Jerusalem, as recorded in Acts 15. The teaching of Judaism in the churches of God was striking at the very fundamentals of the gospel and could have resulted in a breach between Jewish and Gentile Christians. If such a division had taken place it would have been a devastating blow to the young churches from which they might never have recovered, and Satan would have gained a great victory.

Elders realized the importance of meeting together to decide this vital issue and the discussions which took place on that occasion have been so fully recorded by the Holy Spirit that we are obviously meant to learn from the event how the examination of major matters should be conducted and how elders should arrive at their conclusions.

The sequence of events appears to have been as follows:

1. There was a statement by Paul and Barnabas of “all things that God had done with them” (verse 4).
2. The Pharisees also put their views as to the observance of the law of Moses (verse 5).
3. There was much questioning (presumably discussion) (verse 7).
4. Peter addressed the company recounting his experiences at Joppa, and at Caesarea with Cornelius, as recorded in Acts 10 (verses 7-11).
5. Barnabas and Paul outlined God's dealing with the Gentiles through their work (verse 12).

6. James brought the Scriptures to bear on the subject (verses 13-18).
7. James (as chairman) summed up and gave his judgement which appeared to be accepted (verses 19-21).
8. Then it “seemed good” to the apostles and elders, in fellowship with the whole church, to send envoys with Paul and Barnabas when they returned to Antioch (verse 22).
9. A document was drawn up which contained the conclusions reached (verse 23).
10. The document was from the apostles and the elder brethren (the church was not included) (verse 23).
11. It contained the words, “it seemed good to us, having come to one accord” (verse 25), and again, “It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us” (verse 28).
12. The document was to be supplemented by the spoken word of witnesses (verse 27).

This detailed examination of the process of discussion and conclusion on that occasion teaches us several important lessons. There was the liberty given for both points of view to be presented, supported by personal experiences of the work of the Lord. Then there followed the essential application of the Word of God to the problem, followed by a thorough discussion.

It is important to see leadership in action here. Firstly by Peter's compelling personal viewpoint and his testimony to having had his own views changed by divine revelation, and by James's application of Scripture to the problem. Finally, there was the skilful summing up of the chairman (James) beginning with the important words, “wherefore my judgement is”. Over it all, however, there was the obvious presence and influence of the Holy Spirit, acknowledged by the apostles and elders in the words, “it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us” (verse 28).

How vitally important it was indeed that the unity which was achieved by these discussions should express the mind of the Holy Spirit.

Leadership

These examples of leadership in action are important to us so that we may learn how conclusions may be reached in such serious matters. Those apostles and elders were the leaders of the churches at Jerusalem and Antioch, but even among the leaders there were those who took the lead. Among any group of leaders there will be those who will emerge as leaders of leaders. In the things of God such will, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, have the ability to guide their fellows into right ways. In this particular case, the lead was given after the matter had been thoroughly discussed and such was the respect of the others for their leaders that their guidance was accepted.

Modern trends in participation

It is a modern trend to try to arrive at a very broad consensus and to encourage participation in decision making at all levels, but there is no authority or precedent in the Word of God for elders to try to achieve this at church level. While it can be argued that as Christians we are all equal, this is only true in that we are all members of the Body of Christ. As such, there is no distinction between race, social status or sex (Galatians 3:28). In churches of God, however, there are scriptural distinctions, as for example in Philippians 1: 1 where there are seen in the church at Philippi bishops (overseers), deacons and saints. While formal consultation with the church is not scripturally required of elders, they will obviously have a deep knowledge of the needs, feelings and views of those in the church. This awareness would be a natural result of their being among the saints, moving in and out among them in their pastoral work, and it would affect the judgement of the elders as they perceived godly wisdom in many of the saints. The relationship of elders to the saints in the church is

unique, and there should be a willing subjection by the church to those whom the

Lord has given the rule over them. This relationship is wisely balanced in the Word of God. When elders are addressed, they are seen as being “among” the saints (1 Peter 5:2), whereas the saints are exhorted to obey them which have rule “over” them (Hebrews 13:17).

Subjection

The principle of subjection to the Word of God and to one another is important to the proper functioning of a church of God, and to the maintenance of unity among the churches. Elders do not have individual authority and each one must be subject to the elderhood as a whole. Without the spirit of subjection there can only be anarchy and division and the apostle Paul exhorted the church at Ephesus to subject themselves “one to another in the fear of Christ” (Ephesians 5:21). This subjection must first be seen among the elders and so an example will be given to the church.

Where elders are not unanimous about a matter there must be a willingness to subject themselves to one another so that the church may not be pulled in different directions. The general mind arrived at is thereafter accepted by every elder although it may not be his personally preferred view. There must be, in cases of different views among the elders which cannot be resolved, a further waiting upon the Lord for His guidance.

There will be matters upon which some elders will have very strong views and will find it difficult to accept a viewpoint other than their own, but such is the beauty of subjection that in grace they will submit one to another. Subjection is not a sign of weakness, rather it is the strength of the elderhood. It is clear evidence of the working of the Holy Spirit among brethren and an example to the saints in the churches to submit in turn to the mind of the elderhood.

CHAPTER 9: CONTINUITY OF DIVINE RULE

OUR SURVEY OF THE PRINCIPLE and practice of elders and the elderhood now brings us to our own day. We must examine whether that which we have seen in operation in Israel in the past, and in the churches of God of the first century A.D. is applicable among Christian congregations today. Before doing so however, we should look at the dispensational change which took place when the kingdom of God was transferred from Israel to the new people of God. When God called the children of Israel out of Egypt He had a great future in mind for them.

“Now therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me from among all peoples: for all the earth is mine: and ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation” (Exodus 19:5-6).

Israel was given the law of God by which law they would serve God in His sanctuary and live before men. These were their high privileges and responsibilities but because of repeated failures they did not always live in the full enjoyment of their calling and of the blessings which it could bring. The judgement of God often fell heavily upon His people. The government of the nation and the administration of its affairs was given to the elders of the people. It was a divine arrangement that it should be so and we have seen how the elders of families, of cities, of tribes and of the whole nation carried out their duties. God's beautiful ideal for Israel was of a people dwelling alone with Him, in full tribal fellowship and enjoying a commonwealth under His benign rule. The elderhood was to have been the framework upon which the nation would function in its everyday affairs.

The Transference of the Kingdom

Down through the centuries Israel had from time to time lost the privileges of their calling because of disobedience and rebellion. When the Lord Jesus Christ came they were still clinging to their hopes and aspirations as a nation. Only a faithful few recognized that the purposes of God in Christ were being fulfilled in their day. Because the nation rejected the Lord Jesus, the privileges of holy nationhood were about to pass from them to another people.

To Israel He spoke the epoch-making words: "Therefore say I unto you, The kingdom of God shall be taken away from you, and shall be given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof" (Matthew 21:43). Later to His disciples He said, "Fear not, little flock; for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom" (Luke 12:32). In these clear and unmistakable terms the Lord made it known to Israel that, for the present at least, they had forfeited their claims to be the people of God, and to the little flock, His disciples, He also made it clear that He was giving the kingdom to them. In this remarkable way the kingdom of God was transferred to the new people of God, the disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The apostle Peter confirmed the transfer when writing to disciples in churches of God in the five Roman provinces. "But ye are an elect race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, that ye may shew forth the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light" (1 Peter 2:9). There is no mistaking the parallel language which he uses here to that which was used of Israel as the people of God (Exodus 19:6).

The New People of God

The churches of God therefore received the privileges and responsibilities of the kingdom of God which had belonged to Israel, and the risen Lord Jesus Christ instructed the apostles with regard to the kingdom

during the forty days prior to His final ascension: "... appearing unto them by the space of forty days, and speaking the things concerning the kingdom of God" (Acts 1:3).

We have already seen how those early churches were cared for, and their work and witness overseen by the elders. The continuity of the divine system of rule and government transferred from Israel to the churches of God is clearly seen. Israel may have failed, and to a large measure the failure could be attributed to the leaders, but the new people of God were given a similar form of divine rule.

The Churches of God Today

The churches of God today have, by the grace of God, sought to follow the divine pattern of the early churches of the apostolic days. It is not the primary purpose of this book to go into that in detail (this has been done in a companion publication, "The Churches of God"), but rather to say that in seeking to conform to the divine pattern the churches have their elders, and the elders together form the elderhood. This is a foundation principle.

It is now almost one hundred and twenty-five years (1892) since the churches of God separated themselves from what they considered to be the unscriptural practices among the Christian denominations of their day. They came together then as a fellowship of assemblies and have, by God's help, continued to this day. There exists throughout the churches a unity of doctrine and practice. The apostles' teaching is accepted in its entirety. The Deity of our Lord Jesus Christ and the authority of the Word of God is basic to their work and witness. The Breaking of the Bread is observed on the first day of the week and the manner of its observance is standard throughout all the churches.

The Elderhood, the Key

The last century or so has therefore been a remarkable witness to the key role which the elderhood has played in the establishment and maintenance of the churches. There were, in the early years, long deliberations on matters of doctrine as elders sought to establish again out of all the multitude of teachings which surrounded them, the pattern of sound words. There were equally long discussions to establish what was the will of the Lord in matters of procedure and practice in the churches, and such are now accepted throughout all the assemblies in the community.

As the years progressed and the churches of God began to reach out to other lands in missionary enterprise, the elderhood was able to guide the use of the resources of the churches and deploy them to maximum benefit. As new churches were planted in other countries, the care and maintenance of such were also the responsibility of local elders as guided by the Holy Spirit and in harmony and fellowship with the elderhood as a whole.

The work of the elders will be further described in the next chapter, but sufficient has been said to indicate that the existence today of churches of God world-wide, united in their testimony, having fellowship together in the things of the Lord, reaching out still further to others while caring for one another in love, is a testimony to the unifying influence of an elderhood which is in itself united. Because of that it is able to provide a strong leadership to the churches.

By Contrast

The situation so described is in contrast to that which exists in many other Christian congregations. Some have elders but many do not. Some appoint them, others elect them. Because of the desire to maintain the autonomy of each assembly there is little agreement as to the role and function of elders, no accepted procedures exist for them to meet together, and consequently the assemblies vary widely in their doctrine and practice. There is no forum for agreement on doctrine and no scriptural

means whereby false teaching and practice can be countered. No elderhood exists, which before God can act in the full spirit of the exhortation of the apostle Paul to the elders of Ephesus (Acts 20:28) or of the apostle Peter to the elders of the churches in Asia Minor (1 Peter 5:1-4).

CHAPTER 10: ELDERS IN CHURCHES OF GOD TODAY

EVER SINCE THE CHURCHES of God separated themselves from the assemblies of brethren they have been misunderstood and on occasions have been misrepresented. The name “Needed Truth” which is in fact the name of the monthly journal of the churches has wrongly been applied to the churches themselves. In the minds of some, the churches of God have been wrongly identified as part of the “exclusive” brethren movement. The matter of the elderhood has been particularly misunderstood and our present study provides the opportunity to correct possible misconceptions in the minds of beloved fellow-believers.

It has been inferred that the churches of God have “central control”, and the word “popery” has regrettably been used in this connection. There is of course no “central control” of this kind among the churches of God. Unity is achieved through the elderhood being subject to the teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ who is “Son over God's house” (Hebrews 3:6) and is described in Revelation 1:12-20 as the One who holds the churches in His right hand. Nor is there any “popery” which implies the ascendancy of one man to a supreme position in a hierarchy. Indeed both these things are contrary to the spirit and principle of elders working together, and they have no place among the churches of God.

What then is the situation with regard to elders, and how do they work in the churches of God? Perhaps if we were to describe briefly how they carry out their responsibilities it would help to dispel some of the misconceptions which have arisen.

The Local Church

We have already noted that in the early Christian period elders were appointed in every church. It is the same today in the churches of God; each church of God has its elders, always two or more. Their primary concern is always the spiritual and general welfare of those in the church. Then the business affairs of the church, its work of witnessing, its outreach to children and young people all receive their attention. In the day to day practical matters they also meet with the deacons of the church.

When they meet together elders also have regard to themselves, and are alert to the Holy Spirit's work in others in the matter of oversight, to see whether there are men showing promise of preparation to serve with them. In the interests of unity, the fellowship of elders from assemblies in the district would be sought if other men were being considered for recognition as elders.

In their oversight of the church, elders obviously maintain a confidentiality about some matters, particularly things affecting people, but they do not act in unnecessary secrecy, and openly communicate with the church on all matters of general concern.

Churches Linked Together

We have referred to the strongly held opinion of many that each assembly of Christians is independent of every other, and that the autonomy of each must be protected. Our study of the New Testament churches of God has shown that such a concept has no support in the Word of God. On the contrary, we observe a closely linked fellowship of churches, each serving the Lord according to the divine pattern and sharing together, not only in the spiritual activities (Acts 2:42) but in material things also.

While we hold and practise that each church is primarily responsible for its own affairs and will deal with any problems or difficulties which may arise locally, we also believe that churches do not exist in isolation from one another. In the same way therefore as we saw the churches in Ju-

daea, Macedonia and other areas working together, so also today churches in clearly defined geographically convenient areas are linked together. The elders of those churches meet together on a regular basis to discuss matters of mutual concern, and to benefit from each other's presence and counsel. Arrangements are jointly agreed for such activities as outreach projects or conferences for the ministry of the Word. Information about the assemblies and the saints is exchanged for mutual prayer and encouragement, and elders pray together for the Lord's blessing upon the churches.

On these occasions, local matters private to each church are not discussed unless the counsel of other elders is desired by local elders on a particular matter. No decrees are issued and no directives to individual churches or to the saints are sent forth, but such a time of sharing together by men who have been led by the Holy Spirit to carry the burden of the oversight of the churches is a time of mutual joy and blessing, and must also be well pleasing to the Lord.

Districts Linked Together

For the same reasons, and with similar objectives, the elders of districts in a region, country or continent are linked together and meet periodically in the same way as elders of local churches and districts.

Conferences of Elders

We have already considered in detail the gathering of apostles and elders at Jerusalem (Acts 15) to consider the problem of Jewish ritual observances and whether they should or should not be observed by the churches of God. While primarily the problem was discussed by the leaders of the churches at Antioch and Jerusalem, the two major churches of that day, the implications of what was being discussed affected all churches of God and the conclusion which was reached was promulgated throughout the community of churches.

“And as they went on their way through the cities, they delivered them the decrees for to keep, which had been ordained of the apostles and elders that were at Jerusalem” (Acts 16:4). This example of how a major problem was dealt with in those early days indicates clearly that it is the will of the Lord that elders should be united. In line with this scriptural principle we today also have gatherings of the elders from all areas to establish and maintain the unity of doctrine and practice throughout all the churches of God. Such conferences are held at regular intervals, and elders from all over the world are free to attend on behalf of their districts.

The spiritual health of the churches in the world-wide community is examined. The fundamentals of the faith are discussed as also are matters of practice and procedure. Doctrinal questions are reviewed and it is understood that no variation of essential doctrine may be taught among the churches unless it has been accepted by elders in conference. Then there is the application of scriptural principle to a wide range of modern problems, some of these most complex. It is important that as a fellowship of churches there should be an agreed response to such problems, based soundly on the Word of God.

Elders together on these occasions also discuss matters of global outreach and plan to match the resources of the churches to the current need. They hear reports from elders from different parts of the world. Financial matters, literature production and many other things engage their attention, but apart from the affairs of business these are occasions of much joy in the Lord by meeting together as elders of churches, to share the common burdens of oversight, and strengthen one another's hands in God.

These conferences of elders of the whole community of churches are the key to the unity which exists. If the elders are one, the churches will be one, and conferences conducted in the fear of God and ever seeking the

Holy Spirit's leading have proved to be the single most important factor in maintaining that unity. For almost one hundred years now the churches of God throughout the world have been united in their worship and witness.

Leading Brethren

There is another matter which features in the working of the elderhood among the churches of God. This is the role of the small group of elders sometimes referred to as "Leading Brethren". We have already stressed that there is no support in the Word of God for a hierarchy within the elderhood. Decision making as far as doctrine and practice are concerned rests entirely with the corporate elderhood. However, for practical administration, some initiatives are required, and here also we look to Scripture for our guidance.

There were "chief men among the brethren" (Acts 15:22) and it is important to notice that they were "among" not "over". It is clear that this description did not apply to the apostles only, since Judas called Barsabbas and Silas are specifically named. These brethren obviously gave some spiritual leadership and had the confidence of their brethren in so doing. Among any group of leaders, leaders will emerge who will show the way forward to their brethren and it became an important feature of those early churches that certain men were looked to for leadership among the elderhood.

Such is the situation today that some initiatives in doctrinal and spiritual matters, as also in practical affairs, come from the leading brethren. The proper conduct of the conferences of elders, including the compiling of the agenda, falls to these brethren and between conferences they can be consulted for counsel and advice.

The name given to this small group of elders is not important. It is important, however, that they have the confidence of their brethren as they

seek to follow in much fear and trembling the scriptural example of able men of early New Testament days. As such men emerge, their leadership will be evident among their fellow elders, and those brethren already functioning in the additional responsibility will seek the fellowship of the whole elderhood in recognizing such men as one of their number.

It is accepted that in divine things there is always the danger that we can substitute human organization for the leading of the Holy Spirit, but we believe that the elderhood of the churches of God, as has been described, has a sound scriptural basis and has known the blessing and approval of the Lord.

CHAPTER 11: GIVING ACCOUNT

AS BELIEVERS ON OUR Lord Jesus Christ we rejoice that our sins have been forgiven and that the judgement which should have been ours was endured for us by our Saviour at Calvary. We treasure, and have confidence in such scriptures as: “There is therefore now no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1), and “... but now once at the end of the ages hath he been manifested to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself” (Hebrews 9:26).

While we may live in the wonderful joy of this fact, we are also very much aware that there will be a day of reckoning for each of us. Not for our sins, but rather for our lives of service to our Lord and Master. “For we must all be made manifest before the judgement-seat of Christ; that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he hath done, whether it be good or bad” (2 Corinthians 5:10). Such a prospect solemnizes each one of us, for as we examine ourselves, and the quality of the service we have given, inevitably we feel apprehensive that “we are unprofitable servants” (Luke 17:10). We are assured however, that the divine assessment will be entirely just and the rewards beyond our deserving. Nevertheless the solemn warning is given that it is possible for our work and service to have no value and to be burned up as worthless (1 Corinthians 3:13-15).

The Elder Gives Account

While each one of us who belongs to the Lord will so appear, the elders in the churches have further reports to make. They will give account for their own service as we shall all do, but the chief Shepherd, our Lord Jesus Christ, under whom they have served as under-shepherds will also review the manner in which they have carried out their work of oversight.

Was the motivation right, were there ulterior motives, was the service “among” the flock and not over” it, was there an example given for others to follow?

“Tend the flock of God which is among you, exercising the oversight, not of constraint, but willingly, according unto God; nor yet for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind; neither as lording it over the charge allotted to you, but making yourself ensamples to the flock” (1 Peter 5:2-3). Thus the elder carries the extra burden of his work, knowing that he must give account for the way in which he has served in this special area of service. For those elders whose work receives the divine approval there will be a glorious reward. “And when the chief Shepherd shall be manifested, ye shall receive the crown of glory that fadeth not away” (1 Peter 5: 4).

The Elder Accounts for Others

There is however, yet another solemn duty for the elder. He will be required to give account for each person who has come under his care. “Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit to them: (the elders) for they watch in behalf of your souls, as they that shall give account; that they may do this with joy, and not with grief: for this were unprofitable for you” (Hebrews 13:17).

Although it is the elders who will give account, and they will do so either with joy, or sorrow, it is important to note that it is the person in question who will bear the effect. Here then is a joint responsibility which lies upon both the elders and the individuals in their care. The elders are responsible to “watch” and as a result of that which they observe of the spiritual health and progress of the disciples, they will be led to encourage, counsel and if necessary admonish. The disciples are in turn responsible to accept and give heed to the counsel of the elders, but their response to it will produce either “joy” or “grief” in the elders' reporting. For those who disregard the elders' concern and care the result will be “unprofitable” for them. The exhortation is therefore given to “obey

them that have the rule over you”, thereby ensuring a joyful reporting when the elders are called to give account.

In the foreword, the objectives of this book were stated as pointing the way to God's plan for Christian leadership”. Throughout the chapters it has been the intention to emphasize consistent principles of rule as seen in the Scriptures, culminating in what we believe is the teaching of the Lord for New Testament times. In the Churches of God we both teach and practise this, having a strong desire to adhere to the express pattern of Scripture. While we respect the views held and practised by others, who are clearly sincere and faithful in service to the Lord, we nevertheless feel that the subject before us is of such importance, that we invite any interested readers to write to us, and, if desired, enter into further detailed correspondence in the matter using this internet form: http://www.churchesofgod.info/contact_churches_of_god.php

“Now these were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, examining the scriptures daily, whether these things were so” (Acts 17:11).

Don't miss out!

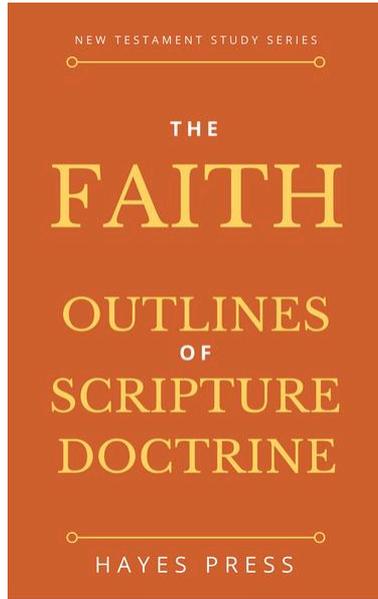
Click the button below and you can sign up to receive emails whenever Hayes Press publishes a new book. There's no charge and no obligation.

<https://books2read.com/r/B-A-XUQC-SMZL>



Connecting independent readers to independent writers.

Did you love *Elders and the Elderhood: In Principle, In Practice*? Then you should read *The Faith: Outlines of Scripture Doctrine* by Hayes Press!



This book provides a concise outline on what the Bible has to say about 15 key doctrines or teachings of the Christian faith.

CHAPTER ONE: THE HOLY SCRIPTURES

CHAPTER TWO: THE GODHEAD

CHAPTER THREE: THE INCARNATION

CHAPTER FOUR: THE ATONEMENT

CHAPTER FIVE: THE RESURRECTION

CHAPTER SIX: ETERNAL SALVATION

CHAPTER SEVEN: THE HOLY SPIRIT

CHAPTER EIGHT: 'MY CHURCH' - HIS BODY

CHAPTER NINE: DISCIPLESHIP

CHAPTER TEN: THE CHURCHES OF GOD

CHAPTER ELEVEN: BAPTISM AND ADDING

CHAPTER TWELVE: THE BREAKING OF THE BREAD

CHAPTER THIRTEEN: THE KINGDOM OF GOD

CHAPTER FOURTEEN: THE HOUSE OF GOD

CHAPTER FIFTEEN: THE COMING AGAIN OF THE
LORD JESUS CHRIST



About the Publisher

Hayes Press (www.hayespress.org) is a registered charity in the United Kingdom, whose primary mission is to disseminate the Word of God, mainly through literature. It is one of the largest distributors of gospel tracts and leaflets in the United Kingdom, with over 100 titles and hundreds of thousands despatched annually.

Hayes Press also publishes Plus Eagles Wings, a fun and educational Bible magazine for children, and Golden Bells, a popular daily Bible reading calendar in wall or desk formats.

Also available are over 100 Bibles in many different versions, shapes and sizes, Christmas cards, Christian jewellery, Eikos Bible Art, Bible text posters and much more!