

Defense of the Elder
In the Church Body

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Preface

The work involved in preparing this thesis has enabled me to gain a deeper insight into the most exiting of Biblical research next to the doctrine of Justification. The order of church government by elders makes one aware of the responsibility that those chosen by God and elected by His people to govern the church have laid upon them.

I wish to thank Rev. Jack Whytock, M.Th., for his patience in reading and critiquing each chapter, and for his willingness to direct me to some of the resource material available. I want to thank my great associate, Lic. Devin Johnstone, B.A., for his proof reading of each chapter and for his constructive criticism. I wish to thank my wife, Shirley, for proof reading, and my daughter-in-law, Amanda, for typing part of the work. Last but not least I wish to thank my congregation for their patience while I worked on this thesis.

The scripture quotations in this document are taken from *Holy Bible The New King James Version*, Nashville, Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1979.

May all that read this thesis in the future find it helpful, in gaining to some degree, a deeper understanding and appreciation of the office of the elder. May all recognize that this office is of divine institution to be perpetuated through all time for the proclamation of the Gospel.

Introduction

The Uniqueness of the Elder in the Church Body is a subject that occupies a specific place in the proclamation of the Gospel of God's grace. The Theology of Church Government can be traced throughout the entire Bible. The principles for governing society were established by God for the rule of his people from creation. God declared this principle regarding good government when he stated that man was to "have dominion" over all creation Genesis 28.

The position of the elder as a ruler or governor can be traced throughout Israel's history. The elders had a significant part to perform in all the journey of Israel from the earliest times. The elders performed a significant function in the life of Israel's development to nationhood. Each time Israel faced difficulty from within, it was the elders of the nation that rallied to support the people in reform.

When Israel was taken into exile as a nation the elders maintained the Jewish people's identity through the founding of the synagogue. The synagogue retained for Israel the identity of their faith in God who had reveled Himself in special ways. The office of the elders governed the New Covenant Church established by Christ through the apostles. The synagogue being well established in all parts of the Roman Empire the Jewish people who acknowledged Christ as savior at Pentecost returned to their homes and their synagogues to share their faith. It is only reasonable to accept the eldership as the recognized form of church government when the church of Christ established an identity apart from the synagogue.

The church experienced many changes with the infusion of other forms throughout the centuries following the age of the apostles. This study will recognize the change in meaning of terms used for the elders in the New Testament. Even though changes took place and corruption in government was allowed to develop by president rather than by divine authority, there was a staunch people known as the Waldensians who persisted in the apostolic form of government.

The eldership survived the period from the fourth century to the reformation through the Waldensian believers even under severe persecution. The Reform movement had its roots in these famous people. The Reformers were determined to free the church's dogma from corruption. The emphasis was placed on a restored Doctrine of Justification by Faith. The vehicle used to fulfill this doctrinal stand was the restoration of the office of the elder.

This work will trace the theology of church government under the leadership of the elder through the Old and New Testaments, thus developing the elder theme as a biblical theology. Then will follow the tracing of the elder theme in church history. This study will end with the application of this office in the church today as applied theology. The attached flow chart will visibly show the direction of this thesis.

**A Defense of the Elder
In the Church Body**

Biblical Theology



Historical Theology



Applied Theology



Conclusion

Chapter One

Origin of the Elder in Israel

Our study of the “elder” as an established order in the Church begins in the Old Testament. The view that this document will take is that the Church is the Body of Christ, Pre-incarnate, Incarnate, and Post-incarnate. To understand the work of the office of the elder it is important to examine the meaning of the word itself.

Earliest Times

In the early documents of the Old Testament the word “elder” referred to a senior member of a family group. This could have been, as in Abraham’s case, the head of his family. This term was designated to the one who had authority to act in matters of discipline and decision making.¹ The word “zaqen” (elder) in some instances was used to designate “rosh” (head) as being over others or in charge of some designated group or family. Those who view the documents of the Old Testament as coming from different sources state that the priestly documents (P) such as Numbers and Chronicles are similar to other Semitic Documents that are older than those recorded in the Scriptures of the Old Testament. By this it is recognize that words such as “elder”, “heads”, and “chiefs” were terms of reference with equal meaning. In numerous passages (i.e. Numbers 30:2, 32:28,

Joshua 19:51, 22:211, 24:1, Deuteronomy 5:20) the reference is to a head of a family or a group of people. ²

An examination of the household of Abraham reveals a first reference to the subject being translated “Steward.” In Genesis 15: 2 the term “shadah” can be translated to mean either steward or superintendent. Regardless this individual was Eleasar of Damascus whom Abraham had appointed to oversee his business during his life. It is certain this man was like an elder as far as responsibility was concerned. In Genesis 25 he is charged with the responsibility of acquiring a bride for Isaac. This charge Abraham made stating that the wife for Isaac must not be selected from the tribes of the land lest the influence of their religions would influence his household.³ It must be recognized that God’s call to Abraham established by covenant was not to an individual but his household. This household was to be governed by the representative principle. This representative leadership will later be recognized, as elders will. This development took form under the leadership of the patriarchs.⁴

A second example taken from the Genesis record tells of the journey of Joseph with his brothers and heads of the families as they return to Canaan for the burial of Israel (Jacob), recorded in Genesis 50: 7. In this passage there is reference to the elders of Israel along with the elders of Egypt keeping Israel’s request that Joseph bury his body in Canaan.

Other nations that are considered much older than Israel are Moab and Midian. These tribal powers that exercised their rule over the land east and south of Mount Sinai are recognized in the record in Numbers. In examining Numbers 22 we read the account of the elders of Moab and Midian as they sought the services of Baalam. Note the manner of approach as recorded in verse 4. ⁵

So Moab said to the elders of Midian, “now this company will lick up all that is around us, as an ox licks up the grass of the field.”
And Balak the son of Zippor was king of the Moabites at that time.

In this passage the term “king” may simply refer to a tribal chief. The important issue here is that elders were active in the interests of the people. The work carried out by these

elders seems to be more political than domestic. The account in Numbers is concerned with the advance of Israel into Moab and Midian's territory. These elders were considered overseers in the field of external affairs. They were more concerned with what was happening in the nations about them than at home. Their work may be viewed as that of a diplomatic core that would work to establish their territorial rights in relation to other tribes of the time. The passage makes more of Moab as acting for both, which indicates the coordination and cooperation of these two groups.

The period of the Wilderness

Looking at the history of Israel from the call of Moses to the Coming of Christ, the elders hold significant power both politically and religiously. This will take us through the struggle for release from Pharaoh and the Wilderness Journey and its trials, followed by the period from occupying the land until the beginning of the rule by Kings. After the kingdom of Israel was defeated the next period examined will be the era of the prophets and the dispersion. Then the last item of interest will be the elders as they are referred to in the Gospels. This is the record of the elders of the Old Testament era as it is reported in the scriptures.

The book of Exodus begins with a view of God speaking to Moses. Moses was instructed to go to the people of Israel and state his call by God to lead the people out of bondage. In order to accomplish this he had to go to the elders of Israel. An examination of the book of Exodus demonstrates that only seventy persons were numbered in Israel as they entered Egypt. If this were a numbering of men of war age only, it would signify why the elders were not mentioned as rulers at this time. It is very evident that the nation became very strong in number over the 400 years following.

This would give reason for their recognized leadership. It must also be noted that they had retained religious purity by not marrying into the other tribes, as Abraham required, when he directed Eleazar concerning marriage for Isaac. It is stated that God heard the cry of his people. ⁶The elders were called by Moses to hear what God had told him Exodus 3:16-18 states:

16. Go and gather the elders of Israel together, and say to them, 'The Lord God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, of Isaac and of Jacob, appeared to me, saying "I have surely visited you and seen what is done to you in Egypt. 17. "And I have said I will bring you up out of the affliction of Egypt and to the land of the Canaanites and the Hittites and the Amorites and the Perizzites and the Hivites and the Jebusites, to a land flowing with milk and honey." 18. "Then they will heed your voice; and you shall come, you and the elders of Israel, to the king of Egypt; and you shall say to him 'The Lord God of the Hebrews has met with us; and now, please, let us go three days' journey into the wilderness, that we may sacrifice to the Lord our God.'

From this passage it is concluded that God's plan for Israel was that they know the leadership of elders. This is apparent by the command to Moses to call the elders together to inform them of the position he was instructed to fulfill. Lange stated that "Moses found existing among his people an organization of the tribes, heads of tribes, who as elders exercised authority in their tribes." ⁷ (Exodus 4:29) Based on Exodus 3 we are confident that the best interests of God's called out people are served through the work of elders. This is God's support structure for his servants in every capacity in His kingdom. Upon examining Exodus 12:21 the command is given to the elders of Israel to prepare for the Passover that was to be carried out on the night of their deliverance from Egypt. Elders were to be the representatives of the people in providing the spiritual insights for their journey in the wilderness and thereafter.

In verse 29 elders formed the link between the masses of the people and God. They acted as the mediators between the people and God. When a sacrifice was presented under the order of the High Priest the elders assembled the people to participate. To substantiate this position as spiritual leaders the elders were to lay hands on the animal for sacrifice. The elders functioned as representatives of the people in the ceremony of cleansing. The eldership of Israel antedates the nation life of Israel. The Passover was instituted through the elders Exodus 12:5,6,21ff." ⁸The eldership was God's institution to establish order and to create a reverence for law and justice for the established good of Israel as a nation.

Following the sacrifice performed by the elders for the people, Israel then departed from Egypt. Every act carried out by Moses as he led Israel had to be supported by the presence of the elders. This is apparent by the many times Moses summonsed the elders to his side. In Exodus 17:5 the Lord commanded Moses to do as instructed, as recorded in this passage:

5. Go on before the people, and take with you some of the elders of Israel. Also take in your hand your rod with which you struck the river, and go. 6 "Behold, I will stand before you there on the rock in Horeb; and you shall strike the rock, and water will come out of it, that the people may drink."

This passage further confirms the importance of elders giving support to the work of God by his appointed persons. In Exodus 18:12 Jethro, Moses' father-in-law comes to visit. After observing the tremendous work that was committed to Moses he suggests that Moses appoint leaders over the companies of the people. We recognize that there were already elders over the tribes. This is evident by the presence of Aaron and the elders as he spoke. This only proves that these elders were given a new function. This time they were to be the representative of Moses for the hearing of problems. These leaders, elders, were placed over 1000's, 100's, 50's and 10's. This detailed the efficiency with which the people of Israel in the wilderness were ruled. Then in 19:5 the elders are summoned to Mount Horeb to stand before Moses and at the same time they were to speak for the people in matters concerning their relationship with God. In this passage the elders are recognized as teachers as well as counselors. "Undoubtedly, their involvement in the events culminating with the entry of the Israelites into Canaan was considerably greater than the Bible implies."⁹

The next development involved the setting apart of the seventy. In Exodus 24:1 God called Moses and those in leadership positions to come up before Him along with the seventy elders. This is very obviously an advance form of governmental control. Then in verse 9 the scene is repeated with Moses, Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu with the seventy. Their authority in Israel is confirmed in Numbers 11:16-17.

16. So the Lord said to Moses, "Gather to me seventy men of the elders of Israel, whom you know to be the elders of the people and officers over them; bring them to the tabernacle of meeting, that they may stand there with you. 17. "Then I will come down and talk with you there. I will take of the Spirit that is upon you and will put the same upon them; and they shall bear the burden of the people with you, that you may not bear it yourself alone.

This passage further confirms the leadership position given to elders along with God's representative (Moses) for this task. This wilderness time prepared Israel for the coming occupancy in the land. The framework for a stable government is laid down through the present leadership of Moses and the elders who would later be the leaders in the settlement period. "The elders were the only group who eventually dominated all levels of Israelite society." ¹⁰ The seventy were looked upon as "Moses' standing executive" by some who has done exegesis on this passage. They are also called the "Presbytery of Israel" and the "College of the Elders". At this point they were the recognized leaders in matters civic and religious. ¹¹

Upon leaving the wilderness and the occupancy of the land of Canaan, it is worth noting that elders accompanied the movement of the Ark of the Covenant from Sinai onward. This was necessary as the elders represented the people. Representation was recognized as God's method of dealing with people. The Ark was looked upon as the presence of God in there midst also. In I Samuel 4:3 the elders speak to Israel commanding that the ark be brought from Shiloh to deliver them from the Philistines. The elders evidently trusted the presence of the ark to deliver them, but failed to keep the faith it represented. II Chronicles 5 records that the ark was placed in Solomon's temple. In verse 4 the elders came and the Levites took up the ark in their presence to place it in its new location in the Temple. These are just two incidents in which elders served the faith when something specific happened in the religious life of Israel.

Deuteronomy 31:9-13 records the last of Moses' days with the people of Israel. The elders are given the task of keeping the law and making certain that it was taught to the people. It is stated that the elders along with the priests were to be the stewards of the law and responsible for its preservation and proclamation. This passage stresses the importance

of the elder as the guardian of the faith as well as a teacher. In the traditions since, this has been the role of the elder as in the New Testament as directed by Paul to Timothy.

Period of the Judges

During the next period of approximate 400 years of Israel's history, the elders held a strong political and religious position. In Joshua 7:14-18 the elders are recognized as representatives of "the 'tribes,' the 'family,' the 'household,' and the individual with his 'house.'"¹² By this we have a very highly organized nation. In this passage the Nation of Israel faced defeat. Joshua calls the elders together and they present themselves prostrate before the Lord. The Lord reveals through them the sin of one man that brought defeat to the people. The elders along with their leaders were God's agents to speak in turn to them. In this instance it was the task of the elders to see that the appropriate discipline was administered.

The book of Joshua recognizes elders as the principal leaders. When we examine the dividing up of the land, the elders played a significant part. In Joshua 1 they are seen as political and military leaders. In Joshua 7:14-18 the elders are "represented severally by their heads, natural or elected; as the whole congregation were by 'the elders of Israel'"¹³ In Joshua 8: 30-35 Professor Keviv called this the General Assembly at Shechem.¹⁴ The words of verse 33 read:

33. Then all Israel, with their elders and officers and judges, stood on either side of the ark before the priests, the Levites, who bore the ark of the covenant of the Lord, the stranger as well as he who was born among them. Half of them were in front of Mount Ebal, as Moses the servant of the Lord had commanded before, that they should bless the people of Israel.

This revealed how important the elders were as leaders of the people. They were a separate entity from all other elected to rule. During the settlement period the elders were given more authority. This is apparent by their position in the Cities of Refuge. (Deuteronomy 19:1-13 and Joshua 20:1-9) ¹⁵ Their duty was to judge those who would be considered worthy of protection from vengeance that might be attempted by someone who

had a relative murdered. This court of elders had the task of hearing the evidence and determining whether the person deserved protection or must be returned to their tribe or community to be properly tried. This gives evidence of their extended social influence.¹⁶ The elders settled matters that created conflict in families and communities.

Period of Cities of Refuge.

One other area that must be examined is the “City Elders.” During the period of the Babylonian Captivity these elders “handled testimonies, oaths, ratification of transgressions, arbitration’s, and litigation’s involving individuals, the family and the settlement.”¹⁷ Elders also acted as Notary Publics in keeping records of civil cases so that issues could be properly judged.

“In spite of change in regime, Israelite elders continued to control the families, settlements and tribal-regional factions until the end of the First Temple period.” Professor Reviv has recognized that “Elders remained the most important institution in main stream Israelite society during the Assyrian exile, and maintained national identity during the Babylonian exile.”¹⁸

It was considered that when a diplomatic delegation was needed to resolve any problem the elders were the ones who were called upon. Professor Reviv of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem states the following: “The migration of the Danites from the southwestern border of the Israelite territory to the northern frontier (Judges 18) – a complicated organizational, military and diplomatic mission – also demonstrates the leadership abilities, areas of responsibility and decision-making rules of the elders.”¹⁹ There are no names given as to who the leaders were but it is accepted that the elders gave the orders to mobilize this group. On this ground it is considered that the spies were also elders that represented the people to examine the land of Canaan.

Elders were the elected leaders to whom the people would go to receive instruction. One such occasion where the elders acted for the people was in the election of Jephthah to lead the people against the Ammonites Judges 11:5-11. This recorded incident revealed the

influence of the elders both in the family and in the cities of the land. While the Judges ruled they were an integral part of all proceedings.

Another matter that was decided by the elders was the settling of land ownership. When a claim to a parcel of land was in question the elders were called to hear the case. This was done when Naomi brought her daughter-in-law Ruth to Israel. The next of kin to Naomi was given the privilege to act according to the Law. When the issue of raising a suitable heir through Ruth was raised it was Boaz who claimed the inheritance. This was done in the presence of the elders as a testimony that all was done properly. (Ruth 4:2)

Period of the Monarchy

The period of the Kings revealed significant changes in the responsibilities of the elders. There was a definite narrowing of authority and yet the elders were respected as advisors to the King during the monarchial period.²⁰ A definite division was recognized between officials and elders. These officials were recognized as those who did much the same work as the elders among other tribes in the land. Israel now wanted to be like other people and have a king. In I Samuel 8:4-5 the request was presented to Samuel.

4. Then all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah, 5. And said to him, "look, you are old and your sons do not walk in your ways. Now make us a king to judge us like all the nations."

This action was the beginning of Israel's trials. The Lord's reply to Samuel revealed that they had rejected His divine counsel concerning His way of ruling over the nation. This error shall be recognized in the examination of the period of the Kings. The elders were given the task to supervise the coronation of Saul as king. The record reported in I Samuel indicated that not all the elders agreed with this move. Some were not convinced of the good of this kind of a central government. Samuel was seen more as an elder among them and those who refused to accept Saul might have seen the "hand writing on the wall." The elders were not just a stamp of approval for others actions. "They are portrayed as having firm demands."²¹

Turning to the life of David, who was anointed by Samuel under God's appointment, another problem surfaces. David was greatly loved by the people. This is demonstrated in the way the elders as reported in II Samuel 2 and 3 are rallied to call for a united Israel. They realized that if this new office were to function it needed the support of all the leaders including the elders. When the Ark of the Covenant was moved, the elders were to participate in this movement (I Samuel 4).

The elders' work under the monarchy was more defined than in previous eras. They were given the task of keeping records and collecting taxes. They played an important role when a military recruitment was necessary. The King realized the influence these men had over their equals. It has also been stated that the King had no real control over this group of leaders but knew enough that he needed their support to remain in office. Yet it was in David's time that they were stripped of all legal authority. It was at this time we have the "city elders" appearing. These elders formed the municipal government to give the leadership necessary for local control. It was not until the revolt of Absalom that the city elders developed a much closer relationship with the monarchy.²²

When Israel was divided the new Northern Kingdom was ruled by Jeroboam, and the Southern Kingdom with head quarters in Jerusalem was ruled Rehoboam. This division could have been prevented if the Southern Kingdom's new king would have obeyed the elders that advised his father Solomon and were prepared to be his advisors. The result was a divided nation because the voice of the elders was rejected I Kings 12. When the Northern Kingdom fell under the siege of Assyria, the elders were again given back their positions of leadership. In the Kingdom of Judah when Josiah proclaimed his reform, it was the elders that rallied to support his endeavors.

Period of Elders in the Exile.

When the period of the Monarchy ended and Israel was under the rule of foreign powers, the elders had more authority again. During this period from 586 BC to the end of the written record of the Old Testament the elders worked among the exiles and those still in the land. It is recognized in Nehemiah 8 that the Synagogue system of worship was

established at this time. This system was considered to have spread wherever Jewish people were scattered.²³ In Ezekiel 14:1-6 and 20:1-5, 27 the elders gather about the prophet. The account here speaks of the elders who came realizing something must be done to resolve their impending crisis. In Chapter 20 Ezekiel addressed the nation and this time he tells the elders they hold the solution to the apostasy that exists. In Jeremiah 29:1,4-7 the Prophet wrote to the elders in captivity, reminding them of the importance of their position. It was through them that communications were kept open between those dispersed and those at home in Canaan.²⁴ Jeremiah called upon the elders to be settled wherever they resided. They were to be content and develop their faith in God as if in the land of their inheritance.

The Period of the Diaspora.

During this period, Jewish people are found in all part of the known world and are called the scattered of Israel. These Jewish people were required to speak Greek and this brought about the Greek translation known as the Septuagint. This text was the record used by the elders of the synagogue to instruct Jewish people. Through this process there was a certain level of knowledge of the eldership established by God.²⁵ The Synagogue was recognized as the central place of worship for Israel until the coming of Christ. It remains among the dispersed Jews who have not acknowledged the fulfillment of the Old Covenant and the establishment of the New Covenant in Christ.

Elders provided strength to the new system as well as elasticity to rule. The whole fabric of the new order depended on the elders. The congregations in the dispersion elected elders to rule in civic and religious affairs that affected them. When a new synagogue was founded, it was the duty of the nearest synagogue to give leadership through elders to direct the election of elders in a new district. Every synagogue must have at least three elders. It has been stated that if it were near Jerusalem the Sanhedrin in later times gave the new group its leaders. Yet it was recognized that no group was given a shepherd to be a teacher unless the congregation was consulted through its elders. At the same time elders acted to guide a congregation in the election of their elders also. This we will see also was true in

the period immediately following the beginning of the Church as the body of Christ on earth.²⁶

The elder's position during the silent years in Israel before the birth of Christ was to bring order to the life of the synagogue. They proved to be a highly developed congregational power base. They arranged the orders for worship, administered discipline, managed the financial affairs, and cared for the poor and afflicted. In the cities with more than one synagogue there were district counsels of elders. Some think of them as holding Presbyterian power in their function. It has been suggested that these bodies were the continuance of the principle of the seventy elders elected by Moses to rule with him. Bannerman states with reference to the Gospels that elders were an integral part of the function of the Sanhedrian. It is felt that this body was composed of the Chief Priest (past and present) the scribes (teachers of the law) along with representatives from the synagogue of the greater area, elders.²⁷

The dispersion of the Jewish people became a base for the apostles to contact people with the Gospel. The dispersed Jews having certain training in the Old Testament in Greek were able to understand the apostles teaching and the importance of the leadership elders. "More than one Christian Father testifies that the reading of the LXX played a vital part in his conversion."²⁸

In the time of Christ the Gospels record the influence of the elders. In Matthew 15:2 "the tradition of the elders" is cited by the scribes and the Pharisees as their reason for questioning Jesus. From this passage we gather that the elders influenced the social and religious life of the nation. In Matthew 16:21 Jesus refers to the power of the elders when he speaks of his impending death. So we can safely state by the Gospels that the elders held extensive power over the people in Christ's time on earth.

Summary

Having examined the activity of the Elders from the sources researched, the following activities are credited to them. They acted as stewards or superintendents. They directed the affairs in tribal groups. They settled disputes in families. They heard cases as a

judge would in the gates of the cities. They ruled over areas of land in the early settlement period. They directed the worship of the people and gradually gained more influence as the nation multiplied. In the time of the dispersion they were the leaders of the Synagogue. At times they managed the census records and also collected the taxes. They recruited military support during the time of the Judges and later under the Monarchy. They were the leaders in the Cities of Refuge where murder trials were judged. With this multitude of duties the elders were certainly notable leaders in the Nation of Israel.

As they lost political recognition in the later part of the period just before Christ came their roles became predominately that of spiritual leaders of the Synagogue. In the Synagogue they exercised Spiritual oversight. This included worship, family matters, finances, care of the poor and the oppressed. The elders were God's provision under the Divine Theocracy. They were the leaders that brought stability to God's created order. Even though sin had disrupted the relationship of God and man and all parts of the world, God gave elders to redeem what is best during this time.

Conclusion

As I conclude this section on the elders from the time of Abraham to the coming of the Messiah, I am convinced both, by the evidence given in Scripture and other evidence from tribal life that elders were the most important leaders in God's plans for mankind. I am moreover convinced that the faithful elders through out this time in Israel served to maintain the remnant so that the promise of a redeemed could be fulfilled. Through them we see the reading and teaching of the law preserved in Israel. Through them a form of religion was preserved until Christ's time. Yet as we move from written prophecies through the silent years (400 approximate before Christ) in Israel's Old Testament we find the civic powers appealed to the Emperor's representative to have Christ crucified.

I will conclude by recognizing what Bannerman notes. He states that the seeds planted in Israel were taken away by the Roman Empire. This was very apparent by the time of Christ. The rulers and elders established the basis for Christian leadership. As we

turn to examine our next chapter on Elders in the New Testament, we will recognize their stabilizing influence in the growth of the Christian church.

Chapter Two

New Testament Requirements

The records available on the founding of the New Covenant Church of the resurrected Christ in Acts 1-5 do not refer to elders directly. The incident in Acts 6 where the apostles called for “the election of the seven men” for service who are considered later to be deacons seems to be a clear indication that some form of leadership existed prior. As the Apostles fulfilled the commission recorded in Acts 1:8 there are more references to elders. In order to understand the significance of their role in the proclamation of the Gospel, it is necessary to understand the influence of the Synagogue on the Church. The Synagogue elders will be examined in this work to understand their influence during the period of the dispersion.

This will help us to understand the references to elders in the Gospel records. During the ministry of Christ while on earth our Lord was a regular worshipper at the Synagogue. In Luke 7:3 the concern of the centurion was addressed to the elders of Israel to go bring Jesus to perform a healing for his servant. The elders represented the centurion making the request acceptable. Yet throughout his public life he clashed many times with the religious leaders. One group that appears to be mentioned many times was “elders.” In Matthew 27:1 the elders accompanied the Priest in accusing Jesus. It is

similar in character to the work of the elders as they accompanied the priests when the Ark of the Covenant was moved from Sinai until it was finally placed in the Temple. Mark 8:31 refers to the elders position in condemning Christ to death. Jesus prepared his disciples by making them aware of this planned action. When Jesus was arrested and taken from the Garden of Gethsemane he was delivered up to the Chief Priest and the elders. In Mark 15:1 the elders are consulted regarding Christ's guilt and whether he was worthy of death. In Luke 22:66 it appears the Sanhedrian's membership was composed of elected elders who formed what we may call a "Presbytery of Elders."¹ In the gospel references to encounters of Jesus and rulers there were Chief Priests, Scribes and rulers named. Miller states implicitly that elders of the Synagogue gave direction to the office of elder in the church. The following quotation clarifies this.

There were Bishops, Elders, and Deacons in the Synagogue; but no officers bearing the titles, or performing similar functions in the Temple. There was ordination by the imposition of hands in the Synagogue; but no such ordination in the Temple. There were reading of scripture, expounding them, and public prayers every Sabbath day in the Synagogue; while the body of the people went up to the Temple only three times a year, and even then to attend on a very different service. In the Synagogue, there was a system established, which included weekly provision, not only for the instruction and devotion of the people, but also for maintenance of discipline, and the care of poor; while scarcely any thing of this kind was to be found in the Temple. Now in all these respects, and in many more which might be mentioned, the Christian Church followed the Synagogue model and departed from that of the temple.²

Elder as an Apostle

The Church, as the body of believers, in the New Testament is definitely the visible representation of Christ's body on earth. From the beginning the Church had its first visible form in the Nation of Israel. In this connection elders were in charge of its spiritual welfare. Keeping this in mind it is reasonable to project that the Apostles were elders.

The spokesman for the Apostles, Peter, refers to himself as an elder. (I Peter 5:1-2)³ This is a reasonable conclusion because Jesus commissioned the Apostles to teach, preach, and heal the sick. (Mark 3:14-15) In II John 1 the author refers to himself as an elder writing to the Church. This is repeated in III John 1 in his address to Gaius.

In Matthew 16:13-19 Jesus invested in his disciples the authority to govern his church in the form it was to take under the New Covenant⁴. Peter is recognized as the representative of the Apostles here. Again in John 21 Peter is charged to “feed my sheep.” This makes him a shepherd, establishes him as an elder. This reference in Matthew 16 makes all the apostles elders. Then in Matthew 18 authority to settle disputes was given to the apostles. They had power to bind and loose. They were given the authority to determine what was to be taught and was to be excluded. This is similar to authority given to the synagogue elders. They held the key to discipline and this was likewise given to the disciples.

Bannerman states that the early church was a loosely organized body. From the Upper Room the first function of the Apostles was to elect one to replace Judas who betrayed Christ. From here the believers spread through out the Roman Empire from Pentecost. They naturally returned to the Synagogue when first converted. James wrote his Epistle to the Jews of the Dispersion. So it is natural to assume that the leadership of elders came naturally.⁵

The New Bible Dictionary states that the apostles were elders who had been trained by Jesus directly and who had known Him in the flesh.⁶ They were appointed by Christ to supervise the development of the universal Holy Catholic Church to take form at Pentecost. They were the first elders of the church.

Elders in Acts 1-12.

The first 12 chapters of Acts do not provide us with much detail on the organization of the early church. The Church was definitely the manifestation of the Body of Christ on earth. The authority of the Apostles is evident by their control over the multitude who heard them preach. The first evidence of the election of an elder was the

replacement of Judas who betrayed Christ. This election restored the number to twelve. Bannerman refers to this as the election of an elder and argues that the Apostles were actually elders in the same order as the Synagogue.⁷

The visible church when first organized at Pentecost was governed by the apostles. Bannerman speaks of them as, “the twelve then, were unquestionably designated by Christ to be office bearers, stewards or overseers, in His Church.”⁸ The overseer is another title given to an elder. The elders are to “tend the flock of God, exercising oversight, not of constraint but willingly, according to God.”⁹ This reveals how readily adaptable elders would be when converted to Christianity from the worship in the synagogue to serve in the visible Church of Christ. From this it is easy to understand how adaptable the office of elders was to the Church. As the elders exercised tremendous control in the Synagogue of Israel so it is accepted the elders ruled in the first Church body corporate. These first elders could very readily have been elders of the old order who looked for the Messiah. Having accepted Christ as this Messiah, Redeemer of Israel, they would be already invested in the office and worthy to serve. They had the spiritual training for oversight in the new church organization already. There would not of necessity be any recorded information on this event. The records we have in Acts only report developments that were added to the life of the Church as time required it.¹⁰

Further investigation of church government reveals that elders were the recognized leaders during the first wave of persecution and following. With this disruption in the body of the Church, Bishop Lightfoot declared there were elders in Jerusalem, Judaea, and Antioch before the death of James the Brother of John.¹¹ James died in A. D. 44.

Bannerman affirms that the Apostles along with elected elders created the unity that brought cohesion to the early state of the Church. “With them from the first it seems probable that, more or less formally, ‘elders’ were associated.”¹² Although there are no references to the election of elders in this first section of Acts (chapters 1-12) there are references to the setting apart of men to take care of the needs of the Widows as recorded in Acts 6:1-7. This gives us reason to accept that the office of elder was accepted as from

a former order without need of recognition. The one reference to elders in Acts 11:30 relates to the provision of relief delivered by the Apostles to the elders at Judaea. Certainly the Church was well organized by this time. Barnabas and Saul are commissioned to deliver the relief funds. From this it would appear that the Apostles, themselves Elders, along with the Church at Antioch must have by now elected a governing body of Elders.

Elders in Acts 14-28.

It is now necessary to examine the growth of the Church beyond Jerusalem, Judaea, and Antioch. Peter and Paul along with other fellow workers as they went about their work as evangelists called on the newly formed congregations to elect from their membership elders. It is at this point that the strength of the Apostolic Church was in the election of elders in every church.¹³

Acts 14 reported that Paul and Barnabas visited Iconium, Derbe, and Lystra. Acts 14:23 states "So when they had appointed elders in every church, and prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed." This indicated that the spiritual life of the church lay in the election of qualified elders who were to carry out the work only after much prayer and fasting. The elders now held the authority to establish elders in newly formed congregations from this time forward.

In Acts 15 we have the record of the meeting of the Jerusalem Council. Though this was convened to deal with the subject of circumcision nevertheless the matter was presented to the Apostles and elders that a ruling may be established. From this meeting letters were dispensed through the Apostles and elders to Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia. In the Acts of the Apostles it is recorded (16:4) that Apostles and elders delivered the message from the Jerusalem Council. Paul called the elders of Ephesus to meet him at Miletus (Acts 20:17). His message was a report on his own life's experiences and they could not expect their lives to be less stressful. He charged them with the responsibility to be overseers of the Church redeemed by the blood of Christ (Acts 20:28).

Bannerman states that the Apostles knew that they might never return to these churches again. They felt that they would be sufficiently strong by the elders elected in them. He writes as this quote reveals the confidence placed in these elected elders.

“These elderships, once established, were self-acting, in the Christian Church, as in the Synagogue. They could take all needful steps, with the concurrence of the members of the congregation, to add to their number, or to form other elderships in congregations which might spring up in neighbouring localities around the mother Church.”¹⁴

Further examination reveals that Paul counseled his co-worker, Titus, to “ordain elders in every city, as I commanded you.” (Titus 1:5) From this passage we conclude that Titus was set apart as Timothy (I Timothy 4:14) to be an elder proclaiming the word of truth. This gave them the authority to ordain elders as need would arise.

Qualifications for Elders

To understand the qualifications for leadership it is important to look at I and II Timothy and Titus 1:5-9. Both of these leaders remained long enough to establish elders who would be responsible for both teaching and ruling.¹⁵ An examination of the passages above will determine the kind of person who is best suited for this office. To have a body of believers with a stable government in spiritual matters there must be people with recognized spiritual gifts. These gifts must be demonstrated in certain qualities. The passages we are about to examine describe these qualifications. Those who desire to exercise this office must look at the standard set here. “Those with great responsibility must meet high expectations.”¹⁶

In the Greek there are two terms used that are considered equal. In I Timothy 3:1 the term is “episcopos” and it is translated Bishop in the King James Translation, and in the New International Bible, it is translated Overseer. Upon examining the reference to elders in the Church at Ephesus (Acts 20:28) the term used is “presbuteros” which is translated elder.

“The identity of elder and bishop is even clearer in Titus 1:5-9, which reads: ‘This is why I left you in Crete, that you might . . .

appoint elders in every town . . . For a bishop . . . must be blameless . . .’ In each church, therefore, the elders or bishops served as a counsel of equals, perhaps assisted by deacons, to administer the affairs of the local church.”¹⁷

In some circles it was considered to be grounds for a Presbyterian form of Government.¹⁸ Philip Schaff describes the difference in these terms. Presbyter signifies the duties of office while the bishop signifies the dignity of the office.¹⁹ To be received into this office one had to desire this work. Paul warned Timothy that one should be elected to this office on the basis of popularity but must be chosen on the basis of their love for the truth and interest in the faith.²⁰ The qualification for this office will be recognized as being both positive and negative.

The first qualification was to be blameless. The N I V Bible translates this “above reproach.” This is not intended to express the idea of being perfect. The thought here is that he may come from a good background having a certain respect from among his own. It also is intended that his public life not be blemished with a behavior unbecoming of the office. He must also have a good reputation outside the church in the community. In the church he must have a working knowledge of the faith, live by the highest moral standard possible. In short he must be a gentleman with impeccable virtues.²¹

He must be the husband on one wife. His faith must be represented in his marital status. It was required that he be a monogamist and not be a polygamist. Polygamy was practiced and accepted in many religions of the day but was not to be found in the Church. Anyone who before conversion practiced polygamy was not to be a candidate for office.²² It is not only a charge against polygamy but also against being flirtatious.²³ The pressing issue on marital status now is promiscuity. If a man were known for even having a mistress, this would disqualify him as well. Another view held was that one was only allowed to have one wife in a lifetime. Based on I Corinthians 7:8, 39 we cannot assume that Paul held this view. The reference found in verse 8 allows a person to have an interest in another after the death of a spouse. In verse 39 a woman is free to marry if her husband is dead, it is fair to assume that this applies also to a man.

A list of virtues follows the negative ones. They are vigilant, sober, of good behavior. These could be translated temperate, watchful, with decency and sobriety.²⁴ They may be described as virtues that present one as being prudent, judicious, and orderly. He must be a hospitable person. This will make him willing to open his home to those being persecuted for the faith.²⁵ This was a very important characteristic of leaders in the first century. Romans 12:13 and Hebrews 13:3 are further references to this quality of person for this office.

The “apt to teach” clause may be taken to express the thought of being a teaching or preaching elder. It is also thought that no person could be an elder who was not able to articulate his faith well. This would be thought necessary when the elder would be given oversight of those in his district as to discipline. His only ground to discipline the flock of God with the other elders would be found in his ability to express the truths of the faith clearly. By this he would be clear in his views of right and wrong and be able to lead others when the teaching elder would publicly teach and preach. This also requires understanding to judiciously govern based on ability to act on knowledge possessed.²⁶ Titus reference to this indicates that an elder must articulate the doctrines of the faith clearly.

On the negative side there were pronounced definite judgement on certain traits not acceptable. He must not be given to wine. By this habit he would be classed as a troublemaker. The excessive use of any alcoholic drink can destroy a person’s sense of reason. It must not assume that Paul was against proper use of wine. In I Timothy 5:23 he suggests that Timothy use a little wine for his stomach. Too much of any thing that is good can lead to the destruction of one’s person. He then states that he must not be a brawler. This describes one as being a striker, a violent person, and quarrelsome person who would lash out at others without any reason. This can also be thought of being an irrational person. He must not be a covetous person. This is also dangerous because of seeing others given responsibility instead of him may lead to bad feelings among elders. This was experience by Christ when he spoke to John in Peter’s reaction. (John 21:22) He must not have a love for money. An elder must be free from this vice. “For where your

treasure is there will your heart be also.” Luke 12:34 This describes the person who thinks more of his money than his service for the Lord. Jesus condemned the Pharisees for their love of money. (Luke 16:14) This is best described as being desirous of material gain.²⁷

Now let us look at the issue of the behavior of the elder’s family (I Timothy 3:5). He must rule well his own house. It is considered that the family is the smaller unit of the church. If the family lacked leadership then the influence of that person would be unfit for service in the church. Every elder should have control over his household and especially his children as long as they remain under his roof. If they depart the faith later he may be assured that he exercised good control while they remain in his charge. A successful elder must rule successfully to bring reform to his own household before he can be trusted to bring reform to the church. This work of reform in the family must begin while children are of a tender age. A father sets a standard for his children by his behavior before them. He is an influence either for good or evil. Abraham received direction from the Lord and instructed his household (Genesis 18:18) and was found faithful. Elli was a failure because he did not oversee his household successfully (I Samuel 2:29). “Because it is meet that such a one should be a man of experience and government, the apostle would have him observed in the private ordering of his family; for from this it may be gathered how he is likely to behave himself in public.”²⁸ Ignoring one’s family for service in the church is not to be excused.²⁹ When he has ruled well his own house he can be more sensitive to problems that arise in the church body on a larger scale.³⁰

The matter of age then becomes an issue. He must not be a novice. This is to be viewed in the light of not being a recent convert.³¹ It is just as important that he be not too young for the office. It was stated in the Church of Scotland that a novice was anyone under the age of 26. New believers should become sufficiently strong in faith before being elected to office. New believers need time to mature.³² This prevents being drawn away by temptations that may arise. It takes a great deal of integrity to be able to handle stressful situations without being overcome by temptation. A major issue in being given

office too young would be pride. This is having an unhealthy sense of one's own worth. Lange states that one must be kept in the path of humility, discipline, and suffering.³³

I Timothy 3:7 states that he must have a good reputation without. The reason for this is that he not only will be a leader in the church in worship and discipline but will be recognized as such from without. The future of the church's witness to the unconverted depends on the leadership of the church as a whole. So the elders must have a good community reputation. This reference to life in the community affects its good name in public. If his past life was one of questionable character even if a convert to Christianity he may not be eligible for office because his past life will not be recognized as changed from the world's point of view.³⁴ This position is certainly harsh yet he should be required to demonstrate his changed life in the community before being accepted in this office in the church. To speak of the snare of the Devil described in I Timothy 2:20 describes conditions that can result when not qualified for office.

It is necessary that an elder be a representative of people whose spiritual life commends them for office. It must also be carefully filled when vacated either by the death of an elder or when one moves from the district. He must not only possess the highest spiritual gifts of discernment but must possess domestic and social virtues to strengthen the church. These qualities in a life give the church a good pattern to reach people without.

The Elder – Ruling and Teaching.

The elders' position has been sufficiently proven to be the body to rule in the life of the Church. The function of the elder's office will now be examined. It will also deal with the influence elders, overseers, and bishops have over the work of the church. Yet it needs to be stated that elders were recognized by a ceremony of ordination practiced by the laying on of hands. This must be carried out in the presence of at least two other elders.³⁵ Paul cautioned Timothy to be careful about setting one apart too quickly to office. The principle of a good reference on a person for office before ordination can

eliminate the disgrace of having allowed others sins to discredit the one who conducted him to office (I Timothy 5:22).

Bannerman's view of the elders is one that holds him up as a person of integrity with good spiritual values. It is a collegiate office in that it is occupied with a group and not alone in any place. This office carries with it responsibility for ruling, oversight, and teaching. One is never elected or appointed by one person and can never rule alone. It must be seen as an office that demands a plurality of elders to exist. In this office there will be a diversity of gifts found. These must be used to protect and care for the members who elect them. They are given the duty of caring for the welfare, purity and increase of the body of the church. They must share the division of labor. They must also labor to cultivate the gifts of each other.³⁶

Paul wrote through Timothy to the Ephesian church that "elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and doctrine." I Timothy 5:17. This does not elevate one elder above another. It simply recognizes the distinctive gift one may possess that qualifies him for a more demanding role than another. It affirms the fact that not all people have the same gifts but are required with their gift to serve the good of all.

Titus I: 9 declares that it is the duty of the elders to guard the assembly from false teachers. They are to be defenders of the faith in this respect. In this office they are to act as disciplinarians in the area of teaching. MacArthur states that:

The highest position of authority in the church belongs to elders, who rule under Christ as under shepherds (I Peter 5:2-4) Elders are responsible for teaching doctrine, administering, disciplining, protecting the flock, praying for the flock, and studying the Word of God. They are answerable to Jesus Christ for their ministry."³⁷

Other duties to be performed by the elders are stated by Miller. They include the gifts of caring for the sick. "If any are sick among you call the elders of the Church." (James 5:14.) It is also the elders duty to "feed the flock of God" (I Peter 5:1-3) Elders are to be respected in their church. "Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit

yourselves, for they watch for your souls as they that must give an account.” (Hebrew 13:17)³⁸

Samuel Miller states that there were two functions but of equal authority in matters of office.³⁹ This singular office is supported by the words of Christ in Matthew 18: 15-17 when He calls for the action of the church in “tell it to the Church” This is modeled on the Synagogue order where by the representatives of the people would hear the case and bring appropriate judgement.⁴⁰

It is reasonable to conclude that the four passages discussed here (Romans 12:6-8, I Corinthians 12:2, I Timothy 5:17, Matthew 18: 15-17) reveal that some elders were teachers while others were rulers. One office is described with two duties performed according to the gift exercised by each. It is also worthy of note that Calvin according to his views on Acts 20:18,28 states that “Bishops differ nothing from Elders”⁴¹ This statement clarifies the teaching on the equality of teaching and ruling elders.

Conclusion

The form of eldership examined in this chapter covering the period of Christ’s ministry and that of the apostles, sets the standard for the New Testament Church. As discovered in the Old Testament chapter the eldership in the Synagogue provided the avenue through which the redemptive plan of God could be fulfilled. So the continuance of this office in the visible church following Christ’s ascension was a meaningful way of providing a channel through which God could give His message to the world. This office enables God’s will to perpetuate the faith among the redeemed. This was demonstrated through Israel as the House of Faith before Christ came. Now the elders’ office is intended to accomplish this in our time.

Moving from the visible church structured following Pentecost it will be necessary to examine the results of either adherence or departure from the principles examined. The future course of the church is blessed when faithful and when it departs reaps His judgement. This will be examined in the following chapters.

Chapter Three

Division of Duties in The Early Church

This chapter traces the use of the term elder as described in chapter two by the Greek words, presbuteros and episcopos, (elder and bishop) in the period immediately following the apostles. Needham states “If the age of the apostles was a time of pioneering enthusiasm and freshness, then the age of the apostolic father’s was a time of settling down, consolidating, and preserving the teachings and tradition of the apostles.”¹ These men who greatly influenced the church probably knew some of the apostles personally. This age is called the period of the apostolic fathers because of their association with those who knew Christ in the flesh. The leading church fathers that followed the apostolic father will also be examined in the period of the growth of the monarchical bishops.

The men examined in this period that occupied leadership positions are more difficult to define with regard to the position of the elders. With the founding of the church by the apostles the emphasis was centered on spreading the gospel message, in keeping with the great commission. (Matthew 28:19). As the apostles preached and many believed, it became evident that the synagogue no longer provided a place for the work of Christ’s kingdom to develop. The records in the Acts of the Apostles (14, 15, 20) indicate the apostles called for the setting apart of elders (presbuteroi). Paul followed his instruction on setting these men apart to this office by setting forth necessary qualifications (I Timothy 3:1-7; and Titus 1:5-9). This seems to have been intended as a

pattern to establish authority for both good government and maintenance of purity in the doctrines of the faith.

It is recognized that the Apostles possibly followed the Jewish converts that accepted the Christ as the Messiah at Pentecost and returned to their homes in different parts of the Roman Empire. This would make the new believers much allied to the Jewish pattern of leadership. As they developed an identity apart from the synagogue leadership there would not necessarily be a problem establishing a form of government. The pattern that developed as reported in the Acts of the Apostles was the application of the elder's office.

The Bishops

A further research of this period of the Apostolic Fathers is presented in the work of Louis Bouyer, Professor in the Faculty of Theology at the Institute Catholique of Paris. Though there are no references to elders in his work he does state a point worthy of being noticed. His view on the writing of the Apostolic Fathers including those who were leaders to the end of the fourth century, leads one to recognize the role culture had on leadership. The following reference to the work of Clement reveals this.

“Those which are not only the most hellenized but the most westernized, such as the Epistle of Clement, are shot through with biblical elements just as the others are, and continue to interpret these elements in a fundamentally Jewish context of thought.”²

He states that during the time of the disintegration of Judiasm and the rise of the Christian culture, diverse influences from varying social cultures influenced thought. The Church was affected by Semitic influences from the east. It was also invaded by a “Hellenistic religiosity in which everything was intermingled and confused.”³ Though he argues that Christianity became very much a stabilizing influence during this period it is readily realized why Clement of Rome wrote to the Corinthians.

Theological teaching in the Corinthian Church created the crisis that resulted in Clement's letter. Bouyer wrote of the millenarianism taught in that period. This may have been the cause of the dispute in Corinth, which invoked the strife that led to the removal of the elders from office. The theology that caused this revolution is considered to have

developed from the Revelation of John, 96 A. D., and the interpretations imposed on it. This seems to have had its influence throughout the period of the apostolic fathers. In this he includes all to the time of the young Augustine.⁴

The views of Clement of Rome (96. A. D.), Ignatius of Antioch (100 A. D.) and Polycarp of Smyrna (Died in 154 A. D.) need to be examined on their views regarding bishops and elders.

Clement of Rome, 96 A. D. wrote the Corinthian congregation regarding a divisive spirit causing trouble. In his I Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians he wrote concerning the discord that existed. This letter involved the disposition of honorable elders from office. Their position was filled with a young man (possibly more than one) who was creating trouble by his teachings. His attitude may have been the reason for Clement's letter. Professor Bouyer's view indicates that a charismatic emphasis linked with a hierarchical situation may have been reported to Clement. Bouyer states "doubtless there existed as at Corinth, at this period with Clement just as formerly with St. Paul, cases of conflict between certain charismatics and certain authorities, or between authorities themselves."⁵

Clement of Rome's letter defended the rightful position of the elders. Herbert Musurillo records parts of I Clement in his work, *The Fathers of the Primitive Church*, with reference to the crisis at Corinth. He states the problem being "a handful of headstrong, stubborn men have kindled to such a degree of madness that your good name, so respected and famous among men, has come to be greatly slandered."⁶ He elaborates on the quality of the elders deposed, as was evident by their generous spirit, hospitable nature, and good judgement in all church business. Clement certainly recognized how well these elders had fulfilled Paul's emphasis on qualifications listed in I Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9. Clement further states that those who have created trouble display a proud and fleshly attitude bringing shame to the church of Christ. Clement viewed this as "youth against the elders."⁷ He further states that when the young men deposed the established elders they were displaying the attitude that brought death to the world.⁸

Clement stressed that there was need for structure and discipline for the continuance of the church. This required Corinth to respect the elected elders and their successors as having the right to give direction in matters of government and worship.⁹ In 40:1 he called for fixed times and hours for worship. This implies the need for the respected elders to provide leadership. He compares the church to an army where the generals lead to provide discipline and instruction for efficient service to the nation. The church model was founded on elders from Israel's model. In 40 he reminds them that all have special duties. Clement commands, "where and by whom He would have them performed, He Himself fixed by His supreme will: that all things being done with piety according to His good pleasure might be acceptable to His will."¹⁰ In 44 Clement writes as follows:

And our Apostles knew through our Lord Jesus Christ that there would be strife over the name of the bishop's office. For this cause therefore, having received complete foreknowledge, they appointed the aforesaid persons, and afterwards they provided a continuance,. That if these should fall asleep, other approved men should succeed to their ministration. . . . Blessed are those presbyters who have gone before.¹¹

By this he argues that order was to be maintained through elders ruling over the people. Then in chapter 42 Clement cites the apostles as his reason for the hierarchical structure they were to accept. Then in chapter 44 he continues his rebuke and this time desires that they respect their "bishops who were appointed by the apostles themselves."¹² Following this he states "they should, at any rate, submit to the elders and receive penitential correction, bending the knee of the heart." He further declares that elders are (62) "men who have kept the faith and have scrutinized the 'saying' of God's revelation." Then in 63:3 Clement required all to respect the elders as prudent men to be "delegates between you and us."¹³

This use of terms, bishops and elders interchangeably, was the beginning of confusion that led to new developments in government during this period. It appears at this time that bishops were those who assumed authority directly from the apostles while

the elders were either appointed or elected representatives of the people in the different churches.¹⁴

When all the documents are examined it would appear that Clement described bishop – presbyter and deacon as the two levels of government at Corinth. This letter was written representing the bishops – presbyters of Rome to the Corinthian church. It was evident at this time there was still only one office involving the synonymous terms, bishop (episcopos) and elders (presbuteros), as representing a single level of government in spiritual affairs.¹⁵

Yet upon examining the work of Clark the following quotation reveals the graying of lines of distinction. “Are bishops and presbyters, then identical? Or especially in view of “presbyters” being used elsewhere in the Epistle for elder men, are presbyters a class from which bishops are drawn, so that all bishops are presbyters but not all presbyters are bishops?” He seems to indicate that not all presbyters are bishops. Bishops are put forth as the representatives of the apostles and recognizes Timothy and Titus in this category. The other view presented is that the elders are the appointed representatives of the people. It is at this time that a clouding of the office begins. It appears that bishops were looked upon as different yet without any real power.¹⁶

Ignatius (100 A. D.) of Antioch is the second bishop to be considered in this period. Ignatius is remembered for the seven letters written to the church and other bishops. An examination of these epistles reveals the development of a limited ecclesiastical hierarchy. Philip Schaff in his work, *History of the Christian Church*, makes several references to the writings of Ignatius. One of these being Ignatius’ assertion that James, who appears to be the head of the church in Jerusalem was looked upon as a bishop. His second assertion is that those appointed by Paul over churches as Timothy, Titus, Silas, Epaphroditus, Luke, and Mark had a certain superintendent position over these churches. His third reference is to the work of John in Revelation. He cites the seven angels as being bishops over these churches. He even suggests that they may have been the beginning of monarchical bishops. Fourthly, his reference to the letters of Ignatius appears to indicate a rise of bishops to power. He then argues that Clement of

Alexandria makes John the originator of the bishop as a distinct leader after his return from the Isle of Patmos. He completes his statements, asserting that there are no direct references to prove the position of a bishop as a distinct office from elders yet it appears that it did rise from this period.¹⁷ This information gives us reason to believe that the rise of bishops was inevitable from this time following. Ignatius delivered his letters to the churches and Polycarp as he was taken under armed guard to Rome where he suffered execution. The journey took him through Asia Minor. In each place delegates from the church came to greet him. This speaks of his influence on the church as a leader.

Harry Boer states that

The central theme of the letters of Ignatius is the unity of the church and the authority of the bishop. Examples of their advice are: “pay attention to the bishop and the board of elders and deacons.” “Do nothing without the bishop . . .” “you must all follow the bishop as Jesus Christ followed the Father.” “Let no one do any of the things that have to do with the church without the bishop . . .”¹⁸

The seven letters of Ignatius that remain will now be examined. Each was written to a different church body as he traveled. The first was written to Ephesus, The Epistle to the Ephesians. In this letter he makes reference to Bishop Onesimus. He begins by setting him apart from other recognized leaders. He refers to his travelling companion, Burrhus, as deacon. In the footnote to this letter Burrhus is referred to as a secretary. He declared that they were to submit to the clergy and the elders. The following quotation is a full recognition of the authority of the bishop over the elders.

All the same, where you are concerned love will not suffer me to hold my peace; and that is why I venture to recommend an action that reflects the mind of God. For we can have no life apart from Jesus Christ; and as He represents the mind of the Father, so our bishops, even those who are stationed in the remotest parts of the world, represent the mind of Jesus Christ.¹⁹

Bishop Lightfoot’s translation states that the Ephesian Church is fortunate to have such a bishop. The following quotation from his translation of the original work gives evidence of his recognition of a single bishop.

Seeing then that in God's name I have received your whole multitude in the person of Onesimus, whose love passeth utterance and who is moreover your bishop (in the flesh) – and I pray that ye may love him according to Jesus Christ and that ye all may be like him; for blessed is He that granted unto you according to your deserving to have such a bishop: -- ²⁰

From the references to bishop in this letter, the position of the bishop was by this time to be recognized and respected as the Lord Jesus Christ himself would have been, if present.

Bishop Ignatius' second letter was an Epistle to the Magnesians. This letter was addressed to Bishop Damas. In the opening remarks he addresses the bishop and two clergy and one deacon.

Forasmuch then as I was permitted to see you in the person of Damas your godly bishop and your worthy presbyters Bassus and Apollonius and my fellow-servant, the deacon Zotion, of whom I would fain have joy, for that he is subject to the bishop as unto the grace of God and to the presbytery as unto the law of Jesus Christ:²¹

From this quotation, the same recorded in *Early Christian Writings*, it is very obvious that bishops were given more authority than elders. It is very apparent that the elders and the people were required to be under their bishop.

Let the bishop preside in the place of God, and his clergy in place of the Apostolic conclave, and let my special friends the deacons be entrusted with the service of Jesus Christ, who was with the Father from all eternity and in these last days has been made manifest. . . . maintain absolute unity with your bishop and leaders, as an example to others and a lesson in the avoidance of corruption. ²²

Bishop Lightfoot makes it very clear that the church was to do nothing unless they consulted the bishop, yet they must also recognize the presbyters. This letter certainly leads one to recognize the power of the bishop. At the same time elders were to have a certain level of authority in each church.

The third letter, *Epistle to Traillans*, is much like the one already examined. The one issue that surfaces here very distinctly is found in the words “for without these three orders no church has any right to the name.” Ignatius makes his position as a bishop clear in these words “I am measuring my words here, out of love for you, . . . if it were not that as a condemned prisoner I have not thought myself entitled to use the peremptory tone of an Apostle.” He further states that any action taken without the clear guidance of the bishop is wrong. “In other words, nobody’s conscience can be clean if he is acting without the authority of his bishop, clergy, and deacons.” The final emphasis on the bishop’s position is stated when he emphasizes that everything must be done to ensure the bishop’s “peace of mind.”²³

Ignatius’ letter to the Romans has no reference to a bishop. As he is being taken to Rome he is obviously overcome with thoughts of his impending martyrdom. This letter is to inform them of his coming. Maxwell Staniforth who translated the letters states in a footnote that Clement had established a highly developed order of Government in Rome.²⁴

In Ignatius’ *Epistle to the Philadelphians*, he declares that their bishop is to be respected because Jesus Christ has given him this office. “It was conferred upon him by the love of God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”²⁵ In this letter the authority over the teachings of the church has been given to the bishop, stating “where the shepherd is, their follow as sheep.”²⁶ The whole tone of letter demands that the bishop be given an elevated position of respect by all.

The *Epistle to Smyrnaeans* goes even further in regard to the bishop’s authority. It places the authority of dispensing the Eucharist with the bishop only. Only if he is unable to perform this service should another person be allowed to dispense the sacrament. This can only be done with his blessing. “He that honoureth the bishop is honoured of God; he that doeth ought without the knowledge of the bishop rendereth service to the devil.”²⁷ This letter is concluded with reference to his position being that of a saint. This kind of reference separates him from all governors and the people in the church.

When Ignatius wrote to Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna, it is obvious that he is a young man and needed support to exercise authority. He wrote “See that nothing is ever done without consulting you, and do nothing yourself without consulting God – as I am sure you never do. Take a firm stand.”²⁸

Ignatius’ letter to the churches and Polycarp, on his way to Rome make it clear that by this time the three levels of government have been recognized. The reference to one bishop in each letter or church makes it clear that the apostles were replaced with an ecclesiastical hierarchy. There is no reference to this in our New Testament letters that were later declared to be part of the canon of Scripture.

Polycarp begins his letter recognizing the presbyters. This distinguishes him from Ignatius who addressed his letters to the bishop mainly. In Clement’s letter it is difficult to determine if he really recognized bishops as differing from presbyters. Polycarp’s letter is of a personal nature that deploys harmony with the presbyters in Smyrna and desires this kind of harmony in Philippi. He requires the Philippians to honor their presbyters and deacons. One warning given to the church was to guard themselves against love of money, which was the downfall of one of them. With this he addressed the two offices of presbyter and deacon directing them to the work that was required of them. Yet he does not give definite direction to the deacons.²⁹

Monarchial Bishops

To understand the government of the church of this period one thing is clear, there is no definite rule on authority. Clement is vague and yet appears to present two levels of government. Ignatius wrote many letters. Each recognized the position of a bishop along with presbyters who seem to be called clergy in some letters. Along with this, deacons are named.

Harry Boer recognizes a development of bishop as a distinct office by the time of Ignatius. He calls him in some instances the “leading elder” and also “head of all the church in the city.”³⁰ By this time a monarchial bishop’s form of church government appeared in Antioch, Smyrna and Ephesus.

There were probable reasons for this emergence of power in a single person. One person may have been more gifted than others. He took the lead and others simply became followers. It is to be noted that persecution of the church could have established this trend. Another reason for a bishop taking charge was to have a single voice to combat heresy in the teachings. Another reason was the centralizing of authority for discipline. This individual would be responsible for correspondence between the churches. So one leader gradually took control. This bishop would be a single voice under persecution and under siege from heretics, and one voice to combat false teaching.

It seems that the apostles have long been forgotten since few would have remembered them. Bishop Lightfoot speaks of the presbyters as “presbyters must be compassionate.”³¹ He seems to designate to these presbyters the office of distributing to the needs of the congregation. This is similar to the office of the seven referred to in Acts 6:1-7.

Out of this development appears three levels of governors - bishops, elders and deacons. With the monarchical bishop came the metropolitan bishop as well. This individual was given authority over a province or territory. There were five single city bishops recognized. They were Rome, Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, and after 451, Jerusalem. At this time the bishop of Rome was made the head of the bishops in the western part of the church and called the Pope.³²

Having recognized the above we must examine the documents from 150 to about 400 A.D. to see the unifying of the western church under Rome. Cyprian (200-258) was recognized as the bishop who fully developed the office. He declared “where the bishop is, there is the church.”³³ It was Cyprian that declared the doctrine of “Apostolic Succession.” His view was for bishops to be elected who would hold office with equal authority.³⁴

In 251, a church counsel of bishops was convened. The issue concerned lapsed Christians due to persecution. The bishops declared, they only had the authority to settle this dispute. This makes it clear that the authority once given the presbyters (elders) has now been removed.

Novatian, a presbyter from Rome, rejected this order and led a revolt within the church. The movement spread throughout the western part of the church. It survived until the seventh century. There is not a great deal of information provided about them. They seem to have merged with the Roman church later.³⁵

The bishops ruled with such power that all issues were taken from the presbyters it appears. Only bishops could rule on reception of members and excommunication. They even controlled marriages. Cyprian was an influential leader. He made the church a “church of bishops”³⁶ The bishop Dionysius of Alexandria ruled from 248-265. From this time throughout the third century elders – presbyters are not mentioned in the ecclesiastical government of the church. By Jerome’s time “by custom rather than by the Lord’s actual appointment” bishops gained control over the church of Christ.³⁷

Conclusion

The elders of the Old Testament era in Judiasm and the elders of the apostolic period were the rulers where as the elders in the Apostolic Fathers are no longer respected as rulers. When the people of Israel demanded a king, the elders in that era were demoted. This led to trouble for the people in their relations with God. Moses recognized the importance of a rule by the people. When this was removed by the Monarchy the people faced deep spiritual trouble which led to rebellion and disobedience to God.

The age of the Apostles emphasized the election or appointment of elders (Presbyters) in every church. With all that has been researched especially in the three leading bishops of the end of the first century and beginning of the second century we find the bishop (episcopos) gradually being developed from a plural term in every church to a single individual ruling. Ignatius’ writings support this view.

The growth of the single bishop leadership in the era after the Apostles shows signs of internal strife. Everything from membership, baptism, to who should serve the Lord’s Supper was in question. Even doctrine begins to show signs of deterioration by making the simple memorial remembrance of our Lord’s death and resurrection

something seemingly not intended. The following chapter will examine the life of the church in pre reformed times.

Chapter Four

Elder in the Pre-Reformed Period

The history of the Christian church from the close of the Church Fathers to the Reformation is traditionally known as the Dark Ages. The persecution that was practiced by the church throughout the middle ages created a great void in information. Those who were accused of being heretics had their writings burned. It can only be reasoned that every effort was made to destroy all records that revealed the form of government practiced. The established ecclesiastical powers of the time were very determined that no authority existed but was created by them. They were determined to control the lives of the public without any representation from the people. Wherever there were pockets of followers of the faith of the Apostles who were determined to keep the faith delivered through the elders were severely persecuted.

Theodore Beza states that it was Satan's objective to overthrow the government of an organization in order to undermine its doctrine.¹ When an ecclesiastical hierarchy in the church takes power it usually follows that the government passes from the people into the hands of a few who make all decisions without the consent of the people. This creates the difficulty for tracing the organization of groups that resisted the hierarchy in the period of 400 to 1500 A. D.

This period begins with the church under bishops possessing monarchical power. It was also about this time that the Bishop of Rome came to exercise authority over other bishops. He was elevated to hold ecclesiastical power and was called the Pope. ²It was throughout this period that doctrine developed to include many of the teachings that created division. At this same time there were groups that resisted the dominant power exercised by bishops.

The records available reveal the power exercised by church councils. They portray a period of ecclesiastical power in which the average believer has no control over his personal life in matters of faith. To understand this it is necessary to examine the Waldensians, one of the “heretic groups” of the medieval period - heretical in the eyes of Rome. By studying this group we gain an insight into an alternative church order of this period.

Waldensians

The records available reveal a stalwart people who were willing to stand firm for the truth regardless of the cost. There may not be a great deal of information covering these noble people but what records there are bear witness to their determination and bravery in the face of great persecution. Samuel Miller states that when Martin Luther surfaced as a reformer the Waldenses were a Christian society that had passed down their teachings for generations. He writes, “soon after the commencement of the Reformation by Luther, they speak of their doctrine and order as having been handed down from father to son for more than five hundred years.”³

J. A. Wylie writes in the preface to his work *History of the Waldenses* that when the new constitution for the Piedmont was framed in 1848, the Waldenses would not accept it unless Freedom of Conscience was enshrined in it. “For this principle they had contended during five hundred years, and nothing short of it could they accept as a basis of nation settlement.”⁴

When the plains people in the north of Italy conceded to Rome’s ecclesiastical authority those in the Alps did not surrender. The Waldensians clung to the simple and plain faith handed down to them. Wylie states: “they held substantially what the apostles

before their day, and the reformers after it taught.”⁵ They were a church founded on the apostles teaching and were independent of any bishop or bishops territory. Wylie called “them the most ancient of people.”⁶

The Waldensian church held annual synods. These meetings were conducted by the church with equal representation “composed of pastors and equal number of laymen.” These meetings were presided over by one of their number, a moderator. Upon examining the limited material available it appears that they held to the teaching of the Acts of the Apostles. They had their appointed or elected elders.

Wylie gives a very vivid portrait of the barbes (pastors) along with equal representation of laymen meeting for prayer and praise to the almighty. He writes declaring them to be a “venerable company of humble, learned, earnest men, presided over by a simple moderator.”⁷

The bishop of Rome feared these people more than any other group in Christendom because “other groups are abominable to God for their blasphemies; but the Waldenses are more pious than any other heretics; they believe truly in God, live justly before men, and received all the articles of the creed, only they hate the church of Rome.”⁸

They further demonstrated their historic faith by the preparation required to be a servant of the church. The barbes (pastors) trained young men in the Holy Scriptures. They were then dispatched to the schools of Lombardy and the Sorbonne in Paris to finish their preparation for ministry. Ordination was carried out as Paul instructed the church in the Acts of the Apostles. Wylie states “youth on whom the barbes laid hands, saw in prospect not a rich benefice, but a possible martyrdom.”⁹

They are credited with a more pure faith than was practiced in the heartland of Rome’s authority. They were hated as much for their simplicity of faith as for their resistance to the ecclesiastical hierarchy. This caused Pope Innocent III to use every resource to remove this influence from his domain. Until the early 1500’s they suffered extreme persecution for their faith and godly life-style. From 1450 to 1500 the persecutors destroyed the church buildings in the valleys. They maintained their faith by

worshipping in caves, barbes homes and in the homes of the chief men (elders). In fair weather they would worship in the open air.

On October 12, 1532, the Waldensians held a synod. Six days they deliberated on many points of doctrine that was convened by representatives of the "barbes and elders." The result was the text called "a short confession of faith."¹⁰ At this synod the new confession simply confirmed a previous confession written in the year 1120 and this one confirmed all doctrine previously approved. The description of their annual meetings and this specific synod gives good reason to believe that this church was governed in the manner that the Apostles directed the church in the years following Christ's ascension.¹¹

In the year 1340 the Waldensians were invited to occupy a tract of country in the south of Italy. The elders listened and then sent a committee to investigate. On the approval of the elders a group of Waldensians moved to Calabria. The following quotation illustrates the courage and faith of these immigrants.

The conditions of their emigration offered a reasonable security for the free and undisturbed exercise of their worship. "By a convention with the local seigniors, ratified later by the king of Naples, Ferdinand of Aragon; they were permitted to govern their own affairs, civil and spiritual, by their own magistrates, and their own pastors."¹²

During this period clergy were sent from the Alps to lead the people in the daily and weekly exercise of worship. They were faithful in paying their taxes to the clergy who controlled the land. Yet they maintained their primitive church under the leadership of barbes and elders. They did not call upon the priest for baptisms or the burial of the dead. In 1532 word was brought to them affirming the glory of the faith they had maintained.

In Germany, in France, in Switzerland and in Denmark the old gospel had blazed forth in splendor unknown to it for ages. The lamp of the Alps was no longer the one solitary light in the world: around it was a circle of mighty torches, whose rays, blending with those of the older luminary, were combining to dispel the night from Christendom.¹³

These Waldensian believers had preserved and translated the scriptures, which was “their gift to the church of the Reformation.” Robert Olivetan, a relative of Calvin, translated the scriptures it is thought with the help of Calvin. It was printed in 1535.¹⁴

Other Evidences of Rule by Elders

Philip Schaff's *History of the Christian Church* gives evidence of a church that was governed by elders in England in the 8th century. At the council of Clavesho, London, 747, Cuthbert, Archbishop of Canterbury describes the authority invested in the elders. After addressing the conditions of the church he stated “that all presbyters should be able to explain the Apostles’ Creed, the Lord’s Prayer, the mass, and the office of baptism to the people in the vernacular” The records reveal that this work was limited in scope but nevertheless existed in part only to be fully restored by the time of the Reformation.¹⁵

The surviving documents written by John Wycliffe condemned the church’s hierarchy. He was a devoted expositor of the teachings of scripture who declared that the Bishop of Rome had no more authority than any other servant of the Lord. Wycliff wrote, “where the bible and the church do not agree, we must obey the bible.”¹⁶ Upon examining his writings it seems clear that he believed in one level of government under Christ. This leadership made all servants equal before Christ.

Samuel Miller writes concerning the period just before the Reformation. He states the apostles applied the term presbyters to both those who labored in doctrine and those who assisted them as judges over the people. With this he states it was the practice of the Bohemian Brethren to have elders of both ranks equal. The reformer, Archbishop Cranmer respected Martin Bucer, the learned theologian, and other esteemed reformers in Europe as vindicating the one class of church officers. Another reformer, Hilory (Ambrose) wrote, “Therefore the Synagogue and afterwards the church had elders, without whose counsel nothing was done.”¹⁷

Bucer declares that the Bohemian Brethren were the preservers of this ancient form of church government. They were the protectors of the eldership in their assemblies.

They served to maintain the cause of truth and piety in the ecclesiastical system. Luther wrote of the Bohemian Brethren that their form of church government was worthy of honor. They maintained discipline and teaching under the eldership.¹⁸

Conclusion

With the limited material that I was able to examine it certainly is apparent that the Waldensians along with other movements during the period from 400 to 1500 kept the faith alive as well as the order of government set down in scripture. They were the true Church following the Apostles that gives us our link with the past through the Reformation that will be explored next. The office of the elder and the one level of government for the true church can be found in the writings of Wylie and Schaff and will be further examined in the next chapter.

Chapter Five

The Reformation period

Chapter five will examine the confessions of the Reformation period to examine what they say on Church Government. Although the significance of this period is mainly found in the controversy over the doctrine of Justification by Faith and even though it occupied most of the formal part of the confessions, the order of government in the church was also of significant concern, and it is described in detail in each confession. Even the emphasis in this chapter will be on the form of church government put forth by those who resisted the rule of the church in the hands of a hierarchy. This was a move to reinstate the church government into the hands of the common lay person whose duty it was to take charge of their faith. It was an attempt to return to the form of government established by the apostles and which was in effect in the synagogue up to and including at the time of Christ. It must also be recognized that the work of the reformers was well established by the pre-reformers of the Middle ages. It was a move to reinstate the office of presbyter – bishop as represented in the New Testament. This was not a new form of church polity, as some would assert. It was always in existence, but had been made obsolete by the church hierarchy of the Middle Ages. The reformers who promoted this form of government were some of the most brilliant scholars of the time. They had been given the best education and were supported by many of the leading political figures of that age. The confessions will be examined as they were written from the translation

available. As each confession is evaluated an attempt will be made to understand the difficulties they faced to practice the faith.

The Second Helvetic Confession

This confession was drafted under the leadership of Heinrich Bullinger who rewrote the work of Zwingli of Zurich. The first draft was prepared in 1561 and the second draft was presented in 1566. It is the second draft that will be examined. The only chapters of interests are seventeen and eighteen which are entitled “Of the Catholic and Holy Church of God and of the One Only Head of the Church” and “Of the Ministers of the Church, Their Institution and Offices” respectively.

Chapter seventeen outlines the structure of the Church body in Christ. The declared purpose of the church is to present the doctrines that lead to salvation. The church militant had its origin in the patriarchs and then it was fully revealed in Christ, God’s Son. Christ set the church in order through His Apostles. The framers of this confession define the character of the church as “the house of the Living God,” II Corinthians 6:16, “builded of living and spiritual stones,” I Peter 2:5, “founded on a rock,” Matthew 18:16, “that cannot be moved,” Hebrews 12:28, “upon a foundation, besides which none can be laid,” I Corinthians 3:11. This description of the Church of Christ teaches us the importance of maintaining the singular emphasis of one head. It is important to recognize only one body. “And he is the head of his body the church, who is the beginning, the first born of the dead, that in all things he might have the pre-eminence.” Colossians 1:18.

It is the duty of Reformed pastors to be constantly examining the body of the church for schisms and heresies. The proof of the true church is found in following the voice of Christ. Proof of the true body is found where there is submission to Christ only and the observance of only two sacraments. This confession recognizes that there will be those who are the true followers of Christ and mixed with them those that want only the temporal benefits. The main emphasis presented in this confession is the importance of dependence upon Holy Scripture only. As to the true body of the church it must be

composed of those who have a genuine affection for one another as unto Christ. Philippians 3:15 – 16.

Chapter eighteen gives direction to the purpose of having ministers within the ecclesiastical structure. Ministers were established as God's means of delivering his message to his people. He could have delivered the message by divine intervention but he chose rather to use his created being, man, a position supported by the Word of God. Romans 10:14,17 present the view of the servant declaring the message. In I Corinthians 3:9 the Word of God declares the importance of proclaiming a divine Redeemer, Jesus Christ. At this the creators of this confession cite the work of Abraham, Moses and the Prophets who declared the coming of the Messiah. Prophets, apostles, evangelists, pastors, teachers and governors continued this work.

According to this confession those who held office under the new covenant were called apostles, prophets, evangelists, bishops, elders, pastors, and teachers. After the first three named offices had served their purpose they were discontinued. The work of the church then fell to the remaining persons. The bishops were charged with the duty of being overseers and distributors of food and other necessities. The Elders were called the ancients who provided wholesome counsel. The Pastors were appointed the task of keeping the flock of God. Teachers were given the task of instructing members.

Installation to office must not be as was formerly practiced by the hierarchy of the Middle Ages. Election of ministers must follow the call. The call must be both an inner call from God and also an open call from the people. This was to be confirmed by much prayer and fasting and when confident that the person considered was to be acknowledged then a service of designation would follow in the which the elders already installed would perform the ceremony of laying on of hands in the ordination of a minister. There must not be any material enticements used to gain this office for anyone as had been practiced. Only those who met the standard established by the scriptures in I Timothy 3:1 - 7 and Titus 1:5 – 9 were to be admitted. This was emphasized to show the importance of being both spiritually and doctrinally qualified for office. This also supported the Reformation position of the Royal Priesthood of all believers.

Ministers are to be the servants of Christ. This confession expresses the thought of ministers as being “under rowers” and must keep an eye to the pilot who is Jesus Christ. They are to be stewards and dispensers of the mysteries of God (1 Corinthians 4:1). Clergy are to be like heads of households providing sustenance as is needed (Luke 12:42). They are the servants the master put in charge of his vineyard when he went on his journey. (Matthew 25:14).

The authority of the minister comes from Christ. Yet Christ only holds power over his church. He blesses the ministry of those who recognize him as the only Head of the Church. The called and accepted will be privileged to represent Him. This is given in the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19 – 20). Isaiah prophesied of this one who would rule the Church Universal (Isaiah 9:6). John in Revelation speaks of his position in Chapter 1:17 – 18. With all that has been stated the minister must function under the authority of Christ. He has the authority to receive into the membership of the body of Christ or to exclude from the body of Christ. The reference to the keys in Matthew 16:19 refer to the authority vested in the apostles. This confession recognized that doctrine and discipline were placed in the hands of His servants, ministers.

Christ established the position of the servant. If one desires to be great let him be the servant of all. The confession calls for all to serve one another with humility and with equality. This document quotes Acts 11:3 – 18 as the basis for the equality of all the Lord’s servants. “The same doubtless were the rest of the Apostles that Peter was, having an equal fellowship with him both in honor and power: but the beginning hereof proceedeth from unity, to signify unto us that is but one Church.” This statement was taken from the work of Cyprian and inserted in this confession. So the office of the minister is twofold. It is the preaching of the Word and the dispensing of the two ordinances. This was a position given to the minister to edify and build up believers and not to destroy any of the faithful. In this the ministers were to govern the church along with the bishops and elders.

The one issue that seems different from the emphasis found in the Waldensian church is the function of the bishops and elders. They do not seem to hold the same office

as is noted by the bishops cared for the need of the members and the elders were the ancients who governed.¹

Ecclesiastical Discipline 1559

The Ecclesiastical Discipline of 1559 was the French Huguenot contribution to the reform movement. It was required of all their pastors to subscribe to this discipline. It was a church ruled by pastor and ruling elders. It was also the duty of these pastors and elders to constitute all church courts. All pastors were required to subscribe to this confession to be allowed to preach.

The authority of the sacraments was placed in the care of the minister, yet the minister could not dispense communion unless the elders were present to assist. Neither could a minister take office without first being recognized by the consistory or the synod in agreement with the congregation. If a minister desired to move to another charge the church presently served must be in agreement with his move and the one receiving his must agree on the move. This required proper letters between the congregations and the consistory. It is also to be recognized that the minister is in charge of his congregation along with his elders and deacons. No minister is entitled to preach in another's charge unless by his consent. If a congregation was to suffer persecution and be without a pastor or to be scattered it is the duty of another minister to gather the elders and regroup the congregation. If no elders are to be found then the congregation is to be supported. In the case of a pastor who felt he must vacate for specified reasons he had the right to dissent with reasons. When it came to the settlement of a charge first the congregation must be considered and then the consistory must be allowed to examine the incumbent person. Ministers were to be ordained for life and where the minister is absent from his charge it is the duty of the consistory to protect the good of the congregation.

The elders of the congregation were not considered as life appointments. They are to hold office as the congregation may decide. Yet an elder or a deacon may only vacate office on the approval of the congregation. It must be recognized that all officers are under the same rule as for discipline.

This confession establishes three offices, pastor, elder, and deacon. These offices were equal in authority. When the church was constituted for business one of their number was elected as moderator. In the synod the church was to be represented by one or two elders and deacons. Each had equal voting authority.

This document is very specific on matters of government. It states clearly the officers that rule in the church. This confession orders only the minister to present the sacraments to the people, yet only when the people have been assembled by the order of the elders. The minister is commissioned for life while elders and deacons may have a definite term. The minister has the responsibility to teach in the congregation, yet it is the duty of the elders to oversee the work carried out by him. In the event of schisms in a congregation the synod was to be called to deal with the issues. Local problems rested with the minister and elders.²

Ecclesiastical Ordinances 1561

This confession includes the work of the 1541 document. It was the desire of both Calvin and the congregation of Geneva to have a church ordered after the teachings of scripture to regulate all matters of worship and discipline. The following statements reveal the type of government that was established.

Every congregation must be viewed as the body of Christ on earth. It must be governed by four offices those being pastor, elders, deacons, and doctors. The purpose for this regulation was to establish order in the church. The pastor was also called elder, overseer, and minister. The same order was for investing a minister in a congregation was affirmed in this as in the Helvetic confession. Elders are to have the same authority and power as the ministers in all courts.

It was likewise the duty of the elders to work in the area of visitation with the minister and to watch over his district as appointed. Elders were responsible for the work of admonishing members and carrying out discipline when necessary. When new elders were to be installed to office the congregation must vote on the desired persons. It was the duty of the minister to state the conditions necessary to be an elder and then to

instruct such men before installation. If an elder were found to be in revolt regarding the standard of the confession he was to be rebuked before the congregation and if penitent was to be reinstated.

Upon examining this confession it is clear that the church must recognize the teaching of scripture. It must be accountable to Jesus Christ as its head, and it must recognize the church as being governed by four levels of leaders who hold office equally. The only office mentioned that is not specifically defined is that of the doctors who were to teach in the different levels in the organized church. My concern in examining this document is to show the importance of the elders who are to have equal position with ministers. This confession recognized the elders as equal yet they are to be assistants to the minister of the word and sacrament in all matters. Only the minister can order the dispensing of the sacrament, communion and baptism. No one can take office by himself or use any unconventional means to gain office. Only those duly elected and accepted by a congregation can be installed either as an elder or a minister. It is the duty of these officers to protect the church from any heresy or schism that might appear in any of the workings of the congregations.³

The Outward Administration of the Church

Johannes Wallebius' (1586 – 1629) writings influenced this ordinance published in 1650. His writings also influenced the work of the Westminster Divines of the 1640's. This is the section on church government taken from the 1650 *The Abridgement of Christianity Divinity*. This document sets forth the principles to be followed for the election and installation of ministers. It speaks of the ordinary and the extraordinary function of the minister

The ordinary function of a minister is to conduct public and private worship. In that time this included both ecclesiastical and political life. The minister was set apart to represent the congregation. To be installed in this office a lawful call was necessary first. This must be followed by a willingness to undertake the work. He was to be allowed the

same privileges as all men to marry. I Timothy 3:2, 4 were to be his proof of privilege and responsibility in these matters.

The extraordinary function entered when the minister was expected to defend the church in civil matters. He was given the authority to interpret the scriptures. He may possess extraordinary gifts as well. His duty was to teach the congregation, administer the sacraments, and labor as an overseer of the work of the church. The position of a minister fulfilled both that of pastor and bishop. If his work involved the oversight of several congregations and he was referred to as a bishop this did not make his office greater than any other in ministerial function. When it came to carrying out the regular functions daily he was an equal with the elders. The work of visitation, order in church, caring for the sick, and discipline was to be shared by the minister and elders.

A number of steps took place in the proper calling of a minister. He was to be examined by the presbytery. This assembly was to be convened by ministers and presbyters. It was not a duty to be performed by a single individual, as a bishop, as was practiced up to this time. The individual must undergo a trial, election, and be confirmed to office. The first step was his trial. He was examined first for his public and private character. If he was found acceptable he must be carefully examined on his knowledge of the faith and ability to proclaim the word of God. This was to be followed by much fervent prayer. When his life and doctrine gave him the right to be elected for office, he was recognized for ordination or induction. This procedure was accompanied with an open process of voting. This was intended to confirm God's call inwardly and outwardly.

Through this procedure he was given authority to teach as Christ's representative. If questioned as to authority he was to reply as Christ did to the Religious Leaders with the question Jesus asked concerning John's baptism (Matthew 21:24). It was also the people's duty to test the credentials of a minister according to scripture. This order was vested in the presbyters whose duty it was to keep order in the church in both doctrine and life. This practice must not be based on custom or church canons but on Holy Scripture.

It was the duty of the minister and elders to administer the binding and loosing of members. This order was invested in the local church through minister and elders and if to be administered further by ministers and elders in the presbytery or appropriate organized counsel. The binding must follow the steps found in Matthew 18:15-17. If these steps failed the individual or party was to be removed from communion according to I Corinthians 5:5. As to loosing the one being disciplined could only be reinstated after a genuine confession of his sin was evidenced. An individual must not practice this binding and loosing. It was to be the collective duty of minister and presbyters. To follow this procedure is to protect the public good of the church. This same process prevents one individual taking authority to himself.

This document puts forth the reformed position of the equality of elders, which includes both teaching elders and ruling elders in the local assembly. It also promotes the only form of government set forth in scripture. This form of government gives all elders equal position in the congregation and in all the courts of the church.⁴

The Church Order of Dort 1619

The Synod of Dort was convened in Holland in 1618 – 1619. This synod formalized the Calvinist doctrine of theology now recognized as T-U-L-I-P. From this synod came the 86 articles recognized as authority for the orderly function of the church after this meeting. Three items were formalized, ecclesiastical assemblies, sacraments, and church discipline. The following will deal with the ecclesiastical assemblies as to the officers within the structure to be recognized.

It is the duty of the church to maintain order for the proper conduct of carrying out the preaching of the word, dispensing sacraments and discipline as necessary. This was to be done through the four offices designated. They are to be minister (pastor), professor of religion, elders and deacons. The minister's office was to be occupied by the call. There were four steps to be followed to be installed to office. There must be an election carried out by prayer and fasting to determine the right of the person to hold office. This was followed by an examination, which included first his life and then his

doctrine. This was to be followed by a waiting period of fourteen days. If no objection was voiced the one elected could be installed. The procedure for installation was by the laying on of hands in the presence of the congregation and by the court of the church.

In order for an individual minister to move from one charge to another there were to be communications between the charges. No minister was allowed to move without the consent of the consistory. In order to serve as a chaplain one had to confirm his obedience to the church orders as all designated ministers. Every call to ministry even for an extension work must be confirmed either by an existing congregation with elders or by an appointed presbytery of elders to oversee the work.

All ministers are bound to office for life unless otherwise allowed. Ministers are only allowed to perform duties as such as are laid down by the consistory or synod. It is the duty of ministers to dispense the sacraments with the authority of the elders and their support. Yet it must be noted that minister and elders are equal in these matters of government. The consistory that is comprised of minister and elders is to provide for the education of those in their charge.

The office of elders was an appointment for two years. One half was required to retire every year. Only if no suitable replacement could be found was an elder allowed to rule longer. Yet every congregation was to have a consistory composed of minister and elders. The number of elders must be sufficient to handle the needs of the families within their bounds.

When a new congregation was established it was to be under the consistory of the nearest congregation or one designated. By this means elders would be provided until a formal order of elders could be elected.

The classical meetings of the church were to consist of a membership of equal number of ministers and elders. The one to preside over the meeting was to be an equal to act as moderator for that session. No meetings of the church at any level of government was to convene unless it had an equal number of minister and elders appointed, this did not mean that if they failed to appear it could not function.

This discipline was binding on all ministers and elders and deacons of all the congregations within its jurisdiction. No church could be formed or function without consent to this confession.

Upon examining this discipline I find that it is very much like the previous one, other than the clause which governs elders in the local congregation. It is difficult to determine if elders tenure in office was permanent and only certain ones function in any given year. It would appear from the form followed that ordination was by the laying on of hands and this would be for life. I conclude the examination of this discipline by recognizing the equality of elders whether teaching (minister) or ruling.⁵

The Book of Discipline 1560

This discipline is primarily interested in the officers in the church and their election. There is one feature in this confession not mentioned in others. It is the appointment of superintendents to govern over districts. There were to have been ten positions created, yet only five were ever filled and they were not maintained.

The election of a pastor was the duty of the congregation. During this period in the Scottish church, the congregation was allowed forty days to find a suitable minister. If this failed the superintendent was to present a name to the congregation. Even in this situation the installation would only take place after proper election, examination, and admission to office. This procedure was to be carried out by men who possessed sound judgement. He was first to present a record of his education and then be examined concerning his private and public life. This was followed by an examination as to his ability to interpret the scriptures, which was carried out in the presence of the congregation. After the Kirk (elders) and the congregation heard the incumbent they were to vote. They had the final word on who should be the minister of the church.

There were certain steps that must be followed. He must first gain the acceptance of the Kirk and the congregation. Then he stood to be examined by the learned ministers. After this a service of induction followed. In this service the sermon was to admonish the minister being installed. Then another was to charge the congregation as to their part in

this installation. The laying on of hands was not carried out as it was considered to have ceased with the apostles. The one installed must be industrious in all his ways, and he must not be found wasting his time. He was charged along with the Kirk to keep order in the church.

The election of elders was to be an annual event. It was ordered in this way to prevent any from using or abusing the office for personal reasons. This was to be done on a special day each year. The persons elected, as possible candidates must meet the standards laid down in scripture. He must have a clean life, be honest, faithful, honorable in both the church and the community. The names were to be presented to the whole congregation for voting.

The duties of the elders were to assist the minister in all public functions. They were to support the work of correction and discipline. They were to constantly oversee the minister's life and study habits. If they found reason to correct the minister it must be done before the Kirk. If this failed he was to be disciplined by the Superintendent. If a serious crime was committed then he was deposed for life. It was the duty of the elders and deacons to report regularly to the superintendents.⁶

The Book of Discipline 1578 (The Second Book of Discipline)

Andrew Melville recorded this document some 20 years after Knox had written his works. This discipline as with 1560 was all based on scripture. It was stated at the outset that all customs and traditions must be eliminated. This discipline gives much detail on the offices of the church to be recognized.

This discipline recognized the importance of civic orders so felt that the church must be as well ordered. In order for the church to carry forth its doctrine, discipline, and distribution it must have three officers for these to be administered. The offices of minister, elders and deacons were established, and all were to be accorded the same respect as that of the minister. They were to recognize only one head in the church and he was Jesus Christ. He was accepted as the originator of these offices. In order for any

person to carry out his work he must have the blessing of the Holy Spirit. These offices were looked upon as being equal and having equal authority in all functions.

For any person to enter any of the offices of the church he must have an inner call and then to be followed by a vote of confidence in the congregation. He was then to undergo an examination and ordination. It was necessary that he subscribe to the confession laid down by this body, and he must also recognize scripture's authority. He was to be satisfied with the remuneration offered. He must have the approval of the people and the confident vote of the eldership. This ordination could only be carried out after much fasting and prayer. Every minister is to have a place and flock to oversee. He must live among his people. His purpose was to glorify God and edify the church.

He fulfilled all of the offices; pastor, bishop, and minister: pastor stressed the feeding of his flock, bishop represented oversight of the work, and minister represented the work carried out. His work was to govern the body of the church. If he should desert his flock he was to be excommunicated. His duty was to preach the word and dispense the sacraments, and was to be regular in prayer for his people. With the elders he was to practice the necessary discipline in the congregation. All proclamations were the responsibility of the minister.

The elders of the congregation were to be senior men who were accounted worthy of recognition and worthy of caring for the spiritual life of the congregation. The Apostles, presidents and governors first named the elders. They were elected as permanent members to this office yet they held office for specific periods only. They were not required to teach. Their duty was to guard the flock both in public and private life. They were to assist the pastor in examining new members. In general they were to rule with minister and other officers of the church.

The work of the elder was important for the stability of the congregation. They were also considered important for establishing of other works outside their own field. In general this discipline has much the same content as the previous one.⁷

The Book of Discipline 1587

Walter Travers and Theodore Beza recorded this document. It was the first English document on church government. It sets forth much of the same information of the other disciplines examined. It outlines the same orders for the installation of a minister. He must have a personal call for office, which was to be confirmed by a call from the people. After being found to possess the gifts necessary for this office of minister he was to be examined as to his life and doctrine. He must not be a novice and must have adequate training. He was to be one of four officers in a congregation; these were pastor, teachers, elders and deacons. It was the duty of every congregation to have a presbytery of elders, which was to include the pastor and the ruling elders of the congregation. The elder's duty was to keep order and maintain the work for the edification of all, and the pastor or pastors, if more than one, was to be in charge of the elders. If more than one, they decided who was responsible to be the moderator.

In the courts of the church a minister must be the moderator. This position was granted to him as an equal among other elders. An elder in the courts equally represented each minister from the consistory to synod.

The elders of the congregation were required to know their district and all the members under their care. It was their duty to be regular in visitation among their people. This confession echoes much of the others.⁸

The Westminster Assembly Directory for Church Government

This discipline was completed on July 4, 1645. In the preface it was stated that its primary purpose was to promote the church founded on the Lord Jesus Christ. It was the responsibility of the church to carry out the great commission. Christ founded the church for His redeemed people. There were sufficient offices given to govern the new organization by Christ himself.

The first officer was to be considered the minister. His duty was to teach, exhort, correct and dispense the sacraments. He was to be available and serving in all seasons. Where there was more than one minister the work was to be shared and each work was to

be designated. The second officer was called the church governor. This office is called an elder in the reformed churches. They were to comply with the same standards laid down for ministers. They were to join with the minister in overseeing the work of a congregation. The duty of discipline was given over to this assembly of elders along with the minister.

As to the structure of the church, it was to have a court of elders in each congregation and a presbytery wherever there was a sufficient number of congregations in a territory. The synods were established over a larger territory or province. The highest court was the General Assembly, which presided over a given country. The power of the church was invested in the courts. They were created to hear and judge all matters pertaining to life in the church not cared for in the Kirk Session. These courts were to elect a moderator who was to sit for a given session. These meetings were to be convened by prayer and preaching. All business must be made law only by a majority vote.

All officers are to meet regularly in worship and to maintain the assembly of worshippers. In every congregation there was to be one to lead in worship and bring the Word to the people. Along with him there was to be a court of elders to rule over the affairs of the congregation. The number of elders was to be determined by the size of the congregation and there must be at least three. The moderator of this court is to be the minister.

In the classical assemblies the minister was a member and he was to be accompanied by a representative elder from each congregation. This established equal representation. In this assembly their task was to oversee the work of all congregations for their good. They were to be the guardians of the faith. If there were any complaints raised, these must be handled by this body. They had the responsibility to examine, ordain and admit ministers into the congregations.

The synods were formed to examine controversies that might arise in classical assemblies, or other matters referred to them. They were to have equal representation of members. Two ministers and two elders were to be appointed by each classical assembly.

Considering the work outlined in this confession it is very clear that it was a church governed by elders. It was a church of courts in which the people had full control by there representatives.⁹

Summary

An examination of the disciplines reveals there are certain similarities amongst them. They all begin by affirming the one Bishop ruler, Jesus Christ. They further present the church as being ruled by one head and all courts in the government of the church under Christ. They are all in agreement that God has in times past spoken to his people through his servants. In the Old Testament era this was granted through the Patriarchs, Prophets, and Priests. Once the Son of God came God chose then to speak through his Apostles, Prophets, Evangelists, Pastors and governments. The ordinary offices are the last two mentioned. The position of the Elder was recognized as the one who was commissioned to fulfill this role in society. The disciplines acknowledge either three offices or four offices. The offices are pastor, doctor, elder and deacon. The second office is not named in all of the disciplines. Each discipline affirms that all these offices are equal and have the same voting power in the courts of the church.

The Confessions called for open and public control by the membership and that no hierarchy must be allowed to develop in any form. No individual must be allowed to gain control and no individual will be allowed to hold a monopoly in the church. The minister's office was established for the preaching of the word and the keeping of the sacraments. The elders were elected officials who were responsible for the oversight of the body along with powers of discipline. The terms of office for an elder varied in the different Confessions. Some held life positions while others thought ordained for life was not the proper way and were given their position for a stated period of time. One stipulation stated that no one was allowed to gain office by influence. Likewise no minister would be allowed induction to a charge without the consent of the people. In all the disciplines the principle of rule was that all the programs of the church must be affirmed and approved by the people.

Conclusion

In conclusion it is difficult to totally relate all that is written. This problem can be traced to the reality that the framers of these disciplines in this era were breaking ground that had been hardened by corruption for over eleven centuries. The Reformers and Puritans were returning to the New Testament pattern of church government and these documents show this. They saw the health of the church was maintained and strengthened by proper government. The Reform was not only on the theology of salvation but included polity. It is easy for this generation who have had over four centuries of privilege in the church of Christ to be critical of those who managed well under the persecution endured. The next chapter will examine the position of the elder as viewed by the Theologians of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Chapter Six

The Theologians

When the documents of the reformation period (chapter 5) were examined it was difficult to determine the number of offices to be found in the church. There are also differing points of view as to the relationship of these offices to one another. It is also difficult to determine who is referred to in the passages of scripture cited as references creating the office of the elder. Did Paul have one office of elder in mind when he wrote to Timothy and Titus? Does the reference to Bishop in I Timothy regarding requirement for office set this person apart as different from other references? Are the election of elders reported in Acts (Chapters 11, 14 and 20) the same officers referred to in I Timothy and Titus? Are the offices referred to in Romans 12:8 and I Corinthians 12:28 called governments another class of elders? Can we use I Timothy 5:17 to designate the difference in authority given the office of elder in the church? These are the questions that create the most difficulty in determining the function of elders in the church.

Since the middle of eighteenth century a number of attempts have been made by the church to resolve this issue. Stated in an article in *The Banner of Truth*, there are three views argued on this subject.¹ The works of some scholars of the past will be examined with the view to understanding the differences presented.

Nature and Duty of the office of Elder, by Samuel Miller

Samuel Miller served as professor of ecclesiastical history and church government at Princeton seminary. His writings on the subject of the elder are considered to be of classical importance. He begins by declaring the elder an ecclesiastical ruler. In summary the elder is commended to rule with diligence.

At the very beginning he presents the elder as fulfilling the rule of pastor and teacher and also as a governor- elder that rules and labors in word or doctrine. The elder as a ruling officer is compared to the civil magistrate, yet his duties are confined to the spiritual life of the church body. He has no authority to execute matters beyond discipline in the church. He does not exercise authority in civil courts. Christ has instituted his authority in the church. As ruling elder his position is as important as the teaching elder. He rules for life even though elected by them. He, like the minister, takes his direction from the corporate voice of the church directed by the scriptures. In all the courts as in the congregation he has an equal vote with the elders and ministers.

Samuel Miller writes that some at this point distinguish ruling and teaching elders by declaring that Christ established the teaching position. The ruling elder on the other hand gained acceptance by human prudence. Miller declared this position false. Any office worthy of recognition must be the instructed desire of the Lord for his church. The office of ruling elder is not an ecclesiastical convenience. Along with the teaching elders, the ruling elder is to hold same position of respect.

The ruling elders are to be the judicial court of the church. In the public position they act as a body on behalf of the congregation, and they are overseers of the spiritual life of the congregation. On some issues the minister may make decisions requiring action to be taken. The minister determines who may preach in his absence. If it is a questionable matter it requires the action of the session of elders.

In the local church court the elders have equal votes. This body with the minister has authority to manage all affairs in the local congregation. When a difference of position is reached between a minister and his elders and when a majority of the elders oppose the minister it is their duty to resolve the issue. Should this fail the matter must be

settled in the presbytery. These elders are the pastor's council in all matters pertaining to the discharge of his duties.

The duty of the elder is not confined to the congregation. He has an equal vote in all courts of the church. The courts are to be governed by equal representation from both the ministers, teaching elders, and ruling elders. All the courts could easily have more elders than ministers yet in the general assembly even this number of representatives is guaranteed. This reveals the importance of the elder's office. His position is of great importance since through it the spiritual well being of the church is guaranteed. It is his duty to be vigilant in edifying, enlightening and admonishing church members. These officers of the church are committed to the oversight of the most important aspect of the church life. So he concludes that these offices are one in purpose.

These men, teaching and ruling elder, together united in their work, have the blessing of Christ on their ministry. Working together overseeing and visiting the flock of God they bring an inestimable blessing on the whole body. Through their united efforts the church matures spiritually and increases numerically. The ruling elders ought to be respected for the benefits by which the church is enhanced. They must likewise carry at heart the good of the congregation. Good elders are the companions of a respectable minister and provide the necessary support needed to carry out his work.²

Having examined the writing of Samuel Miller on the subject of the ruling elder, it is very apparent that he defends the single elder's position. In this regard the office of teaching elder and ruling elder are both upheld as being one office. The only difference being in the duties to be performed.

The Church and its Polity, Charles Hodge

Charles Hodge was a long time professor of Princeton Seminary having commenced his teaching career in 1822 and continued until his death in 1878. During these years he contributed to the debate concerning the number of offices to be recognized in the church proper. The following presentation will present his view of the eldership as he saw it.

With the above stated he argued for “the purity of the clergy, the right of the people, and the unity of the church.” whatever is essential must be determined as to its benefit to the salvation of people. To limit the development of the church government is to limit people having a rightful place in church affairs. So he proceeds to declare that no office is of divine authority. He cites scripture stating the view that some are apostles, prophets, evangelist, pastors and teachers. He further makes reference to some having gift of government. This led to the view that the offices existing are always in question. It is not possible to determine the temporary from the permanent.

From this Hodge argued for two offices, teachers and rulers. He accepted the offices of teaching and ruling by divine warrant for the Presbytery. Even though all members have equal parity they are to have elected representatives as governors. It was impossible for all to administer discipline. So representatives are essential and elders are the respected officers to be accepted. He states the two positions in the eldership, one position being a layman and the other a clergyman. As a layman he holds a different office and a different vocation. If he was a clergyman then all hold the same office. The only difference was in the function. Both offices are truly from God. They are both to function with purity.

Both positions allow the same rights of office. The difference arises when we must determine whether a ruling elder was a clergyman? Hodge decreed that the new position put forth by Thornwell made the qualifications laid down in scripture applicable to both, then all are clergy. This he refuted, stating that it destroys the basis of the reformation confessions. These documents declare each office was to have different training and function. The second argument that declared elders laymen gave them the authority to represent the congregation. The single office position takes away the congregations’ representative. To this Hodge decreed the church becomes a clerical despotism. The new order could eventually be as destructive as any clerical dominated authority. He differed only on the divine warrant for election to office from Miller.

Hodge concluded that it really did not matter whether there was one office with elders designated to different functions or two offices of elders each representing a

different level of authority. The bottom line was, whether the task for which the office was created, carried out its divine mandate. That is to declare the Gospel of justification by faith in Christ alone. Hodge's view of two offices of elders is based on scripture and the minister (elder) is a fulfillment of the scriptures with reference to Titus 1:5, Philippians 1:1 and Acts 20:17. To this he argues that ruling elders received their mandate from Romans 12:7 and I Corinthians 12:28 where it calls them governors (governments). These officers are chosen from the congregations. So there are two offices, one to rule and the other to preach the word of God. So the office is determined by the duties performed. The authority invested in each office is provided by the nature of the office. One office from the Lord to declare his counsel, the other also of the Lord to ensure the work performed.

Hodge then clearly speaks of the qualifications for a minister as laid down in scripture. They are minutely described. This definitely makes them of a different office. Even their purpose for designation is different. He puts forth a very definite position on the three-office perspective, teaching elders, ruling elders and deacons. He states very definitely that the scriptures support his position and that the scriptures are definite on the offices described.³

The Theory of the Ruling Elder, Peter Colin Campbell

Peter Colin Campbell was Principal of the University of Aberdeen. During his tenure he wrote, *The Theory of the Ruling Elder*. At the very beginning he declares the office of the ruling elder was not to be proven on the same scriptural grounds as the teaching elder (minister). He cites the arguments for the offices of ruling based on the same scriptures as these used to prove the office of teaching elder a "specious theory".

I Timothy 5:17 is stated as the standard text for this argument. He felt very distressed to find the learned Calvin basing his argument on such a limited proof for office. He then points out a discrepancy in Calvin's works (Institutes IV.1118) where he used the term presbyter and bishops and restricted their use to members who preached the word. From this Campbell proceeds to show how Calvin wanted the Church to

recognize another class of elders as governments (governors) based on Romans 12:5 and I Corinthians 12:28. Here the terms used to describe ministers (Presbyters, Bishops) are not mentioned. These governors Calvin states are the elected congregational representatives. There were definitely venerable men elected to office.

P.C. Campbell proceeds to state that the reformers in the confessions nowhere equate the minister and elder as officers from the same scriptures. Campbell calls Calvin's theory unfortunate. The only scriptures to warrant the office of rulers are Romans 12:8 and I Corinthians 12:28. These passages speak of teachers but conclude by referring to another office called governments. He furthers his argument based on Acts 15:23 where brethren joined the apostles and elders of Jerusalem. He also includes the incident where brethren are present to receive the first Gentiles into the church (Acts 10:23, 11:12). In this scripture, brethren share publicly in the ecclesiastical affairs along with Peter. He proceeds to separate the scriptures used to prove the office of ruling elder from teaching elder and declares two distinct offices. I Timothy 5:17 was an untenable proof for these reasons. His first premise states that no evidence was found to see a division of qualifications and duties in this scripture. There was no hint of a division of persons in this text. He further states that Calvin did not make all presbyters, elders. He limits its use to that of ministers of the gospel. Campbell claims, to make all elders presbyters, was to return to the bishop's authority, so an ecclesiastical hierarchy returns. The equality of bishop and presbyter must be maintained. Yet this office must not be assumed to include ruling elders. Then the congregation would not be justly represented. Also all these elders would have same rights as ministers. This was recognized by the order of the Westminster Confession that refused to accept Calvin's views. If all hold the same ordination then another problem is created. Why are they not allowed to carry out the same functions? To argue that some presbyters in the early church did not teach, and were constituted elders is attempting to create an authority with a weak argument. All presbyters are to be teachers. Teaching is a distinct office and does not lend itself to being divided into two offices, one public and another private. So Campbell concludes by refuting the one office and two functions in favor of the two-office view. This finds his

proof from scripture is found in different texts. Though he recognizes the continuity with the Old Testament he did not feel the need for proof beyond those in Romans and Corinthians to create lay elders as distinct from Ministers and elders.⁴

A brief for Church Governors, Edmund P. Clowney

Edmund P. Clowney, Professor and President of Westminster Theological Seminary, began his article by stating the issue of the number of offices as a source of “confusion”. Some saw the minister, elder and deacon as three offices. Some saw the minister and elders as one with deacons creating a second offices. Some saw the minister as one office and join the elder and deacon as another. He points out how the scripture speak of seven offices and divides them into two classes. One class was extra ordinary. The other being the ordinary offices in which he places pastor and teachers as church governors.

The real issue is whether all have the same gifts for service. Are all governors, teachers? The scripture was not intended to be a “little black book” for church government. There are no definite passages written, outlining the function of an elder, therefore the New Testament must not be looked upon as a law book defining an elder. Each record addresses a particular situation that needed support. There must be some flexibility allowed in determining the meaning of a text on the subject in question.

The real issue must focus on Christ. There must not be a legalist approach to any doctrine, so there must never be established a legalist form of church government. Precedence was established for the formation of the office of elder ruler in the Old Testament era. The scriptures used in the first chapter are the basis for Clowney’s premise for the present ruling elders. He cites the elders that assisted Moses and those who functioned in the Land of Canaan under the judges. These elders were the people’s representatives, based on the same information presented in chapter two on the elders in the age of the Apostles.

He furthered his argument by referring to presbyters in Act 11:30. His reference to elders in this passage makes them the representatives that deliver the gifts to Jerusalem

from Antioch. He argued that Acts 6 does not represent deacons but the first indication of distinction among elders. If in Acts 6 the men chosen are elders then the terms are only a means of providing an appropriate title.

He further argues that Christ is the fulfillment of the divine theocracy that is referred to in the Old Testament under which the elders ruled. Since Christ is now the High Priest of all believers, the shift of authority for leadership must be focused on the community. Christ is our prophet, priest and king, and through him the apostles were given to share with the elders in the Jerusalem church. These elders were the brethren in the Jerusalem church. Now that Christ has come a new order is necessary for elders. The structure of Israel's elders is not isolated. Elders are to proclaim the message of Christ and be governors to protect the purity of the church under the new covenant.

Clowney presents the gifts given to the church as the other witness of the period as outlined in scripture. In his distinction he stressed the continuing need for elders to keep order and exercise discipline, as in the Old Testament order. He further states that the gift of teaching for some does not detract from their functions. He stressed the importance of "ample room for a rich diversity of administration" and "administrative gifts".

He asks whether the scriptures support the ruling elder's office. His reply is found in the exegesis of I Corinthians 12:28 and Romans 12:8. He argues that God gave gifts to men through which they would serve. The office of ruler was one as well as the office of teacher. Each was given sufficient grace to be faithful in their particular calling. As the gifts are exercised so the function is recognized and the office established.

If function defined office then we have a number of offices. When all the scriptures cited concerning gifts are examined none give an exhaustive list of functions or offices. There is one exception to the above and this gives reason for teachers and rulers. In I Corinthians 12:28 the definite listing of teachers and governments is sufficient reason to accept two offices. All offices require the same spiritual ability to perceive the truth. Yet not all will function in same order. I Timothy 5:17 is just in distinguishing the rulers from the teachers. The technical problem in these passage issues from the use of the word

translated, apt to teach. Does it refer to office or age? This totally changes the emphasis. Does the text deal with offices of elders or simply two age groups of elders regardless of their gifts?

The Gospels and The Acts of the Apostles support the distinct offices of teachers and rulers. In these passages ruling and teaching presbyters are recognized. To take a position that one elder teacher was a poor representative and another a success is to present God as being more favorable to one than another is.

When he refers to the disputes in Corinth, Clowney stresses that Paul rebuked the church for not respecting the rulers given them to settle these matters internally. So it appears that teaching elders and ruling elders are indicated in this situation. The position of the wise men who ruled in the Jewish synagogue were elders and it seems clear that Paul is calling upon this group to take action in Corinth. Having examined Clowney's document on church governors, it seems clear that he connects the office of teachers and governors into one office. This establishes the deacon as a separate office. Even with this, there is no rule that says one cannot function in the others sphere on occasion. Yet in specific order each has a distinctive gift that enables him to function best in one given position.⁵

Theories of the Elderships, Robert L. Dabney

Robert L. Dabney, Professor at Union Theological Seminary, was the principle opponent of Charles Hodge's view on the eldership. To introduce the subject of the government of the church Dabney takes a similar position to Hodge. His presentation argues that there must be room in the orders of the church to allow the Holy Spirit to develop enough polity for the full proclamation of the gospel. The scripture gives us the general outlines and entrusts the development, within limits, to the body to develop the means appropriate to do the work commissioned. With this background on Dabney, his view of the eldership will be examined. .

He presents the order of the elders on the principle that it is found in scripture. With this principle the church must look to the Lord for constant instruction on how best it may fulfill its mission to give body to the work commission. They are the preaching

elder, the ruling elder and the deacon. There is need for the parts to be subject one to the other and also all subject to the greater whole, Jesus Christ.

He places the minister (teaching elder) first in his presentation. It is his duty to moderate all church government. It is his duty, as an educated leader, to preserve what warrant there is for the establishment of the church under divine direction. This must not be altered, neither must there be introduced orders unnecessary to the proclamation of redemption. Our warrant is found in Matthew 28:19-20, I Corinthians 12:28, Ephesians 4:11, John 17:13, and Acts 15:28 and II Corinthians 13:10. All these scriptures speak of elders' commission to seek to fulfill Christ's mission as directed by the Holy Spirit. He summarizes the above with these views. Christ is sovereign, the church is his kingdom, established under orders according to the New Testament.

There is no direct formula laid down in scripture for the development of church government. First elders were adopted from the old order, and then deacons were established to relieve the stress placed on the first elders (apostles). It is acceptable to expand a given principle as long as it faithfully discharges the command initially intended to redeem the world for Christ.

Dabney proceeds to present Miller's argument that the presbyter elder stated in scripture provides a dual function of office under one head. As the system views the offices as one with teaching, ruling on one hand and yet ruling on the other. This position is presented as making all elders – ministers. Dabney argues it is not a matter of having ruling elders, rather do the teaching elders and ruling elders gain authority from the same scriptural base.

His arguments are as follows. His first is based on the Old Testament or Hebrew perspective. In this structure a plurality of elders ruled. The eminent historian, Lightfoot, states that one of these elders was elected to be presiding spokesman or preacher to maintain order in the assemblies. So our ruling elders gained authority from this established order. This emphasizes why no detail of the order for ruling elders is given in Acts or elsewhere. The model adopted was there and recognized.

The second argument states that the word presbyters and bishops must be applied. Yet when they are examined on the basis of the Old Testament these elders are the elected of the people. The teaching elders were the prophets and priest, levites and doctors. The word episcopos is designated as an inspector, ruling function in the church and not a teacher. The same can be said of the word presbyters. These terms describe the function of a ruler as given in the synagogue order. He refers to the Princeton *Repertory* as using these terms to describe the preaching elder. They do not allow the ruling elder the right to ordination as the teaching elder either. So with Miller he states the need to recognize ruling elders as having the right to office as inspectors and governors to be ordained by the laying on of hands.

His third argument is based on the need for a plurality of elders. This plurality would elect one to be the preacher from there number. The size of the congregation would not warrant more than one expositor. The emphasis in I Timothy 3 and Titus 1 are presented with regard to the necessity of having good representatives to be a missionary enterprise to further the gospel kingdom among the heathen. The reference in Act 20 gives reason to advance the view that all elders were presbyters and also bishops as elsewhere stated. So he concludes this arguments by stating the three-office view as preaching and ruling elder based on the Greek terms above stated along with deacons. The later usage corrupted these terms by making presbuteros plural and episcopos singular. This he refutes as wrong.

To take the ruling elder out of the position stated above is to rob this office of its divine placement by God. The ruling elder must have scriptural warrant as presented above. In his conclusions he refutes the reformed view that puts ruling elders in a category alone. Due to the loss of respect for the order of elders over the centuries, from the church of the apostles to the sixteenth century, the reformation documents must not be depended on for accuracy, rather they must be viewed as an attempt to return to a purer form of government.

He further rejects the view of Hodge by stating that I Timothy 5:17 allows for both ruling and teaching elders in it interpretation. Elders are not an added function in the

presbyterial system. They are founding members of the church in the New Testament. They must be ordained by imposition of hands, as by divine appointment.

Dabney furthers his presentation by declaring the office to be important based on the source and the authority that established its creation. This office is one that represents the people through whom God chooses to speak. To take away the warrant as being the same as teaching elders is to remove them from official position in the courts of the church.

Having presented the above arguments, he concludes by declaring the proclamation of the gospel as being the central thrust of the laborer, whether ruling or teaching. So laboring as elders together there must be a common interest to advance the goals of the body of believers. He concludes that where the elders function faithfully there is no need for other church organizations to do what should be the work of inspectors and teachers within the church body. Both offices are necessary, the one to preach and the other to oversee the lives of those in the smaller groups, who are to discipline and develop the character of the true body of believers.⁶

Having completed an examination of the eminent theologians of the Nineteenth century it is necessary to examine the views of two from the twentieth century. They are Iain Murray and Robert S. Rayburn.

Ruling Elders, A Sketch of a Controversy, Iain Murray

Iain Murray, distinguished British Clergyman and cofounder of *Banner of Truth* Magazine, introduces his view on the eldership by stating that there are differences of opinion on the subject. The question, that must be addressed, is whether ruling and teaching elder derive their authority from the same source or from a different source. The Westminster divines were not able to resolve this issue successfully. Murray simply states that the church was established by Christ and gave to his church officers to carry out the warrant for its work. He presents the texts of Romans 12:8 and I Corinthians 12:28 as basis for the ruling elders as the Westminster divines argued. The texts from Acts, Timothy and Titus are not presented as references for ruling elders.

He notes that the Scottish representatives desired the ruling elders to hold some authority as teachers and ministers to establish equality. Murray argues from I Timothy 5:17 that two elders are referred to in this passage. He further argues that the church needs a one elder position with all men ordained by the same procedure. All elders are rulers in the congregation and courts of the church, and all teaching elders are simply elders with special abilities recognized by the whole church. William Cunningham was much displeased with Hodge's view of the difference of authority for the ruling elder. Murray quotes him as being distressed by Hodge's work on the subject. With all the views present in this chapter Murray reviews the two positions based on the scriptural warrant for their existence. The only valid argument for the eldership is to be found in the scriptures. Yet our concern should be the functions performed by the elders for the good of the body of believers.

Murray then presents Witherow's argument. His view would have all elders of equal function and performing the same work. He used the words found in the scriptures, *presbuteros* and *episcopos*, as his reason for this view. Witherow desired that all reference to elders must be on same grounds. This creates a solid base to protect the eldership for the goals of the church. A church governed by elders must be based on solid scriptural proof or abandon the case for leadership completely. The charisma for preaching was one addition to the function of all elders that only a few would have received.

Murray concludes his presentation by stating the importance of maintaining the offices for the institutional good of the church. This order must view the elder as a servant of the church both in the congregation and the courts of the church.⁷

Ministers, Elders and Deacons, Robert S Rayburn.

Robert S. Rayburn, Minister of The Presbyterian Church in America, began his discourse on the eldership by referring to the debates of the nineteenth century that caused a crisis in the church structures of the era. He quotes G. W. Knight III, of the

twentieth century, as presenting the two-office view. He agrees that the elder is founded on good scriptural reasoning and must be recognized based on these reasons.

He presents the weakness in the two-office concept. This is based on educational requirements. Both would need the same education. In order to resolve this dilemma there is need to examine the basis for the office.

He proceeds to cite the classic position of the elder from the Old Testament scriptures as grounds for the ruling elder who was to act as a representative of the people. He states this was in favor of the two-office position. As in Israel the elder was to rule and judge so the same authority was vested in the elder in the New Testament era. The Old Testament had an officer to carry out the function of the word and sacrament. These representatives of the people shared the work with the elders. It must be accepted that the terminology from the Old Testament era was carried into the New Testament times. In Israel the separate functions existed under different titles.

In our New Testament understanding of the term elder, it is necessary to recognize that this office has been carried from the Old Testament understanding of the office. The Priestly office is now Christ's alone. So the apostles and elders shared the duty of teaching and ruling in the new covenant church. He states that all the scriptures quoted are intended to support the whole and not segment the office. This would bring about a two office, dual eldership. The problem of "apt to teach" should not trouble our views any more than monogamy would cause concern. No person should be admitted to either function in the elders' office unless he qualifies by being fit to keep all requirements established for this office. This division of function must not be based on one scripture as I Timothy 5:17 but rather on the whole counsel of scripture. He simply states it appears that the apostolic church developed from the elder' office with a two function position in two offices as was given the church from the synagogue era.

Rayburn concludes his argument as follows. The three-office position as presented by the second book of discipline, requires the office to be dispensers of "Doctrine, Discipline and Distribution." He further reveals the weakness when ruling and teaching elders are represented as one office. This weakness is found in making the

teaching elder a “chief elder”. To avoid this, so imagined hierarchy, it is better to separate the functions into two offices. Another weakness lies in the diminishing of the call of those who will minister in word and sacrament. He concludes by quoting Samuel Rutherford. “The Lord knoweth that I prefer preaching of Christ, and still do, to anything, next to Christ himself.” It can be concluded that he supports the three-office position of the eldership.⁸

Conclusion

The works examined of nineteenth and twentieth century theologians on the subject of the eldership are divided on their views. Both sides capably argue their case for the different positions taken. The two-office view was by Miller and Clowney. The three-office view as presented by Hodge, Campbell and Dabney are equally clear, based on their assumption. The other two examined from the twentieth century are divided. Rayburn in his summary rejects the two-office view in favor of the three-office where Murray is evasive on his position.

The subject of the eldership has occupied the mind of leading theologians over the years. This gives us reason to believe that it is very important that the differences be understood. The position taken may not hinder the proclamation of the gospel yet to lack good order in the church may cause unnecessary unrest. The three-office position seems the most reasonable based on the evidence given. This supports the view of the minister as being gifted in a special way. This also makes the order of the ruling elder important to support the work given to the teaching elder. The other office being the deacon. The gift of preaching is a specific gift. The ruling elder has the gifts of government whereby he is able to give his time to overseeing good order and discipline in the body of believers.

Those who take the position of the two-office view, elder and deacon, must recognize that it creates a weakness in not drawing definite lines of distinction in gifts. This form of eldership can lead to more internal problems than the three-office view. The most important issue nevertheless in all this discussion of views is that the office of the eldership is the only form of government that truly represents the work of Christ's

kingdom on earth. Christ is the only bishop to be recognized and the only true head to the church on earth.

Chapter Seven

The Elder in the Present Day

The office of the elder is not the issue in this chapter, rather it is the function of the elder that is our concern. The issue to be discussed revolves about how many offices there are in the church with regard to elders. Some present the office as being two, ruling and teaching elders. Others combine the two and call them one office with two functions. Iain Murray states in an article in the "Banner of Truth" it is not the technical issue of the difference that should concern us, rather the emphasis should be placed on the work given the church to complete through the elders' leadership.¹

The Business model or the Pastoral Model

It is necessary to establish a definition for the relationship of the eldership to the congregation in the church. Is the eldership to be seen as a business model or a pastoral model? In a business model the elders are simply organized to administer affairs. In this model they act in the capacity of a board of governors who either approve of the work being carried out by the minister, looked upon as a hired servant, as being successful or not. They sit as a corporate entity to be an advisor to the minister who must carry out their recommendations. They do not become involved in the day to day experience of the life of the congregation. They seldom know the names of the members or families involved in the church. John R. Sittema describes in his book, *With A Shepherd's Heart*, this kind of a Church Staff.

Simply put, elders are viewed today in an administrative role, as the corporate officers of the business known as church such and such. In fact, many churches have even adopted names that reflect their new insights; they call their elder's board members or trustees.²

The eldership as a pastoral model is much different. In this model each elder acts as an overseer with the minister. He will have a definite district and number of families under his care. He will know each family and be involved in their lives observing their habits regarding worship, participation at church services, and events in the life of the church. Their main interest will be to protect the spiritual health of the congregation. They will act as guardians of "the flock of the Good Shepherd." It is also understood that "the Bible assigns to the elders in each local church the awesome duty to protect and secure the health of the flock."³ The shift in society has moved the masses from an agrarian people interdependent to an industrial society of independent people. This has had a definite affect on the shepherding model of the elders in the church of our time.

To foster a true eldership spirit there must be a return to model found in scripture. I Peter 5:1-4 outlines the kind of elders needed to build healthy churches. The elders are to be an example before the people. The elder's life must shine forth in a transparent manner. An elder with this kind of openness will find it much easier to relate to the families under his care. This will enable the elder to effectively oversee the spiritual well being of those under his supervision, protection, discipline and instruction. The elder must always see the part of the flock under his care as belonging to God. An elder must be installed to this office out of love for those he serves. It must not be used to gain some return or be a power base to abuse others, rather it must be exercised for the well being of others and to their profit. This leadership advances the kingdom of God by setting a good example for those that follow.⁴

The functions of the elders

It is now necessary to define the importance of the work of the eldership in the church of Christ, to have healthy congregations. It is not the intention of this study to deal with educational requirements for an elder; rather the purpose of this presentation is to deal with the work of an elder. This office should be occupied by men called of God who are willing to take up the task and be committed to do the work without having an ulterior motive for being elected to office. An elder must be one who is a good organizer with the ability to act without needing to be prompted or constantly be reminded of his duty. He must be a man who can demonstrate confidentiality at all times. He must be capable of working with others and be a good listener and well as be able to speak with some degree of clarity on issues of concern. He must have a keen sense of the needs of others in his charge. "As shepherd, his work and his purpose must be guided by nothing other than the purposes of the Good Shepherd for the care and tending of his sheep."⁵ 'An elder must have a good spiritual record in order to be installed to office. He must also be required to meet the qualifications outlined in I Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9. The "apt to teach" statement should be looked upon as meaning "able to be taught." Lawrence R. Eyres gives this explanation.

Some scholars have argued that "apt to teach" may be a misleading translation of the Greek term (didaktikos). It may mean "able to be taught" rather than "able to teach." But the need for the ruling elder to be able to teach does not depend on this phrase. Since all rule in the church "ministerial and declarative," and not despotic and coercive, every church ruler must be ready to minister the truth, to declare it - to teach it to the flock.⁶

A carefully prepared elder will take time to prepare himself so that he will be able to lead with purpose. Paul advised Timothy that an elder should be "apt to teach." As has been stated before the Greek word translated apt to teach could be better translated "able

to learn." In order to protect one's own person while in office one must be growing spiritually with a real understanding of needs that must be developed. (Acts 20:28)

An elder must be man who exercises a deep spiritual prayer life personally. This must be viewed as a priority in order to be God's representative as well as the people's representative. Jesus set this example by "having risen a long while before daylight, He went out and departed to a solitary place; and there He prayed." (Mark 1:35) If our Lord placed great emphasis on prayer it is as important for all leaders in the church be men of prayer. If an open relationship in prayer is maintained it more likely that the elders will be able to discern what the needs of the church are regularly.

The overall work of the church is given to the elders. This involves the oversight of all members in the congregation including the reception and dismissal of members. It is the elders' duty to keep a close watch over the membership. The concern of Abraham for his son's future regarding the choice of a wife should provide an example of the concern elders should have for the member's needs in every area of their spiritual lives. This includes the instruction members receive for spiritual nourishment regularly. The grazing of the flock determines their ability to face conditions that affect their future. They must know if members are consistent in their worship and family life. Elders should know if members are wandering from church to church and why. They should recognize when members are not content and need extra encouragement and bring this to the attention of the minister.

Elders need to recognize as John R. Sittema points out some importance elements of the meaning of membership. Every person who belongs to the church is a member of the family of God (Luke 8:21). As family members in the church there is need for leadership. Jesus describes members as being sheep under a shepherd. The sheep know their shepherd and follow him (John 10). The church is the body of believers and as members in this body each one must learn to respect the other. The cohesiveness of the body depends on the authority exercised by the elder and the respect afforded him by the membership. The effective working church recognizes the need for a pastoral chain of

command. This begins by the proclamation of sound teaching followed by a practical approach to ministry. Hebrews 13:7,17 commands the membership to hold their elders in the highest regard.

Elders are accountable to God for the lives of the membership. This is to be exercised as long as a person is within the jurisdiction of that congregation. Should a member or a family move to a new location, and no longer attend the church where their membership is established, it is the duty of the elders to encourage that member or family to enter into fellowship with another congregation of the faith. If it is possible to find a church family, one of their own, they should be encouraged to transfer their membership. The letter of transfer should recognize the gifts and quality of the person or family to be recognized. This should be done with the understanding of the person being transferred and in good faith with the congregation to which the transfer is made. This may be described as a good shepherding practice.

Membership must not be taken lightly by either the one desiring to be accepted or by the elders recognizing the persons being received as the representatives of the congregation. Joining the church requires the persons being accepted to recognize the authority God has given to the elders.

Members are to recognize that the gifts and talents they possess are to be used to strengthen the work of the church for its future good. Everyone must learn to work as a unit as in a living body for the good of all. Paul describes this in Ephesians 4 and especially in verse 17. Here the church is described as "fitly joined together."

John R. Sittima gives good advice on material to be shared when receiving new members. There must be a clear explanation given regarding what it means to be a part of the church body in faith. This requires instruction in doctrine, and the elders should join with the pastor in this part of the preparation. The elders should determine the gifts and abilities these new members bring to the family of God. This is the time to encourage active participation. New members should be made to feel comfortable and extended the invitation to participate in as many ways as possible. No person should be allowed to just

sit on the inactive always. This is sure way for elders to loose touch with people. Those who become members having grown up in the church must understand the importance of their new stand requiring them to take an active part in the body of the church on their own. The transferees are more likely to be the persons who need the most encouragement to feel at home and welcome.⁷

The elders should be the leaders in the educational program of every church. They should not be expected to be the direct teachers in all instances yet they should know what is happening in all areas of the church. The boards and committees of the church are important to involve the membership. Yet every effort should be taken to protect the good name of the church by the elders who have the spiritual oversight of every part of the body. Elders need to be informed leaders so as to be abreast of developments that need to be addressed as they are presented. There must be a constant awareness of developments in the community in order for the church to educate effectively and support the membership, as they are involved both in the church and community. The faith of the church should be a force to direct the thinking of the family involvement outside the church in its interaction with others. The elders' should have a definite place in this part of the members' lives. Genuine awareness enables an elder to lead the people of God rather than be always cleaning up after other have caused trouble. When every effort is made to develop a good program for the different departments of the church, discipline is less difficult. If the principles set out in Deuteronomy 6:7 were carried out dutifully in the church under the guidance of the elders much of the counsel necessary would be eliminated. Verse seven states "you shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up."

An effective elder will be certain about his own relationship with Christ. This will enable him to demonstrate a real spirit of confidence as he shares his faith with others. A good elder will establish a visiting schedule. Paul's advice to the Ephesian church is a good model for us. Elders were to exhort from house to house (Acts 20:28). The elders

work of visitation is well described in the following quotation from the work of John R. Sittema.

Encouragement as the Bible describes it links the work of the Holy Spirit to the work of the shepherds of the flock who care for Christ's church. To say it bluntly; God assigns to the elders of the church the awesome task of giving human shape to the comports and encouraging work of the Holy Spirit. Pastoral elders become the Spirit's hands and feet and voice to do that work.⁸

The reason for council and discipline must always be for the health of the total body as well as the care given to the individual person. All leadership should center on building the body to be more like the one in whose image it is founded. The elders must represent the church on two fronts, separation and purity, for the perfection of all parts of the body of Christ's church. "Elders are men charged with the pursuit of holiness in the church on both fronts: purity and separation from the world."⁹ The Leviticus ordinances declared that there must not be a mixing of any items whether it is seed for planting or in animal husbandry. The purpose was to maintain purity in all things. The elders must be supervisors of the body to maintain this order. To keep the church body by this principle is a definite model for holiness. This is being in the world but not of the world. The elders are committed to the work for which Christ prayed in His high priestly prayer (John 17). The principle laid down at Sinai in Exodus 19:5 - 6 states that Israel was to be a "special treasure, . . . a kingdom of priest and a holy nation." This was repeated in I Peter 2:5.

Elders must recognize that their work will not be easy. It will be difficult just as the life of Jesus was filled with hardships so will there be (John 15:17, 20). Elders must be committed as Peter described their duty in order to deal with crisis in shepherding. There will be hurts encountered including everything from death, terminal illnesses, job losses, financial disasters, and family problems. The personal lives of those committed to their trust must be their concern. The elders must relate so as to become the trusted leader to whom they will turn for spiritual support to deal with everyday experiences.

This makes the work of the elder an instructor of the word always in season 11 Timothy 4:2. 11 Timothy 3:16 - 17 become very relevant when the elder is serving the

needs of his people. In Titus 1:9 the elder is advised to hold firm so as to encourage others. The work of the elder is "being -there - when - they - need - you."¹⁰ John 10:24 describes clearly the effective work of the elder -shepherd.

But he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep.
To him the doorkeeper opens, and the sheep hear his voice;
and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.
And when he brings out his own sheep, he goes before
them; and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice.
Yet they will by no means follow a stranger, but will flee
from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers.

The elder will be required to rebuke members and this will demand a clear and consistent approach to problems. The elder must clearly define the issues and not let any number of side issues to bring harm by side stepping main issues. When a problem is being dealt with the purpose should be to restore the offender and bring about a restoration to full fellowship. The scriptures must be the guides to rebuking and restoring the one disciplined. The elder must recognize the central position of scripture as having authority over both the work of the elder and the reason for the discipline.¹¹

Jude 23 describes the elders work as "pulling them from the fire." Sittema states that "the elders of the church are answerable to God for whether or not they do the work of rebuking."¹² Ezekiel (chapter 33) calls upon the watchman to be on guard so that when trouble comes he will sound the trumpet to warn of impending harm. The purpose of rebuking is to bring growth to the lives affected.

This makes the elder a counselor. Many will reply that counseling requires special training. Counseling takes place when advice is offered under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The elders are to be "doers" of what they believe (James 1:22). This is applying the knowledge received from the study of the word through personal development in one's daily life. The elder counsels by establishing priorities. This work will cover all areas of activity in the church for the average family. The apostles faced this burden and in Acts 6:4 resolved the problem of caring for the material needs of the widows by setting forth a plan. The solution to this need resulted in the establishment of the office of deacons.

Hebrews 13:17 calls upon the believers to recognize those "who had the authority to rule over them." Members are required to submit to the elders' counsel, as they will be required to give an account of those in their charge. "The teaching elder should remind the congregation that elders are representatives of the Lord and are to be heard, submitted to, and obeyed in the Lord."¹³

Elders who are keenly sensitive to the work of shepherding will be called upon to exercise discipline as well. The model for this work must be taken from Matthew 18:15ff. When sin is detected in the family of the church the elders must be very sensitive as to how they proceed, yet it must not be overlooked. There are three steps to be followed and it must be the intent of the discipline to restore the offender to full fellowship always. The purpose of the discipline must be to heal the offender and bring about healing to all concerned without allowing the sin to escalate into outright disgrace to the body of the church.¹⁴

Elders must be available to church families to support them in times of crisis internally. In the Old Testament the elders ruled in city gate so that family matters could be settled when the head of the house was unable to gain a peaceful solution. Moses advised the nation that this work of discipline rested with the elders. (Deuteronomy 21:18-21). This passage describes a rebellious son who has disrupted the family and must be discipline by the elders. The view presented in the fifth chapter on binding and loosing is the work of the elders and still applies in the matter of discipline.

In this area of work the elders must hold each other in the highest esteem. Jealousy must never be allowed to develop between elders. The words of Christ in John 21 are a warning. We are to follow Christ and fulfil our calling by the exercise of our gifts through the support of the Holy Spirit and our fellow elders (John 21:21-23).

For the eldership to be successful in the work of counseling and discipline certain guidelines must be established from the beginning. A good foundation must be laid for the work to be done. The domestic rules to be applied must be stated clearly, and the consequences of breaking these will be as reported. The elders must be persistent in

carrying out without feeling sorry or being soft. Yet when discipline must be administered, make it an experience if at all possible as pleasant as can be so that the one disciplined will learn and return with full repentance to the family of the church.¹⁵

Regular meetings of the eldership are a necessity for the smooth operation of the church. It must be understood that this demonstrates discipline on the part of the leaders as much as discipline is to be expected in others' lives. The meeting of the elders should be established as a regular function of the office. The day and time of meeting must be followed faithfully and each elder must be required to be in attendance. The meeting will open with prayer and be followed by some instruction necessary for the future good of the church. This will be followed by a reading of the minutes of previous meetings and be duly signed. The business arising from the minutes must first be dealt with. Then new business can be presented. These meetings are not intended to be a free-for-all session. Session meetings are designed to be a place to bring the issues that concern the health of the congregation for discussion so as to have the consensus of the whole group view on thorny matters of concern.

Even though a man may be an elder over a long period of time there is always something new to be experienced. The elders' court should be a place to learn and support others to face difficulties as well. Every developing congregation will encounter people with different needs and this will require a constant watchfulness over the flock. The elders will have their districts yet it is as much the work of an elder to watch out for one another and those in their charge. This is not a matter of interfering but rather an insight to be shared.

Prayer time should be a major part of the work of the elders together. A praying session will have a significant effect on the insights of the elders and control of the church. Elders who walk close to the Lord in their prayer life corporately will also be more discerning of the direction the church must take for the future.

The total work of the eldership can never be completely defined yet it will be sufficient to state that elders are the most important members in any congregation. They

have their mandate from the Lord to hold office and must exercise control with a humble and contrite spirit, and they are to require the same of the membership over whom they rule.

Conclusion

The elders have held a significant position in society from the very beginning of organized families and tribes. The records reveal the elder's part in the revelation of the work of justification and the continuing fellowship with God Leviticus 9:1. Chapter one reported the importance of the elders in preparing Israel for their deliverance from Egypt. The elders were called God's representatives in many instances. Moses and Joshua called the elders to meet with them when Moses came to lead Israel out of Egypt. At Mt. Sinai the eldership received national recognition to assist in judicial and administrative duties in the nation Numbers 11.

God's method of speaking to his people was through the elders. From Sinai and afterward when God chose to reveal Himself through the ark, the elders were required to be present. This was even more important when the ark was to be moved. This gave the elders the oversight of the worship and education of the people. The Sanhedrian was a counsel made up of elders that exercised authority in Israel's religious life. The elders of the Old Testament era and the first elders in the New Testament era are recognized as having their authority from the same source, presbuteroi. These elders were lay representatives who exercised authority in teaching and ruling.

As long as the elders remained faithful to the Lord the people accepted their leadership. Even under the Judges the elders held a significant influence. When Samuel

neared the end of his life the people requested a king. This reflected a lack of trust in the elders. The people were granted a king to rule over them. During this period in Israel, the spiritual life of the nation deteriorated. The elders had their authority reduced from being civic and religious rulers to eventually being in charge of the spiritual oversight of the nation only. The monarchy used the elders only when it was to their advantage as reported in chapter one.

The nation of Israel was eventually made a subject people and carried captive to many nations. The prophets, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, advised the elders to restore the faith and keep the trust given them by the Lord while in exile. Out of this situation developed the synagogue under the leadership of the elders. The elder remained the one constant office in Israel throughout her history even though the faith was not always strong. The elders who supported the work of the synagogue in the beginning must have been strong spiritually but like many institutions the order survived, but the faith entrusted to them deteriorated. By the time of Christ the synagogue had lost its grasp of the faith and like all the leaders of the day did not see Jesus as the Christ. The elders continue to exercise authority but without the spiritual vitality that they once knew. In the chapter on the New Testament elders, they are reported to have taken part in the crucifixion of Our Lord.

The rule of the elder was significant in the period of the apostles. Peter called himself an elder and with this reference it is reasonable to assume all apostles were elders I Peter 5:1. It is reasonable to assume that Christ trained His apostles to be the first elders in the New Covenant Church following His ascension. The great commission gave authority to the apostles to represent Him on earth as teachers and administrators of His Church Matthew 28:19-20. In Acts 1:8 this mission was confirmed by the promise of the Holy Spirit. This was evidenced by the preaching of Peter at Pentecost when the people cried out asking, what me we do to be saved Acts 2:37.

The elders were officially the organizing body for the church from this time forward. This is evidenced by the manner after which elders were elected in the church by the apostles. Timothy and Titus were advised of their importance as the writings of

Paul indicate. The work of the elders was to oversee the assembly of the people as well as all teaching.

The office of the elders is never referred to in the singular. These representatives are always referred to as a collective group. In Leviticus 9:1 they are called “the elders of Israel,” and in Acts 20:17 “the elders of the church”. This makes a strong case for the plurality of the position in each setting.

By the end of the first century the separation of the terms presbuteros and episcops became apparent. The presbuteroi remained a plural term whereas episcopos took on a distinctive singular form. The letters of the apostolic fathers reveal the rise of the bishop as being over the elders. Ignatius wrote to the churches advising them to respect their bishop and to do nothing without his consent. This form of control, established by precedent, eventually took control of the spiritual life of the people. Out of this development grew the monarchical bishop with territorial authority. By the fourth century the rule of elders was almost a forgotten entity except for pockets of the civilization that resisted this process of change. Along with this development came the deterioration of the faith that proclaimed redemption in Christ.

The Waldensians were the stalwart followers of the apostolic faith with their form of church polity. Through years of persecution they remained faithful resisting even when persecuted by Rome’s armies. This period can be likened to Israel’s leadership that developed under the kings. Only through the elders did the remnant survive. The same can be stated of the Waldensian elders who paved the way for the Reformation movement. Churchmen like Zwingli, Luther, and Wycliff resisted the activities of the Bishop of Rome and publicly declared the glaring corruption in the church. They called for a return to the apostolic teachings and the form of government laid down in the Epistles and the Letters of the New Testament.

During this period when an effort was made to purify the teaching of the church, the office of the elder was revived as the means of delivering the message to the people. The work of those who recorded the confessions and disciplines reveal the effort of those who were willing to put their lives at risk for the preservation of the true faith.

The period of the sixteenth and seventeenth century saw the writing of confession and disciplines for the refurbishing of the church to restore her to the position of proclaiming justification by faith alone. The eldership was the form of government recognized to fulfill this mission of the church. At this time the eldership was recognized as performing two functions. The ministers were called teaching elders and rulers were called ruling elders. Each office was designated specific duties in these documents. The teaching elder's primary duty was to preach the word and administer the sacraments. Yet to retain the equality of the elders, both teaching and ruling, no function could be carried out without the permission of both. The ruling elders had their duties defined yet they were restricted in their function by the necessity of the teaching elder presiding over all sessions. Both offices of elders were to be elected by the people and installed by their authority. They were to be chosen and voted into office by the people. There were regulations that governed their power, and yet they were a necessary order in the establishment of a new congregation.

As the reformed movement spread throughout Europe and the British Isles the position of the elder was recognized as the only authority in church government. The position of the elder was clearly defined in the Westminster Confession of 1645. This confession stated three offices involving ministers, elders and deacons. The minister and elders were of equal authority and possessed equal voting privileges in the courts of the church.

In nineteenth and twentieth century America the office of the elder came to be questioned as to the warrant for its existence. The sixth chapter presented the views of leading churchmen. The controversy involved the number of offices and the scriptural warrant for these offices. The three-office view of minister, elders and deacons was defended. The two-office view was equally defended. The question argued was do we have a church with the office of the elder as one position that rules and teaches or do we have two offices of elders, teaching and ruling separate.

If we have two offices of elders separating the teaching and ruling, are they founded on the same scripture? The position taken by the leading theologians are

presented in chapter six. It is sufficient to state in this conclusion that there is scriptural warrant to acknowledge the two offices, namely teaching and ruling, from the same scriptures. There are scriptures such as Romans 12:8 and I Corinthians 12:28 that add support to the ruling elders' position over those of I Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9 that support both positions. The exegesis of these texts along with I Timothy 5:17 acknowledge the differing gifts given to each office. In I Timothy 5:17 the only reasonable conclusion to be reached must acknowledge that those who possess special gifts are the elders called to proclaim publicly the Word of the Lord.

The apostles taught that God called some to proclaim the Gospel and he called others to be governors in His church. The final chapter, the Elder in the Present Day, details their work. The minister is designated as the one to proclaim of the word and to dispense the sacraments. Yet he is never commissioned to this work without a competent company of elders.

Together the teaching and ruling elders are responsible for the spiritual oversight of the congregation. This presentation did not deal with the educational requirements for the teaching elder. The main emphasis was placed on the functions performed by the elders in a congregation corporately. The eldership is to be looked upon as a pastoral office, overseeing the spiritual lives of those committed to their trust. This involves the work of men who are spiritually qualified for the oversight of those under them. They are to be men of wisdom and prayer with a keen sense of self-control and personal discipline. To them is committed the oversight of all programs of the church from the preaching and teaching in all departments of the church. They are to be the cohesive body to establish order in worship and maintain harmony in the body.

The elders are to be counselors and, when required, to exercise discipline. Elders must have a practical working knowledge of the scriptures in order to provide good leadership. This body performing their duty to God and His people will assure the churches future on earth. God has established the office of the elder to be the vehicle through whom He can further the ministry of reconciliation, and prepare His own for the

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