

## BIBLICAL ELDERSHIP

### The Pattern of Leadership in the New Testament Church

As was suggested in an earlier chapter, a cursory examination of the New Testament record will lead one to make four general observations concerning church membership/leadership that are pertinent to this study: first, new believers were received immediately into the church with a minimum of restrictions; second, there were formal lists maintained in various contexts in the early church; third, there were specific and formal offices and leadership positions in the apostolic churches; and fourth, qualifications for those offices were high, in marked contrast to the qualifications for membership. In addressing the issue of church polity, the third observation is particularly pertinent, that there were clearly-defined offices and leadership roles in the early church.

The initial leadership, of course was in the hands of the apostles, and not just anyone could be an apostle. Passages such as Ephesians 4:11 clearly establish that Christ ". . . gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and, some, evangelists; and some pastors and teachers" (KJV). As Homer Kent notes, "The point is not that He gave to some men the gift of apostleship, but that the church as a whole received apostles as a gift from Christ."<sup>1</sup> Obviously, the same is true of the other gifted individuals mentioned with apostles. The Lord of the Church gifted, set apart, and gave to the church these leaders.

Subsequently, reference is made to elders (Acts 11:30), overseers (I Tim. 3:1), deacons (I Tim. 3:8), as well as the prophets, evangelists and pastor-teachers of Ephesians 4:11. Of these various groups of leaders, the two that are specifically and formally defined as officers are the "overseer" and "deacon" of I Timothy 3. (Consideration of the question of including "elder" as a formal office will be a crucial piece in the puzzle of biblical church polity.) Whether there is agreement on the specifics of the list of New Testament church officers, the fact remains that there were definite offices set forth in Scripture for the church.

#### Jewish Background of New Testament Leadership

Although some writers question the degree of connection, there seems good reason to conclude that the basic concept of leadership in the New Testament church has its roots in Old Testament Israel, and in the synagogue of the first century. There one discovers the basic function of leadership residing in the elders.

At least two conclusions can be drawn regarding the elders of Israel that are undisputed, and a third conclusion will be offered that seems relevant to the present study. The first conclusion is that the concept of "elder" originally referred to one of mature years. "It is generally agreed that the institution of elder rule, as the word itself indicates, originally was based on age: the older, more influential men of society naturally formed a ruling council."<sup>2</sup> The same Hebrew word (zagen) was used alternately for older men, and for men considered among the leaders of Israel. It is defined as:

Lit. "bearded ones," perhaps reflecting the age, wisdom, experience and influence necessary for a man expected to function as an elder. As heads of local families and tribes, "elders" had a recognized position also among the

Babylonians, Hittites, Egyptians (see Ge 50:7), Moabites and Midianites (see Nu 22:7). Their duties included judicial arbitration and sentencing (see Dt 22:13-19) as well military leadership (see Jos 8:10) and counsel (see I Sa 4:3).<sup>3</sup>

However, not all older men were considered among the leaders of Israel. "Elder was originally applied to older men with particular reference to their wisdom. Later it was conferred upon others, but still it still carried the connotation of wisdom."<sup>4</sup>

This introduces the second conclusion: that the elder concept detached somewhat from an age designation to designate leadership, with less dependence on age. As someone has suggested, at the age of fifty, some men have amassed fifty years of experience. Some men have one year of experience--fifty times. Elders were selected from the former group.

But there is a third conclusion that seems to be biblically warranted, and is relevant to New Testament church leadership: "Elder" was a general term, denoting one who functioned in leadership, not a formal office. There are several reasons for this conclusion.

Elders seem to be men appointed to other offices, and possess the role of elder almost as an *ex officio* function. The first reference to Israel's elders is found in Exodus 3:16 when Moses is sent back to his people to begin the process of deliverance. There is no indication who these elders were, but presumably they included heads of families, clans and tribes.<sup>5</sup> Those were the functional units by which Israel had organized itself from the beginning. The "offices" these men held were "heads of families," "heads of clans," "heads of tribes," etc. Collectively they exercised the function of "elders of Israel."

It appears valid to translate "elder" as "leader" without doing violence to either text or historical record. The concept seemed to imply, on the one hand, a function of leadership

shared by various officers, and, on the other hand, a pool of qualified men from which officers were drawn. In Numbers 11:16-17 such an incident is recorded. Moses was overwhelmed by the load of leadership. The Lord created a new office to assist with the administration of the affairs of Israel.

The Lord said to Moses: "Bring me seventy of Israel's elders who are known to you as leaders and officials among the people. Have them come to the Tent of Meeting, that they may stand there with you. I will come down and speak with you there, and I will take of the Spirit that is upon you and put the Spirit on them. They will help you carry the burden of the people so that you will not have to carry it alone.

Several important implications can be drawn from this passage: First, this particular office or responsibility is separate and distinct from eldership.<sup>6</sup> Moses was to select the seventy from the pool of elders that were available. Second, the fact that Moses is instructed not only to choose from among the elders, but from among the elders who are "leaders and officials" implies that there were elders who were not considered "leaders and officials." Perhaps (to put it in a contemporary context) they were between terms of office, they did not occupy any formal office, yet were still considered elders. They were acknowledged by their family or clan or tribe as having a leadership function.

Reference is made (in Deuteronomy 21, among other places) to the "elders of a city." It is reasonable to assume that these men held offices equivalent to the current mayor, city council, municipal judge, etc. In the context, it is stated that "The priests, the sons of Levi, shall step forward, for the Lord your God has chosen them to minister and to pronounce blessings in the name of the Lord and to decide all cases of dispute and assault" (Deut. 21:5). Just a few verses later, the elders are called upon to decide the fate of a rebellious child

(Deut. 21:18-21). Apparently the priests were sometimes classed, with other leaders, among the elders.

The term seems capable of a number of uses, some broader than others. For instance, in I Kings 20:8 it is stated that "the elders and the people" all answered King Ahab. At that point, all the officials seem to be included in the designation "the elders," as opposed to "the people." At other times, holders of various offices are distinguished from "the elders," as in Deuteronomy 29:10: "All of you are standing in the presence of the Lord your God--your leaders and chief men, your elders and officials, and all the other men of Israel."

Again, a case can be made for normally rendering "elders" in the general sense of "leaders" as is the case in comparing the rendering of II Kings 19:2 in the NIV ("Shebna the secretary and the leading priests") and in the KJV ("Shebna the scribe, and the elders of the priests"). There is no indication of a separate class of priests elected "elders," but priests who occupied the office of High Priest and other offices were recognized as holding, by virtue of their several offices, the function of eldership. They were the leading priests.

Likewise, it seems reasonable to conclude that there was no separate office of elder, per se, but rather, men who occupied the various offices and positions of authority in Israel's society were acknowledged to function collectively as the elders of the land or the city or the tribe. This was the model of leadership familiar to the leaders of the early church.

#### From "Apostle" to "Elder" in the Book of Acts

Without question, the initial leadership in the infant church of Jerusalem consisted of the Apostles. It is essential to understand that the final pattern of leadership did not arise, fully developed, overnight. It developed over the course

of three decades, in response to a growing understanding of the will of the Head of the Church, and in response to the perception of the needs that would exist over the long haul. Christ would not return in a year or two. The church would need structure and leadership that would ensure its health and vitality beyond the apostolic day.

The Apostles led the church until Acts 6, when the need became apparent for a broader leadership base. It is common to recognize the seven men chosen at that time as the first deacons. That is certainly an appropriate term for the ministry to which they were called. But two things need to be noted.

First, their ministry was one of considerable administrative responsibility. As was noted earlier in this study, it is necessary to envision the "waiting on tables" of Acts 6:2 as actually encompassing a comprehensive social service program for a body of ten thousand people or more. These seven men became the functional administrators of the program of the church.

Second, these men were obviously involved in more than mere administrative work. The book of Acts only tracks two of the seven in detail, but if Stephen and Philip are typical, these men also had far-reaching spiritual ministry in Jerusalem and beyond.

The next stage in the evolution of leadership in the church is the introduction of the term "elders" in Acts 11:30. These men are introduced into the narrative without any indication of who they are or where they came from. It is interesting to note that the first reference to elders involves receiving a financial contribution to alleviate the material needs of the church in Jerusalem. It is further interesting to note that the first deacons were chosen in Acts 6 to oversee the financial

resources of the church to alleviate the material needs of the church in Jerusalem.

Is it possible that the elders of Acts 11:30 are in fact the deacons of Acts 6? If not, then there are no hints in the text as to their identity or selection. The close correspondence between the function in both passages would perhaps make such an identification plausible, if not probable.

From this point on in the narrative of the church, "elders" becomes the term of choice with reference to local church leadership. They were prominent, with the Apostles, in the account of the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15, and as leadership was established in newly planted churches, it inevitably consisted of elders (as in Acts 14:23, 20:17, 21:18, Titus 1:5).

#### Formal Offices in the Pastoral Epistles

The final stage in this evolution is seen in I Timothy 3:1-13 (reflected in Phil. 1:1). There the two formal offices, "Overseer" and "Deacon" have their qualifications set forth.

Now, one might argue that the third office of elder is similarly specified in Titus 1:6-9. It is more likely that "elder" is used in Titus 1 as a broader term to refer to leaders generally. Either that is the case, and Paul gives general instructions about biblical church leaders (including deacons and overseers} and then adds more detailed qualifications for overseers in 1:7-9, or he uses the two terms interchangeably and synonymously.

If such is the case, it is strange that the churches of Crete are given no instruction concerning the need of deacons. But it would be reasonable to suggest that Paul might prescribe a less detailed organization for Crete than for Ephesus. The church at Ephesus was much more mature in its development than the churches of Crete. The indication in Titus 1:5 that formal

organization was newly instituted, especially in view of the culture and background of the new believers making up those churches (hinted at in 1:12-13}, would give credence to the expectation of simpler structure for the churches of Crete.

#### Relationship of Elder, Pastor, Overseer and Deacon

It is possible that "elder" is not intended in the New Testament to be synonymous with "pastor" or "overseer." Nor does elder denote a third biblical office. Rather, it is a function of leadership that deacons and overseers share. In fact, the first reference to elders in the history of the church in Acts 11:30 may very well denote the deacons selected in Acts 6.

Obviously, this is an area of interpretation, and a case can be made, using the same scriptural evidence, for numerous other views. Strauch writes in his book Biblical Eldership, "A number of New Testament passages make it obvious that the two terms ["overseer" and "elder"] refer to one and the same group and are used interchangeably."<sup>7</sup> He then goes on to cite Acts 20:17, 28; Titus 1:5, 7; I Peter 5:1, 2; I Timothy 3:1-13, 5:17-25 and Philippians 1:1. Concerning the latter passage he notes:

At Philippi, only two corporate bodies are designated: "overseers and deacons." It is improbable that there was a body of overseers in addition to a body of elders. It is equally improbable that Paul would greet "overseers and deacons" but omit the elders who held an essential place in early church leadership. Thus, one must conclude that overseers and elders are one and the same.<sup>8</sup>

It is equally possible that Paul does not mention elders separately in the passage because both deacons and overseers were elders. Granted, where the three terms of "elder," "pastor," and "overseer" exist together (as in Acts 20:17. 28; I Peter 5:1-2) it is clear that there is a very close correspondence. But that correspondence only indicates that the overseer--shepherd of the flock--is, in fact, an elder. That

does not limit the function of eldership to overseers. One key to unraveling of the biblical concept of elders is to realize that deacons are also elders.

If the New Testament concept of elder does not encompass both deacon and overseer, then there is no instruction for dealing with those leaders, for most instructions detailing leadership principles specify "elders." This is true of the support of spiritual leaders (I Tim. 5:17-18), the discipline of spiritual leaders (I Tim. 5:19), the role of spiritual leaders in essential areas of ministry including spiritual and physical healing (James 5:14-16), and valuable counsel from the Apostle Peter, himself an elder (I Peter 5:1-4). In attempting to understand the relationship between the various terms, it might be fair to say that "Overseer" and "Deacon" are formal titles of office, focusing on the administrative role, with the deacons operating as the functional administrators of the ministry of the church while the overseer is, in fact, the overseer. Pastor denotes the element of spiritual ministry involved in the office of overseer. Elder denotes the function of leadership inherent in both offices in relation to the body.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Homer A. Kent, Jr., Ephesians: the Glory of the Church (Chicago: Moody Press, 1971), 71.

<sup>2</sup>Alexander Strauch, Biblical Eldership (Littleton, CO: Lewis and Roth Publishers, 1986), 39-40.

<sup>3</sup>Kenneth Barker, gen. ed. , The NIV Study Bible (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Bible Publishers, 1985). 91.

<sup>4</sup>Ralph G. Turnbull, ed. , Baker's Dictionary of Practical Theology (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1967). s.v. "The Pastor's Calling," by Herschel H. Hobbs.

<sup>5</sup>Gerhard Kittel, ed. , tr. by Geoffrey W. Bromiley, Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, vol. VI (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1964), s.v., "presbus."

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>Strauch, 130.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 131.