

The Emergence of leadership and ministry.

By Les Wheeldon – © 2001

A. Introduction

The great cry in so many places is for more leaders and preachers. There is no doubt that this is the great need throughout the church. The question is what can be done by the church to aid the emergence of leaders and ministers? Jesus told the twelve to pray that the Lord of the Harvest would raise up more labourers and thrust them into the harvest. This is doubtless the chief means by which leaders are raised up, but it also implies that those praying are seeking to bring in more leaders. It is significant that the Lord enjoined those already labouring to pray. It is as they pray that understanding comes and eagerness to recognise God's hand in sending forth more men into the harvest field. This study looks at patterns of government and ministry in the church and seeks to highlight areas where the church can aid the spirit in the emergence of leaders.

B. Church government and ministry.

Throughout the centuries there have been many different patterns of church government. The wide variety puzzles us all the more when we realise that all kinds of government have been blessed of God. Indeed some of the most unusual have been among the most blessed. This should cause us to reflect deeply on the importance of spiritual reality far over and above any mere form.

In attempting to define the various forms of government one can distinguish three:

1. Congregational. This is government by the church congregation itself. The body of all believers meeting together in open session, discusses important matters and it is decisions made here that direct the church. The strength of this is that all feel part of the church, and are drawn into decision making. The weakness of it is that it can lead to an absence of leadership, causing the church to subsist, without forward movement. It is a good corrective against error, but not a good pattern for moving the church forward.

2. Presbyterian. This is government by elders who hold power over the individuals who exercise ministry in the church. They also do not often consult the wide body of the church. This is a group of men leading the church together. It's great strength is that it promotes the development of many ministries, thus ensuring the continuance of the church's life and ministry when the charismatic leader has moved on. It's weakness lies in that it invests men with the power and position of leadership as a group, without the guarantee that they will be clothed with the anointing and revelation to lead rather than just administrate and control.

3. Apostolic/pastoral . This is government by one charismatic leader. His charisma may be of many different kinds. Most commonly it is based on some vision or fresh insight into a particular truth combined with some fresh application of the truth to the age in which he lives. General Booth is a prime example of this style of leadership. He hardly consulted anyone, and in fact his followers asked him to cut down all forms of bureaucratic consultation in order that the job might be done with all speed!

The disadvantage is that it bars men from developing into leadership, and leads to a vacuum when the great man either dies or moves away. It can lead to a measure of respect that invests the great man with an aura of infallibility.

The new testament pattern is a combination of all three, and all of them have their place in the church that is healthy and thriving.

Ministry in local churches varies widely. At one extreme, the pastor/leader carries the whole service, praying, choosing hymns, preaching, exhorting etc.. This kind of ministry has grown up typically where the outpouring of the Holy Spirit was unknown. Once the Holy Spirit has come, ministry emerges as people overflow in utterance. The various gifts of the spirit are not themselves qualifications for leadership. They are expressions of the mind and will of God. There is no doubt that God intends ministry to flow from all the members of the body.

C. Spiritual Foundations

1. Christ the head of the church.

The foundation of all church government is the recognition that God is the leader of His church. Therefore the role of all men, whether leaders or church members, is to discern God both in His heart and mind in the midst of the saints. As soon as it is held that God is not involved in the leading of his church, men begin to feel the freedom to see the church as the area for the development of their own plans and ideas. They feel free to experiment and do what they feel. Conversely, church members may begin to lobby and influence leaders in a carnal even a political manner. This leads to spiritual death.

God leads His church by being the head of each individual member of His body. That Christ is the head of the body is a far more radical statement than to say He is the ruler of His kingdom. As king, Christ is over all powers in the universe. He is the king of kings, setting up whom He will over the kingdoms of men. He rules over all, even granting the devil permission to pursue His evil ends. Christ is king over all, and is the final authority in every thing that takes place. But Christ is not the head of the kings of the earth. He is head of His body alone. The great difference lies in that Christ's great power over the kingdoms is external. Whether men will or not, he is Lord. In this realm many people submit to Christ as to an earthly ruler. They give

Him outward respect, and yet keep the domain of their own hearts to themselves. In the same way, an individual may vote for Tony Blair, and yet will not yield their affections and hearts to him. This is entirely proper. But it is not the manner of things in the church. If the external pattern of government is transferred to the church, then the government of God touches men's lives through God's representatives. This implies hierarchy. But this is not how the church is governed.

The church is governed by the activity of the Holy Spirit in the hearts and minds of those who have yielded all to Christ. It is at the point of yielding that a person is baptised with the Holy Spirit, and made a member of His body. This whole transaction produces an immediate change in the tone of a person's life. They have passed from one kingdom to another, and it is discernible through inner assurance and inner awareness of the eternal. It is in this state of heart that God Himself communicates His mind and will, as the individual abides in conscious communion with the triune God.

This is the foundation of new testament church leadership. Without this, no system, no matter how biblical, will succeed. It is in this realm that patterns of leadership fail. Men are constantly tempted to trust in that which is outward and carnal. They trust in the systems they live in, or in their eldership, or in their charismatic leader. This is a great error, since none of these can give life to the church. Life is only maintained in the church through that which God ministers through the individual members.

It will be quickly realised that the great qualification for a leader, elder, song leader, sunday school teacher, is that they have been introduced into this realm of the headship of Christ, that they have become part of His mystical body. The mystical side of the church is not to be confused with vague other worldly spiritual experiences. The mystical dimension of church life refers simply to the fact that Christ is consciously known and discerned as the basis of all life. Without this dimension, the church is no more than any worldly organisation, which is sadly so frequently the case.

It is also the case that all ministry must flow from the appointments of the head. He coordinates the various functions into a harmonious whole. Where men function in the body, without knowing Christ as their individual head, their ministry creates dissonance, and does not edify the body. Generally this can be swallowed up in the flow of church life and ministry. It is when men seek to promote themselves carnally to the centre of things that real problems arise, requiring the corrective action of elders.

2. Waiting on God.

Waiting on God is the practical means by which the headship of Christ is maintained, and by which also leadership and ministry emerge. Waiting on God can be defined as the inner attentiveness to the indwelling Christ. There is no doubt that the great

enemy of faith is the ceaseless chatter and noise of the human heart. Many complain about the noise of the world, and yet it is inner noise that is the great enemy of our souls.

As men wait on God, they become conscious of a will and a desire that far exceeds their own. They realise the reality of the words of Jesus, when He said that He did only those things that His father showed Him (Jn 5:19). The great power of the life of Christ was that His inner life was undisturbed and clear. This should be true of the life of men and women in the church, and also therefore of the whole church. This is the realm in which men emerge both as ministers and leaders in the church of the Lord. It is also the realm in which ministry and leadership become weakened, for if men neglect their inner life, they have nothing to contribute to the life of the church. No matter how clever, gifted or well informed men may be, the streams of living water must flow from an inner life of communion with God. It is in this realm that God's will and choice become clear. It is the Holy Spirit who sets men aside for apostleship (Acts. 13:1) and also for eldership (Acts 20:28).

D. Leaders - Apostles.

The church can be likened to a ship, forging its way through the waters. There are 2 distinct dimensions of administration on board the ship. One is the internal administration of daily life. This must go on, whether the ship is docked for a few days, or whether the ship is travelling at great speed. This is the dimension of caring for those on board, providing them with good food and clean dry accommodation. This is a vital ministry in church life, and can be described as the ministry of pastors and teachers.

However, no matter how well oiled this internal government is working, the ship is not given any movement forward by it. The second dimension of administration is in steering the course, giving instructions to the engine room and also to the helmsman. This dimension of administration is to do with spiritual leadership. Here the captain must know where he is going, he must be aware of sunken reefs. He must always be on the watch for the lighthouse and the buoys. Through this ministry all the members of the crew are alert and at their post. Through this ministry all their life takes on a wider dimension than the daily round of mere survival. Good management can keep the ship afloat and functioning well, but leaders steer the course and fire the engines. To take the analogy one step further, the ship that has no movement will wallow, and suffer discomfort from even a light swell. In this way too, a church that lacks leadership will find itself experiencing severe problems which are not actually arising from outside, but rather from the vacuum that lies at the heart of things.

It is vital for a church to acknowledge apostolic or prophetic ministry. I do not mean by this that the church should waste time attaching labels to men, which have often led to the inflation of men's ego. I refer rather to the need of the church to be aware

of the kind of ministry that stirs movement and direction among the saints. The danger at this point is to think that leadership is to introduce the latest new ideas on church growth. There is no doubt that there is a realm in which leaders must move with the times, and must seek to reach the world with means that are effective and relevant. Nevertheless, this is not the heart of leadership. The apostle Paul gives almost no instructions to the churches on how to organise evangelism. He gives few hints as to how the church is to multiply and grow. The thrust of apostolic ministry is to stir men up to discover the riches that lie in Christ Himself. This is by revelation through the Holy Spirit of the unseen, heavenly realms. The apostle/leader is one who has entered into communion with the invisible God. He has been called to walk closely with Christ in order to become familiar with the foundations of the invisible kingdom of God.

Apostolic ordination.

Apostles are ordained of God. There is only one apostle created by man in the new testament, and that is Matthias in Acts ch. 1. While the new testament does not pour scorn on the procedure adopted for his election, the whole episode is quickly lost in the unfolding of a greater ordination in the choice of the apostle Paul. The scripture still refers to the twelve, thus including Matthias, but there is no evidence that his ordination introduced him into the true realms of spiritual apostleship.

Paul like the original twelve, and like Jesus Himself, was never ordained an apostle by man. He states this quite boldly in Galatians ch. 1 v.1: "Paul, an apostle, (not of men, neither by man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father...)". The church cannot make leaders, it can only recognise them and praise God for them. In a church there may be many elders, but it is a great error to therefore assume that they all have the same measure of leadership. Sometimes, an eldership is referred to as a joint leadership. This can only be true if all the elders are leaders raised up of God for that purpose. The tragedy is that when a leader moves on, the assumption is made that the remaining elders will be able to lead the church on. This can lead to deep tragedy, as the church discovers the all too obvious fact, that leaders are quite rare. When a church loses a leader for whatever reason, the church must look to God for a new one. It must not look to the elders, nor must the elders look to themselves to provide something which they do not have. John the baptist summed this up when he said: "A man can receive nothing except it be given him from heaven". No elder can go beyond what God has given him.

At this point it is good to pause and state quite clearly, that a church finds leadership in ministries that have fathered life in the midst of the church. This will be a local man, but will often include men who are not resident in that locality. It will also include a changing group of men, as God introduces freshness into the church, through different men. Some will visit the church once. Others will develop a deep and ongoing relationship with the church for a considerable period of time. It is good for the church to recognise these fathers in Christ, who are more than mere teachers as Paul declared.

At this point, it is useful to note the use of the word "apostle" in the new testament. There are first of all the twelve, followed by Matthias, and then the apostle Paul. In Acts 14:14 Barnabas is referred to as an apostle. Philippians 2:25 refers to Epaphroditus as your apostle (A.V. messenger.) 2 Cor.8:23 refers to Titus and other brothers as the apostles of the churches (A.V. messengers.) So we can deduce that there was a general recognition of men in spiritual leadership. This does not mean that these men had any authority over local elderships beyond the influence that comes from mutual love and respect. It does not mean that these apostles were to remain dumb in the face of things going wrong in the churches that they were visiting. The force of their authority did not however lie in their position, but in the force of the truth that they shared. It is also true that apostles and leaders are far from being infallible. In fact they are subject to many more temptations and snares, and need the prayers and the fellowship of believers in order to keep their hearts clear. The churches are littered with examples of what can happen when men are lifted up with the pride of their office or ministry, and go beyond what God has called them to.

The need for fatherhood is not to be forgotten or minimised. Churches have roots that cannot be changed, and to be cut off from the flow of spiritual truth as it has come to us can be dangerous for individuals and for the churches. "Remove not the ancient landmark which thy fathers have set". Proverbs 22:28

Apostleship/leadership is according to the ordination of Jesus Christ. He spent the whole night in prayer and then in the morning chose the twelve (Luke 6:12 - 13.) Their ordination was founded on the fact that they were to be witnesses of Christ. "He ordained twelve that they should be with Him." (Mark 3:14.) They were to walk with Him, continuing with Him in His temptations. (Luke 22:28.) This meant that they were to be witnesses of the great events of His life, including His miracles and His resurrection. But most of all they were to be witnesses of the inner secrets of His life and kingdom. These inner secrets are the foundation of His church. They are innumerable, and unsearchable and yet the main characteristics can be discerned in three key scriptures. These were events from which the Lord excluded the crowds, and even 9 of the apostles. They were events in which He revealed something about Himself. In each event He expressly took only Peter, James and John with Him, and on the first two occasions made it clear that they were not to repeat what they had seen.

1. The raising of Jairus' daughter. The secret of true power.

This event came at the end of an incredibly busy phase of powerful ministry. He had taught by Galilee, crossed the lake, delivered the Gadarene, recrossed the lake to be met by huge crowds, and amongst them He had received the tender entreaty of Jairus to come and heal his dying daughter. The Lord had not hesitated but had immediately followed Jairus. On their way a woman with a haemorrhage lasting 12 years had touched Him. She had done this secretly, as if she believed she could

pick His pocket and take away her healing without Him noticing. The reason for this was that she knew that the Law declared that anyone touching one defiled with blood would instantly become unclean. No Pharisee would have allowed her to approach him. Her tragedy was that her sickness separated her from all touch and affection. How true this is of sin, that by it our hearts become strangers to the inner awareness of the love of God. The wonder of the whole event, is that when she was discovered, she heard the voice of the Lord calling out, not with disgust or condemnation, but with love and kindness. His voice drew confession from her lips, and she told Him all in a few words. How great her delight and wonder, when she heard the blessed words of adoption from His lips "Daughter, your faith has made you whole, go in peace and be whole of this your plague." (Mark 5:34.) And then the news to Jairus: your daughter is dead. This was met by the quiet confidence of the Lord - "Only believe".

The sight of the mourners was an offence to Him, knowing their hypocrisy, but this did not stop Him from seeking to win them. He declared the wonderful truth of faith, that death is not the cessation of life, it is only a temporary rest in the bosom of the Father at the end of life's day, whether that day be long or short. Death is sleep and is but the prelude to the morning when the dead in Christ shall awake and arise. But the mourners had no faith in God's word, for all that He said had been declared to them by their prophets, when they had said that David slept with his fathers.(2 Sam 2:10). So He drove them away, and took the parents of the girl and three of the apostles in with Him. There He again defied the Law of uncleanness, which said that He could not touch a dead body without defilement. He took the girl by the hand and said the words "Talitha Cumi: which is interpreted, my little pet lamb, I say to thee arise." (Mark 5:41.)

Here lie foundational principles of church life. Chiefly, that power does not lie in great noise, but in tender love. But further to this, that power lies in a word from God, spoken in a whisper. True leaders must lead the flock to such a saviour for the tender lambs will not open to any other. God has not called leaders simply to lead for the sake of leading! They are called to lead men and women to the fountains of living waters.

2. His transfiguration.

Here was a truly remarkable revelation. Christ led them up the mountain, and there His form was changed, and they saw unspeakable glory. They saw beyond the veil of Christ's human flesh into the glory of heaven itself seeing even the glorified Moses and Elijah. Finally they heard the voice of the Father Himself speaking directly and audibly. Here in this simple and direct confrontation with the invisible kingdom of God lie the foundations of that kingdom. The first is in the brightness of the holiness and the glory. They witnessed a light and a purity, such as none on earth could ever equal, and this was the inner life of Christ shining through. All leaders must have some awareness of glory, of surpassing holiness. Without this they will falter in the face of the surpassing evil that is in the world. Men will not

keep going unless they know there is a sinless one, who can never be defiled, and who has lived in this world without defilement. His church is glorious, because she is bone of His bone, flesh of His flesh, partaking of His glory by His indwelling in our hearts through the person of the Holy Spirit. The early church did not have great programmes or detailed strategies. Their leaders were imprisoned, persecuted and executed - quite a pattern to follow! But through all the conflict came the blazing awareness of the reality of the unseen Christ glorified at the right hand of the father. Small wonder that Stephen's face also shone like that of an angel while beholding the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. (Acts 7:55 - 56.)

But the words of the Father to the three apostles are also an open window into the Godhead. The simple declaration was that "this is my beloved son, hear him." (Mark 9:7.) This reveals to them, what it is to be loved. The church is to be a declaration to the world of what it is to be loved of God. This is a revolutionary state of being, since the world does not know what it is like to be loved through and through, till there are no more fears and worries, till there is no more condemnation.

3. His agony in Gethsemane.

In Gethsemane the Lord again took only Peter, James and John with Him to witness the awful agony that came on His soul there in the garden. Leaders must in some degree have witnessed the soul rending agony that crushed the soul of the Lord Jesus in the garden. This agony was the experience of the Son of Man, i.e. of Christ in His manhood. It is significantly absent from the gospel of John, who concentrates on Christ as the Son of God, and thus also does not describe the temptations in the wilderness. This does not mean that Christ was a divided personality, sometimes acting as God and sometimes as man. Christ was fully human and fully divine, and the love of God that burned in His heart caused the man Christ Jesus to agonise over the sin of man with a sorrow that brought Him to the gates of death. Such a physical state is quite rare and yet is not unknown in the hearts of men. Grief and sorrow of bereavement have claimed the lives of men, and here in the garden, Christ declared that the sorrow that He bore was crushing Him nearly to death. He prayed for strength, for he wanted to prevail and persevere unto the cross that He might not only die of a broken heart, but might also die as the sacrifice for the sins of the whole world. Men guess at God's nature, but no one really knows either the Father or the Son, unless they are revealed. The church is founded on the revelation of God in Christ Jesus. Jesus declared this to Peter, when Peter saw in a flash the truth beyond flesh and blood that here was the Son of God. He said that He would build His church on this revelation. He surely did not mean that He would build His church on the mere doctrine of the divinity of Christ, but rather that He would build His church on the revelation of Christ in His nature. This is apostolic mission, to know Him, and to declare Him in the midst of the church, and also to a dying world, that the invisible God might be fully known throughout the length and breadth of the earth.

This definition of apostolic ministry includes all the main ministries of the church that operate in some measure of leadership in the church. Prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers must all to some degree be men who declare the unseen riches of Christ.

The apostolic commission.

The apostles were sent out to preach and teach and work miracles. They were endowed with power for this ministry, and went out with the exhortation of the Lord as recorded in Matthew ch. 10.

1. The first thing to note is that they were commanded to go only to Israel. (v.5 - 6) This was clear and specific. The remarkable thing about this was that this commandment was altered by the Lord after the resurrection, when He commanded them to preach in all the world. Men sometimes cling to a past calling, and miss what God has got for them in a new phase of life and ministry. Life does not develop in straight lines, but turns abrupt corners. George Muller was called to Bristol, and yet at the end of his life spent many years travelling the length and breadth of the world preaching the gospel.

2. They were also to work miracles. (v.7 - 8) This calling was firmly united with unusual signs and wonders accomplished at various times, taking the progress of the church a whole leap forward. Paul declared to the Corinthians that the signs of an apostle had been fully worked among them (2 Cor 12:12.)

3. They were to trust God for His provision for their needs, and were at liberty to receive support for daily needs from those they ministered to. (v.9 - 10)

4. They were to expect dangers from men above all. (v.17.) But whatever the threatenings and the dangers to which they would be subjected, they were above all not to fear (v.26, 28, and 31.) Fear was thus to be the chief enemy of the fulfilment of their calling. Conflict was inevitable.

This exhortation to the apostles must of course be applied more widely to all the ministers of the Lord, but chiefly those who had some prominent ministry such as prophets, pastors, evangelists, pastors and teachers. Let us also remember at this moment that Peter declared he was an elder. For John it was the title he preferred, never once in his writings referring to himself as the apostle John.

E. Eldership.

1. In Israel.

Eldership has been the pattern of government among God's people since the beginning. Abraham was the father of his household, and the elder of all there with him, though he is only once referred to as an elder in Heb 11:1. The same became true of Isaac and Jacob. Later in Exodus, Moses declared the word of God to the elders of Israel. There is no indication how many there were, nor how they were

recognised. The inference is that the number was not fixed, and that there was no formal recognition. Rather men through maturity and wisdom naturally became elders of the nation. It was the inevitable destiny of men who were responsible.

In Exodus 18, Moses took the common sense advice of Jethro and organised the whole nation, so that the strain of leadership did not fall solely on him. This was good advice, but it seems to have been premature. It is easy to make elders because it seems a good idea, and yet as in the case of Matthias in Acts 1 one is left with the sense that the whole process did no good either to the men appointed or to the nation.

The whole process takes on a different dimension with the divine approval, when Moses was called up the mount to receive further revelation. He was commanded (Ex 24) to bring 70 of the elders of Israel with him. This indicates that these 70 were obviously called to something higher than the other elders. One year later in Numbers 11, Moses had reached the depths of despair. It seems that the men appointed earlier in Exodus 18 had not really helped bear the real burdens of the leadership. Moses cried out to God to provide more men. (Nu. 11:14 & 15.) God ordered him to gather seventy of the elders of Israel, and then the Lord anointed them with the spirit of prophecy, thus granting them power and anointing for the work to which they were called. In this can be seen the principle that man's timing is often premature. He sees and feels the need and acts on the common sense wisdom that is at his disposal. But this must fail. There must be a sense of the moving of God in the appointing of men, or else their ordination means nothing, and can even damage the flock.

The elders of Israel were never to replace Moses. When Moses died, there was never a question of them taking up the leadership of Israel. God raised up a new leader - Joshua. Their role was to aid in the administration of Israel and to aid God's chosen leader. This of course included their duty to admonish and correct that leader if he should need it.

Finally, the titles of eldership in the Old Testament refer to the fact that they were older, bearded and grey headed! This is sanctified common sense.

2. Eldership in the new testament

A. The development of church eldership.

The first mention of eldership is in the context of Israel. Jesus foretells that he must suffer many things of the elders, the chief priests and the scribes. (Mat.16:21) On another occasion the Pharisees questioned Him because his disciples did not keep the tradition of the elders. The Lord rebuked them for making the word of God of none effect by that very tradition, for exalting it above the word of God. (Mark 7:2 - 9). There can be little doubt that this is as great a danger for elders of the church as it was for those of Israel. Elders must take note that by their very attitudes and

actions they will set traditions in process that may well outlive them! When William Carey presented his paper on the need for missionary outreach at a baptist ministers conference, Dr. Rylands said: "St down young man, when God chooses to convert the heathen, he will do it without your aid or mine!" In fairness to Dr. Rylands however, when Carey did persist and founded the missionary society, Dr. Rylands became one of his ardent supporters. But knee jerk reactions are not what is required in eldership. They are not the guardians of the status quo!

The first mention of church elders is in Acts ch.11:30 referring to the elders of the church at Jerusalem. There is no clue as to how or when they were ordained. There can be little doubt that the apostles themselves functioned as the first elders. But equally, by ch.15 reference is made to the apostles and elders as distinct roles in the church.

The first mention of the ordination of elders in local churches is in Acts 14 where Paul and Barnabas are seen ordaining local elders in the new churches that had sprung up only weeks beforehand. Doubtless then, all of these elders were spiritual novices to say the least. This pattern of ordaining elders by outside help is confirmed in Titus, where Paul enjoins Titus to remember that he had been sent to Crete specifically to ordain men to this office. A large eldership is implied in Acts 20 where Paul addresses the eldership of the church at Ephesus in the port of Miletus. Here again, these men had become christians but 3 years previously. The final mention of eldership is in Revelation where they are seen in heaven, glorified and crowned, surrounding the throne and worshipping.

We can draw several conclusions from these accounts:

1. Elders were vital for the smooth running of local assemblies.
2. Elders were not necessarily spiritually mature. That they were spiritually clear can be taken for granted, but their qualifications for eldership were not merely spiritual, they were also natural and to do with their maturity and stability as men.
3. At the outset of a work, it is needful that the elders be recognised by those involved in the founding of the local assembly. The "apostles" ordained the first elders.
4. It is not to be concluded however that all elders are ordained or chosen by the apostles. This is rather the pattern at the outset. Later, the elders and the church functioning together agree on further ordinations.
5. The role of the elders can be discerned in these chapters. They were not to be the only ministers in the church, nor were they ordained as ministers primarily. They were ordained as those who would guide the church through the difficult questions as they arose. Doubtless too, in the early church, they would have to be fearless men, answering to the authorities for the activities of the churches under their charge. Many of these first elders were to meet martyrdom, and thus were to be

examples to the flock.

6. The final lesson is from the scene around the throne. Here it can be seen that there are elders in heaven, recognised by God. This does not mean that all elders on earth will automatically have a place in that august assembly! Their number will include men of stature in the faith, like Moses, Elijah, but also Booth, Wesley etc... No one can aspire to be among their number, for that is the choice of God alone. However, it can be seen that elders have entered into an awareness of God on the throne, and their lives are filled with a sense of wonder. When a man loses the sense of wonder about God, he has ceased to worship, and is no longer able to function as an elder.

B. The role of elders.

1. To give a covering of wisdom and maturity.

Eldership is not merely a spiritual gift or ministry. Elders can be assumed to have spiritual gift and ministry, and so will be apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers, and/or will possess a variety of gifts, from miracles, to discernment to the gift of tongues. But eldership has a natural role. Men must be stable in their personality, and simply mature. Without these qualities, no amount of spiritual ministry is sufficient. But equally, no amount of natural maturity and wisdom are sufficient - there must be spiritual life too. Eldership then is a blend of the natural and the spiritual.

Eldership is defined by the most common word in the new testament that is used for it, namely: presbuteros - an older one. This word occurs 61 times in the new testament. (The second word for elder: episkopos - overseer, occurs a mere 5 times.) The force of the word does not lie merely in old age. This can never in itself be a foundation for office in the church. The word includes all the positive virtues associated with age, namely, maturity, experience, and wisdom to name but a few. The opposite would be the word, young men. The qualities of youth that cannot bear office are impetuosity, inexperience, immaturity etc.. Churches cannot be led by inexperienced or immature men. The Holy Spirit takes up the wisdom of years, and produces men of stature able to lead and guide the church.

The role of eldership then is first to offer the covering of spiritual and natural wisdom and maturity .

The expectation of the scripture is that all men will move steadily into the maturity of fathers in Christ, and will begin to share in some measure in the leadership of the local assembly taking responsibility seriously in a sober manner. The body of elders in a growing congregation should be increasing. The key thing at this point is to distinguish between the call and anointing to lead that makes a man a leader among elders, and the qualities of spiritual and natural maturity that make a man an elder.

2. Watchful oversight

Watching for danger

The word episkopos is the word to oversee. Elders are shepherds that must watch over their flocks. This is the watchman on the walls of Jerusalem, that is looking at the horizon for approaching danger. In Krakow in the 13th. century, the tatars surrounded the city in the middle of the night. One lone watchman became aware of them and sounded his trumpet at midnight, only to be shot by an arrow in the middle of his trumpet call. The tradition has been kept over centuries, and a trumpet blast is made, cut short right in the middle. That watchman saved the city, and his bravery is remembered as a warning to all to be vigilant.

Watching for God.

The elders on the watchtower, like Habakkuk, are there to hear what God will say to the flock, and to see what God wants to do among His people. (Hab 2:1).

Watching over the souls of men

"Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls as they must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you." Heb. 13:17

Elders are vigilant to the things that are happening in the lives of the flock. They are aware of wrong doctrines coming in, and aware too of the carnal ambitions of men. They must watch to try and correct these things before they take a hold.

3. They must go ahead.

In Romans 12:8 and 1 Thess 5:12 the Greek word proioteimi is used, translated to lead, or rule. The word means to stand before. Elders have overcome their self-conscious shyness about standing in front of people. They are not to be lost in the crowd when leadership is required. They are to be lost in the crowd at all other times though! Elders must rule, which means that the church must sense that there is someone in control who is safe, who is sensitive. This should mean that the church has a deep sense of security knowing that there are men aware of their responsibility for the ministry that is conducted in the meetings. In the old testament, the elders of the city sat in the gate, in public view, thus aware of who came into the city, and who left.

4. Steering the course.

1 Cor.12:28 tells us of a spiritual gift of governments. This does not mean that all elders have it. But it does mean that there is an ability to see the answer for the present situation by a word or an insight from God, that brings light to the church as it seeks guidance and direction. The Greek word for this gift: kubernesisis is the word

for steering, piloting.

5. Ruling.

This is perhaps the most difficult of all to swallow in our modern age. But this word is used of Jesus in Mat 2:6, and of elders in Heb 13:7,17 & 24. Elders are not policeman, and they have no police force to enforce their rule. They can only have as much authority as is recognised. Thus Jeremiah had no authority in Israel. Doubtless, the ruling of God's house is not for selfish purposes, or self aggrandizement, though men can use it that way. The rule of elders is to hand on the rule of God over the souls of men. David gives the key:

"He that ruleth over men must be just, ruling in the fear of God. And he shall be like the light of the morning, when the sun riseth, even a morning without clouds; as the tender grass, springing out of the earth by clear shining after rain." 2.Sam.23:3-4.

There can be no doubt that men must rule, they must enforce discipline, and they must at some point correct, restrain and exhort. At times they will have to exclude those whose conduct is shameful to the church. If elders will not rule, then other spirits and other men will wreak havoc in the church.

6. Shepherds.

The whole dimension of ruling is tempered by this word used frequently of Christ and also of elders. The verb is used in Mat 2:6, John 21:16 (only!), Acts 20:28 and 1 Peter 5:2. The word is often mistranslated "feed". A better translation is "tend". Shepherds are to tend the flock which includes feeding, but is much more to do with overall care. All elders must have a shepherd's heart though not all will have the distinct pastoral ministry.

A key passage for this is in John 21. Here Jesus draws Peter's attention to the fact that the key to tending His flock is to have a heart of love for Jesus, the Chief Shepherd, as Peter calls Him in 1 Peter 5. Jesus gives three commands to Peter. The first is the Greek word "bosko" to feed, the second is the word "tend" or "shepherd" (Greek poimen), the third is the word to feed again. This highlights the fact that to shepherd the flock, they must be fed and watered. The food that the sheep require is love, but this must include the ministry of the word. This is because there must be constant supply of the word from the heart of God to His people. If there is a vacuum in the realm of the word, then without a doubt souls will become weak and dry, a prey to other words. Error needs ground to abound. The most fertile ground for it is rebellion and pride. But it will also grow well where there is no preaching of the word of God.

7. Stewards Of God (Titus 1:7)

This is the title given to elders by Paul and is perhaps the greatest imaginable. It refers to the fact that they are those who manage His house and run His affairs.

This may seem simple enough, but God's house is twofold - first it is God Himself, and secondly it is His people. To be the steward of His people is already a high calling, but to be a steward of God Himself is indescribable. God is not known intimately outside of the church. If there is no church in a locality, then God remains unknown, along with all the riches that lie hidden in God. The great calling to be an elder is most of all to be immersed in the consciousness of God and to be aware of Him. As the world looks on the church they must see the revelation of God. Thus this must be true of elders. They must accurately reflect God, and be seen to be not masters of their own house, but stewards of the very person of God. It must be said reverently, but it is nonetheless true, men who hand out the communion are symbolically serving God to the people. Thus elders too are to handle not the symbols alone, but the very person of God to men and women. They hand out His very presence, His substance, as they move among the people. This could of course easily turn into priestcraft. All the people are priests unto God. But let us not miss the truth that those who minister are called to be themselves first the partakers of all the things that they minister. The church itself is the pillar and the ground of the truth. God Himself dwells there, His presence is known there, and there too His stewards dwell with Him, full of faith and the Holy Spirit.

C. Qualifications for eldership.

Blameless

Virtually all the qualifications are to do with his personal life and character. The first word in both Timothy and Titus is blameless. This does not mean that he must be perfect in every way. Peter was far from perfect, and denied the Lord three times under extreme pressure. He became embroiled in compromise while visiting the church at Antioch (Gal 2.) But his eldership is not called into question. Elders must however be free from charges of misconduct as detailed by the apostle. He must not be violent or rough, he must not be greedy for money or possessions. He must not be in trouble with people outside the church. He must not be given to wine. These qualities are self evident lest he dishonour the name of the Lord and His people.

An ordered home.

The home reveals the true state of a person's heart. For this reason a wife can easily disqualify her husband from office by indulging in gossip, or causing the home to be a place where believers do not feel comfortable for any reason. The state of the marriage is a key indicator as to whether a man can bear office, as is the manner in which he cares for and controls his children.

Vigilant, sober, patient.

These are qualities of positive proof of character. It is not enough to be free from

grosser problems, there must be spiritual alertness, a serious demeanour, and an ability to listen and wait.

Apt to teach, holding fast the faithful word.

Elders must not be dumb and silent. There can be no dumb elders. They must be able to express the mind of God and give clear expression to the truth of God on a regular basis. Some men regard silence as the a great virtue. It is a virtue, but there are moments when it is vital that an answer be given, that a word be provided. At such moments, they must articulate what God is saying.

These qualifications are indicators as to whether a man should be ordained to the office of eldership. They do not indicate the work he is to do, they are the foundation on which he will do it. They can be summed up with the realisation that as men look on elders they must to some degree behold God in the flesh. This is true of the whole church, and it must not be exaggerated or none would dare to take on such a responsibility. Nevertheless, in all his life, and elder must consistently display the life and nature of God - in the meetings - at home - at work.

F. Deacons.

The Greek word is diakonos, referring to a minister or servant. Unlike the word elder, there is no reference to age, nor any to taking oversight of the flock. The emphasis here is not on authority and responsibility, but rather on ministry and a desire to serve the Lord in the midst of His people. This may include practical matters such as treasurer, but it is wrong to assume that this is the only realm in which deacons are to function. They have a heart to serve and to be available to help the saints wherever and whenever the need arises. It is abundantly clear that all elders must also be deacons. Jesus Himself said that He had come to serve (diakoneo) Luke 22:26. He said that he who would be greatest must be the deacon (servant) of all.

The emphasis here then is not on age, young men can be deacons, and there is no doubt that the seven men ordained in Acts 6 were young and eager to serve.

Deaconhood is not a grade lower than an elder, it is a different grade. God's divisions are vertical, man's are horizontal. To be a deacon is to attain a high office, the highest, but it is distinct from eldership. Some deacons will never be able to bear the pressure of responsibility for the church. They function best in joyful fulfilment of service.

There is no doubt that their role also extends to spiritual ministry. There are doubtless many men who have gift and unction from God for some ministry, but lack all the wisdom and maturity to bear responsibility for the church.

To appoint men as deacons should be to include them in the leadership of the church in as much as it pertains to ministry. Leaders meetings can be dominated by needs and problems. But they should be much more forward looking, seeking opportunities for the work to grow through prayer and ministry. It should be a joy for a body of ordained elders and deacons to meet together to pray and plan together. Such an inclusive meeting will foster maturity and responsibility, and hence there is every possibility that men may well pass on to be elders though it is unhelpful to think of deacons as trainee elders!

Qualifications are identical to those for elders. The one point of potential difference is the question as to whether there are such things as deaconesses. The question of female elders does not arise, because that is distinctly a position of authority, and God has made it clear that women are not to rule over men. (I Tim 2:12.)

Phoebe was declared by Paul to be a servant of the church at Cenchrea, and the word used here is deaconess. Since the office does not bear authority, but refers rather to service there is no reason why women should be barred from it. It would doubtless add a new dimension to the leadership meetings.

Finally a quote from Spurgeon on the nature of true leadership*

"Labour to gather a church alive for Jesus, every member energetic to the full, and the whole in incessant activity for the salvation of men. To this end there must be the best of preaching to feed the host into strength, continual prayer to bring down the power from on high, and the most heroic example on your own part to fire their zeal: then under the divine blessing, a common sense management of the entire force cannot fail to produce the most desirable issues. Who among you can grasp this idea and embody it in actual fact?"