

## The Eldership and Protocol

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The word *protocol* is used to describe a code of etiquette or procedure for diplomatic negotiation, or, in military circles, for agreed codes of conduct. The term will be employed in this study in a similar way, to describe the procedures agreed to by local churches for the right ordering of church government, particularly as it concerns those who rule, namely the elders. The Head of the church requires that everything be done decently and in order, and the provision of protocol is dictated by divine wisdom, the wisdom that foresees the difficult problems that will be faced by elderships, producing differing views, consequent tensions, and possible divisions.

Many of the independent churches formed during the last thirty years, following the lines laid down in the Pastoral Epistles (Timothy and Titus), have created elderships for their particular governments. The revival of interest in the doctrines of grace on both sides of the Atlantic has spawned a renewed interest in implementing biblical forms of church government. Full-time pastors, while still taking the leading role, began to function in parity (equally shared authority) with part-time ruling elders. During the 1970s a series of articles on Eldership appeared in *Reformation Today* magazine which seemed to illustrate well this heightened sensitivity. That series began with the following paragraphs:

A discovery of the dynamic of New Testament eldership is one of the most urgent needs of the churches today. The subject is not removed from that of revival. Some evangelicals have been seeking revival through evangelism, thinking that the Church will be revived through the addition of converts. Glory and joy result from new converts but with the gladness comes added responsibility of pastoral care and teaching. Evangelism is our responsibility until the end of the age but we should never concentrate on one area of the Church's life at the expense of another. If churches are weak, ill-taught, lacking in discipline and carnal in outlook they are not likely to be effective in evangelism and will be poorly equipped as a place of nurture for spiritual babes.

We should aim at a spiritual, mature and inspired leadership as well as a godly, well-disciplined, dedicated and well-taught membership. I believe that the Lord will send revivals again and that one of our responsibilities is to prepare for them by providing homes for new converts in which they can be nurtured and built up. It is imperative therefore that the practice of eldership be revived and that the difficulties (and there are many) be analysed and overcome gradually with patience. There are those who are content with traditional forms of Church government. They are opposed to change and hostile to the concept of eldership. They believe that different forms of Church government are available and that churches are free to opt for the form that suits them best. (*Reformation Today* No 35, Jan-Feb 1977.)

When churches take seriously the New Testament teaching on church government, the practice of plural elderships is usually generated. As the above quotation shows, however, that concept cannot be taken for granted. The Westminster Assembly (1643-49) debated the eldership question in great detail and at great length. The majority favored office only for the full-time laborers called "ministers". The idea that "ministers" should be assisted by part-time ruling elders was a view held by John Calvin and based on 1 Timothy 5.17: "The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those who work in preaching and teaching." The Scottish delegates who had imbibed the idea of ruling elders and their representatives pressed for it at Westminster. The notion was strongly resisted. The Assembly, in fact, experienced very great difficulty with regard to the interpretation of 1 Timothy

5.17. Lightfoot says that “there were very many and very long debates” on this verse. The Assembly agreed that ruling elders who did not “labor in the word and doctrine” (i.e. part-time ruling elders) were indeed warranted, but it did not declare this to be prescribed by Scripture as essential to church government, and the proof texts did not include I Timothy 5.17 but rather Romans 12.7 and I Corinthians 12.28. It is important for us to take note of this conclusion since the idea is common that an assembly or church is less than ideal if it lacks ruling elders, men who do not “labor in the word and doctrine”

It is a fact that since 1689 most Nonconformist churches, including both General and Calvinistic Baptist, have not employed the eldership method in their government. They have operated on the basis of a pastor (the minister laboring in the Word and doctrine) assisted by a board of deacons. This form of government has predominated for pragmatic reasons. Churches simply did not take kindly to being governed by part-time men who lacked the expertise of full-time pastors. This method, however, had its deficiencies because the men chosen to be deacons had to function in many areas as elders. Deacons assisted in interviewing candidates for baptism and church membership and in applying discipline to the wayward. The method also produced tensions for in many cases a power struggle developed between the pastor and the deacons.

The question of eldership is large because the question of church government is large. Much that has been written on the subject in recent years has been on a purely theoretical level and has not addressed pressing practical concerns. While the restoration of the eldership has been greatly beneficial in some quarters, it has gone seriously wrong in others. Churches increasingly to prefer to seek such benefits as forthright leadership, gentle shepherding and a nourishing teaching ministry apart from the wearisome hassles of a malfunctioning eldership. There is the possibility, even the likelihood, that history will repeat itself and that churches will go back to the traditional system of a single pastor supported by a group of deacons. The church, some will say, was made to be Christ’s Bride. It was made for him, not made for the sake of the elders.

The following discussion is an attempt to wrestle with some of the practical problems of a functioning eldership. It is not possible to treat this subject exhaustively in a single article, yet some effort must be made to address the issues.

### **Difficulties experienced in eldership**

It is well known that the eldership has been in trouble, not only in new churches, where pioneering is the order of the day and where we might expect some “teething” problems, but even in larger and better known churches. It may be that too high a profile has been given to the eldership. About the only place eldership is mentioned in the introductions to Paul’s letters is in the one to the Philippians. In spite of the many problems that beset the church at Corinth, Paul never says in his letters to it, “Elders, get on with it! It is your responsibility to deal with those problems.” In reply one might reason that, since the apostolate was then in existence, it was not necessary to refer the problems to the elders. Now that we no longer have apostles, the elders must rule today as the apostles did then. Fine! In the so-called Restoration Movement that has literally been the case, and the unhappy consequences are notorious.

Frankly, we do not want that. It is a fact that things are not fine with some elderships, and the reason may well be that too much is expected of them. The eldership has been thrust wrongly into the forefront. So much has this been the case that we now have people saying, “Well, we are *only members* of this church!” We must not forget that there are many different organs and functions in a body so that one part

of a body should never vault itself over the other parts. "Not lording it over those entrusted to you", warns Peter (1 Pe 5.4). The existence of an eldership is simply not a panacea for all a church's ills.

A second difficulty relates to authority and roles within the eldership. There must be parity in authority yet there must also be room for diversity in function. There is parity when elders rule and make decisions, but there is never parity when it comes to gifts and abilities. No two elders have the same gifts, and it is folly to pretend that they do. Even within the apostolate the distinction in leadership was crystal clear, and our Lord never apologized for dealing differently with Peter, Matthew, and John. An eldership is headed for frustration if room is not made for recognizing the strengths and weaknesses of its individual members. Flexibility is always the wisest course.

Two instances of this problem come quickly to mind. There is a difference between a man who has been called to leave his profession of medicine, accounting, or other expertise to devote all his time and talents to the vineyard of Christ and those who remain in their professions. History shows that the principle of a full-time leader or rabbi working with elders was residual in the synagogue system on which the New Testament concept of eldership is based. By itself, however; this concept always proved inadequate when it was not flexible enough to allow for broad participation in various areas of leadership by gifted, though only part-time, elders.

It is also of paramount importance today to recognize the gift of evangelism. When this is found in an elder; it should be encouraged, not stifled. Some causes are dying for lack of imagination and initiative. It is true that elders must discourage entertainment evangelism and other well-intentioned efforts which are counterproductive. But it is simply not enough for them to have a negative role, however important that may be for the preservation of the church. We desperately need wise, biblical, and enterprising initiatives coming from the leaders of the church. It is tragic when churches are stillborn because of pessimism, negative attitudes, and inflexibility in their eldership.

A major problem that often besets an eldership is the lack of unanimity. What happens when there is sharp division of opinion on a matter? That the eldership must always present a unanimous decision to the congregation is a misguided notion. Certainly it is lovely to be united - and it looks good! But if that is based on the idea that the elders must be infallible - or at least appear to be so! - it is not only wrong; it is mischievous as well. Elders most certainly are not infallible, and any tendency toward thinking they are should be assiduously repulsed.

We need to be clear about the fact that only Scripture is infallible. Elders must be united in affirming the infallible doctrines of the Bible. In most churches both elders and deacons are required to subscribe to a common confession of faith. But while agreement in such areas is essential, there are many issues which are relative and concerning which it is unreasonable to expect complete agreement. Difficult matters of church discipline are a case in point. If in an eldership it is known that only unanimous decisions will come before the church, that in itself can lead to aggressiveness and belligerence, even in men of advanced personal sanctification, in order to force unanimity. The attitude can soon develop that it is a fiendish thing for any elder to disagree with his fellows, especially in cases of zeal to discipline a church member whom some regard as a villain. Thus a pastor; by reason of his gifts and personality, can rule autocratically over the men who are supposed to be his colleagues. In any event, a facade of public unity which disguises a belligerent mentality and appalling in-fighting is most disadvantageous for any ruling body.

On the other hand, if the principle of unanimity is insisted upon - for the eldership must be infallible! - then it is possible for one elder to hold out against the rest and veto their opinions so that no decisions can be made. Such veto power can be a good thing in the hands of a wise and courageous elder who realizes that the others are in error; but it is a bad thing when it is used by one who simply has a streak of obstinacy in him.

This brings us to one of the main reasons for plurality. Three or four or five wise men working together are far better than one man acting on his own because that makes it possible for various aspects of a case to be seen more fully and adequately debated. If, for example, a weak believer is being considered for discipline, one or more of the elders should assume the role of his advocate so that his case may be fully and fairly judged. At least some of the church's members will feel sympathetic toward that weak believer and secretly if not openly resent a harsh decision by the elders. There is even the danger that rumors of the matter will leak out, be reported in the news media, and gloated over by the ungodly. If all the extenuating circumstances of a case are not taken into account by the elders, not only may the news media take up the matter; but the members of the church will feel aggrieved, and even more so if the eldership has already gained a reputation for authoritarianism. If the principle is allowed that the eldership by its very nature cannot err; a further problem develops, and that is the curse of inquisition. If we elders must be perfect in doctrine and judgment and must maintain solidarity in our infallibility, it follows that we must be constantly on the alert for any elder among us who may deviate from this perfection. If, for instance, an elder shows suspected disloyalty by friendship with any party whatever that takes a different view of a doctrine held by the elders or a more lenient view on a judgment made by them, then the "disloyal" elder will have to conform immediately to the opinion of the others or suffer very serious consequences. Good men have sometimes been "axed", yet time has proved that they were guilty neither of heresy nor of wrongdoing. They were only guilty of having a different opinion from that of the others, and their dissent was adjudged a crime by the eldership from which they were evicted.

As Christians we enjoy freedom under Christ, and he has not forced us to do anything. We did not believe because a knife was held to our throats. All that we believe concerning the Bible we believe voluntarily. We were never coerced into believing anything against our wills. Many of us enjoy complete liberty to meet with fellow Christians with whom we differ in order to discuss with them doctrines and practices, ethics and morals. We desire therefore to have elderships in our churches in which the same principle of freedom applies. There are vast complexities in such subjects as medical ethics, and there are many moral issues concerning which the Bible does not provide judgments with slide-rule accuracy. We want to have elders who will be frank with us and with one another. It is inconceivable that they will agree with us or among themselves about everything, for they are not infallible and never will be. We do not want them to hide their views, and we do not want to feel that we must hide ours. When Paul says that we should all be of one mind, we take that to mean that we should be at peace with one another; not that we must agree exactly on every issue.

Elders should come to terms with the fact that it is not sinful for them to have differences in judgment in many matters; and elders should be willing to share with the church difficult matters which are not confidential. They should not hesitate in some difficult cases to seek the counsel of wise and experienced members of the church and not feel that in so doing their own dignity and authority is threatened. Paul goes even further than that and tells the Corinthians to "appoint as judges even men of little account in the church" (1 Cor 6.4). Does this not show that in many disputes everything is open and nothing hidden, and that in the end of such disputes every Christian will still have a mind of his or her own?

Therefore it is important that there be in the establishment of church government a protocol which allows for dissent within the eldership - dissent without division. In our church meetings we often make decisions by majority vote, and we do not excommunicate dissenters. We all accept the principle that we do not need to leave the church just because the vote does not go our way. It is great asset to submit to the judgment of consensus in matters that are relative. Before coming to a decision concerning a delicate and life-threatening operation, a surgeon may consult with a group of his colleagues about the procedure. In such cases the decision as to whether or not to proceed has sometimes been based on a straight majority

vote. Thus responsibility for the outcome is shared by the group and does not lie on the mind and conscience of one lonely man.

Issues involving relations with other churches can create tensions in a board of elders, for the responsibility of eldership extends to the wider body of Christ in interdependence and interrelationships with sister churches. In most cases it is pastors who have to grapple with the challenges of church planting, missionary expansion, training for the ministry, and meeting the menace of the modern ecumenical movement - all of which involve a measure of cooperation with other churches. If the elders are parochial in their mentality, then tensions are inevitable. The Lord Jesus did not say, "I will build my 175,349 churches"; he said, "I will build *my church*." "There is *one body*" (Eph 4.4-6; 1 Cor 12.13).

Happy is the local church whose eldership is willing to study ways and means to contribute to the training of men for the ministry, the preparation of men for missionary service, the development of a wide policy of church planting, and a reaching out to the wider community by means of literature and the mass media. Such is the diversity of gifts required for the ministry, and such are the needs which arise out of the interdependency of churches, that it ought to be immediately obvious that flexibility is required. For instance, if a pastor is called to the specialized work of a seminary, or to spend time in a radio or TV ministry, or to devote much of his time and energy in reaching out to a particular ethnic group, it may be necessary to reapportion his work load in the local church. Yet a pastor's involvement in such specialized ministries should not require his total withdrawal from the local church ministry, for that has often been seen to be harmful. However, the pulpit ministry may have to be shared, or his leadership in the church relinquished, depending on the gifts and capacities of the persons involved, but his continued presence and service on the local eldership is highly desirable.

The eldership ought always to consider how the gifts given to individuals can be used in the fullest and best possible way, not only for the interests of the local church, but for the wider church as well. At times this may require that the most talented pastors move out to the mission field. If a pastor shows increasing ability in evangelism and is frequently called on by other churches, it may be necessary for him to consider a full-time itinerant ministry and for the elders to consider it with him. If a man gives himself to such a ministry, it would be a pity for him to withdraw completely from the eldership of the local church. Even if he can meet with that body only on rare occasions, the insights he gains by his wider experience may prove invaluable to the other elders and to the entire local church.

### **Duties of the eldership**

I will now try to summarize all the duties of shepherding as they are seen in the Chief Shepherd, who is our prototype for eldership. No one elder can possibly fulfill all that is required, but every elder can at least broaden his perspectives so as to appreciate the comprehensive work that is involved. Thus he will be fitted to cooperate with the others and to encourage them in the fulfillment of their particular labors and responsibilities. Christ can be observed as a Shepherd in his functions as Priest, King, Prophet, and Initiator.

Christ's Priesthood is reflected in his caring for, counselling with (Col 1.28), and praying for the members of his flock.

Christ's Kingship or rule is seen in his maintaining discipline in the church and his use of the keys in bringing in and shutting out. This should be reflected in giving protection and showing genuine concern for the welfare of the flock, never lording over them, for Christ's rule is never that. Undershepherds should be noted for their humility and their readiness to share with and take an interest in the most

humble and lowly, and a willingness, too, to leave the ninety-nine who are secure and safe in order to search through the mountains and find a solitary lost sheep.

Christ's role as Prophet (or Teacher) is reflected in the diligence and thoroughness of those who are set aside to labor in prayer and teaching as they attend to their calling. The emphasis on prayer in Acts 6.4 is a reminder that we must intercede for those to whom we minister and pray for unction and power in our own ministry, so that, like Aaron's rod, it may be marked by fruitfulness that comes from a supernatural source.

The distinction between ordinary elders and full-time elders who labor in the ministry of the Word is made at the point of teaching for the simple reason that this ministry is so exacting. It may well be that today the preaching ministry is more demanding than ever before, because ministers are now required to be highly skilled as apologetes as well as dogmaticians. A minister who cannot maintain an authoritative, systematic, expository, and attractive preaching ministry in an increasingly secularistic and pluralistic society represents a lost cause. Such work requires total dedication and full-time attention.

Very few men are talented enough to sustain two occupations. The apostle Paul himself was so gifted that he could, if necessary, earn his living at tent-making and minister the Word effectively at the same time. Sometimes ministers are forced by circumstances to labor with their hands. The Communist regime in Hungary places Christian ministers on such meager stipends that many pastors have to work on the land to provide food for their families. Jewish rabbis were required to learn a trade or some secular skill before their entrance to religious work. That no doubt accounts for Paul's skill as a tentmaker. This same apostle declared, however, that secular employment for pastors ought to be avoided, and he used the analogy of military service which requires total concentration (2 Tim 2.4).

### **The Lord Jesus as Leader**

We come now to a neglected facet, one that is so prominent that unfortunately we take it for granted. Our Lord fulfills the essential role of Leader. He called Moses. He commissioned Joshua. He called Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. He called the apostles and trained them. As leader he made the decisions. He outlined and commanded the course of action the apostles should take following Pentecost: to take the gospel to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and then to the uttermost parts of the earth.

Elders should follow the Lord's example in this respect also and be leaders, initiators. I would suggest that it was the quality of leadership that decided the issue in the election of the seven deacons from among many qualified men in Acts 6. This is the quality stressed in the references to elders in Hebrews 13.7 and 17. The Greek word used here is *hegoumenois* 'those taking the lead [among you]' Men who are equipped by the Holy Spirit with creativity and enterprise should be encouraged by their elders. Those inspired by the love of Christ to evangelize should be helped and trained rather than suppressed. The preparation of God's people for works of service is part of the calling of the ministry (Eph 4.12). Enterprise among the people under their care should be encouraged by the elders. It is true that some are misguided and have zeal which is not according to knowledge, and elders are required to protect the flock from fanatics; but while suppression is occasionally needed, the work of encouraging the development of gifts is always paramount.

Having viewed the example of our Chief Shepherd, I now attempt to summarize the duties of elders. This includes:

1. The comprehensive spiritual oversight of the flock, compassionate caring, teaching, intercession for, and ruling.
2. Regulating all gatherings for public worship.
3. Giving heed to all the flock by watching over them and praying for them; by organizing and encouraging the visitation of the sick, the restoration of the backsliders, the correction of the

ignorant, and the guidance of those ready to stumble. The encouragement of fellowship and the integration into union of all the members. The encouragement of full use of gifts within the membership.

4. Overseeing the administration of baptism and reception into church membership. The preparation of candidates to present to the church and their instruction in all their responsibilities.

5. The rule of the church with respect to discipline by gradually, lovingly, yet firmly dealing with those who refuse to fulfill their responsibilities or who are in a state of decline, sin, or rebellion. The application of disciplinary measures when it is quite clear that all other means of persuasion have failed.

6. Encouraging the work of evangelism in the community by organizing, leading in, and participating in it. By supporting the planting of churches at home and abroad, encouraging the work of evangelism in all the world, and giving financial support in ways deemed to be most effective and timely.

7. Seeing that the church is the pillar and ground of the truth (1 Tim 3.15), the elders are responsible to see that the local church has an up-to-date and adequate constitution and confession of faith. They must think not only in terms of preserving the truth intact on paper for future generations, but also in a living way, by training up others who in turn will preach the gospel and train yet more (2 Tim 2.2). In other words, elders must have eagle eyes to detect and encourage gifts, praying that future elders will be raised up for the church at home and especially gifted ones who may be sent into the world at large with the message of salvation.

8. Harmonious cooperation with the deacons of the church and encouragement of them in their responsibilities.

In addition to leading the other elders in the fulfillment of the duties outlined above, the full-time preaching elder, usually referred to as pastor or teacher (Eph 4.11), must provide a structured teaching ministry designed to build up the whole church in biblical theology, an overall knowledge of the contents of the Bible, and a definitive spelling out of the doctrines of the Bible, covering in due course all the themes of the 1689 Confession of Faith. His preaching must be thoroughly evangelistic, practical, and applicatory, especially in the realm of family life. In this area catechizing should be encouraged as the most viable form of imparting the whole counsel of God's revelation in a balanced form. The teaching program ought always to respect the unity of the Old and New Testaments and the harmony of all the parts of the Bible.

The cooperation of the ruling elders is essential for the success of such a program, and where assistance is needed to share in or to supplement the ministry, the clearest channels of communication should be maintained so that the pulpit ministry is always inspiring, challenging, powerful, and edifying. There is a negative side to true preaching, and the eldership should seek to maintain unity when it is necessary for the pulpit to expose the vile nature of sin, reprove the rebellious, and correct error. It is also needful for the eldership as a corpus to remember always that to strike a correct balance in preaching between those who need strong meat and those who can take only milk is exceedingly difficult and requires intense and constant application.

Such is the inbuilt prejudice due to the remains of sin that many believers have times when they rebel against the discipline required to live by the Word of God. This tendency is so well illustrated in Numbers 11 - especially verse 6: "But now we have lost our appetite; we never see anything but this manna!" - that I will not attempt to go further, except to say that elders ought always to be aware of the real reasons when members sometimes grumble about the preaching. There can be valid reasons, of course, and these can be sorted out; but at the end of the day, if the preacher is a faithful man, it is the Word of God and not the preacher that is on trial.

If the pulpit ministry is to be shared, then relationships should be clearly defined and a definite understanding established as to how the ministry is to be delegated. A legalistic attitude should be avoided at all costs, and flexibility should be preferred to a system that imposes on elders a preaching role they are unable to sustain and for which they lack the appropriate gifts. Rotation may not be the best way

of filling a shared pulpit. It may be better for one man to study thoroughly and be prepared to preach regularly during a period in which a particular theme is coherently sustained for the benefit of the congregation. However, whatever has to be arranged (perhaps during an “interregnum”), there should be a clear understanding among the elders. Often it is found best to delegate the task of organizing the preaching ministry to a single elder who shows a peculiar aptitude and wisdom in that sphere of administration.

### **Thoughts on protocol**

Having briefly remarked on some of the difficulties and tensions elderships face as well as their responsibilities toward God, we are now in a position to make suggestions concerning protocol. By way of introduction to this section, I wish to draw attention to the inadequacy of most church constitutions. Accordingly, most of what we shall now consider is not covered in the average constitution. A manual for protocol is urgently needed, and a church constitution could include such a document. Recommendations rather than fixed laws should characterize such a manual, for inflexible legislation can become unwieldy, lead to legalism, and prevent room for manoeuvring. Brevity is an added advantage because too much detail is harmful. Guidelines are better than rigid rules which hamper freedom and which can prove to be a liability in future circumstances not now foreseen.

Protocol is a paper exercise belonging to the family of constitutions and covenants. What can paper do to remedy something that can only be cured by the Holy Spirit in revival? The answer is that a covenant for elders can perform the same function as the more familiar covenant for church members. Covenants can serve as effective reminders to God’s people of their duties. In the same way a covenant among elders can remind them of their calling, including their responsibility to lead the church in evangelism and the support of missions according to the Great Commission.

One pastor I know suggested seven points by way of an annual covenant for himself and his elders:

We deem the following to be essential: (1) Participation in practical evangelism, (2) Visitation of the flock, (3) Attendance at the Prayer Meetings, (4) Gentleness and generosity, (5) Hospitality, (6) Absolute fidelity and loyalty to each other, (7) Affectionate attendance to the needs of the pastor and his family and the encouragement of the deacons in their responsibilities.

### **The question of power and the nature of authority**

The authority wielded by elders is pastoral, spiritual, moral, and momentous in character. We should not imagine that deacons do not wield power, for they do. Power and authority are connected to responsibility. The deacons of Acts 6 had authority in the use of funds, and that is no small power. An airline captain has a great responsibility for the three hundred passengers aboard his craft, and for that he is given the appropriate authority. The same is true in various spheres. Everyone who is entrusted with responsibility is to that extent wielding power. Elders handle matters of eternal import and will some day render an account to the Chief Shepherd (He 13.17; 1 Pet 5.14).

The principle of decision by majority vote is used by committees, cabinets, and in elderships, but this principle does not work so well if there is an even number of elders - two, four, or six. In the case of a tie vote, one of them must break the deadlock, and that privilege is usually given to the chairman. While decisions on ordinary matters can be made by majority vote, it is questionable whether a matter of discipline in the church can be handled in that manner. Unity is then imperative because it is unsatisfactory to take a momentous issue to the congregation if the leadership itself is divided concerning

it. Perhaps time will enable them to reach a unanimous decision, but what procedure should be followed if it does not? It is better not to apply the proposed discipline if the eldership is not united about it. This means that in effect each elder has the power of veto in cases of discipline.

The power of veto can be abused if personal factors enter. "Blood is thicker than water", and it may be that a case of discipline involves a relative of one of the elders. A rule could be adopted whereby the power of veto would not be allowed to an elder affected in such instances. Sometimes cases arise concerning which it is not clear whether or not scandalous sin requiring discipline has been committed. In such matters there is real possibility for disagreement among elders, and it may be of great value to seek counsel from the eldership of another church or other churches. Part of accepted protocol should be the right for elders who are perplexed about a case to refer it to the association (assuming that the church is part of an association) for a recommendation by the leaders. This procedure, modeled on Acts 15, has sometimes proved most effective in bringing light and agreement. Spiritual people respect the fact that the Holy Spirit gives light and wisdom to those whom he equips for roles of leadership - not infallibly so, but adequately so more often than not.

### **The question of confidentiality**

Of great importance is the matter of confidentiality. Elders must be able to trust each other when they discuss personal matters concerning members. But while the need for confidentiality should always be stressed, a sense of proportion and balance is necessary. To report that the elders are dealing with a difficult matter is one thing, but to break confidence about details can cause great injury to an individual, or lead to a bitter quarrel, painful offence, or serious misunderstanding. Scrupulous care is needed in this area. Yet there are times when confidentiality is inadvertently breached through carelessness, and if that should happen, the error should on no account be made into an unforgivable sin.

Confidentiality extends, too, to church meetings, and the membership should be instructed in a specific manner as to where confidentiality applies. It is necessary to be specific because, generally speaking, it is only rarely that information concerning an issue needs to be kept confidential. While it may need to be stressed, for example, that no details whatever concerning Mr. X should be reported outside the church, the ordinary decisions of a church are not secret but open. The church is an assembly under the authority of the Word of God, and its members are people who live openly and ingenuously and have nothing to hide. The church is not a secret society like the Masonic orders or the Mafia.

Confidentiality can become an enormous problem to the elders, and especially so to the pastor because he is the one who is most often confided in by individuals. When details concerning a family are revealed in strict confidence, this can cause tension in the eldership because the pastor will view this particular situation in a different light from the other elders, seeing that he is in possession of more of the facts. This type of problem is increasing with regard to sexual matters, especially child abuse. A woman may confide to her pastor but demand that he keep secret the fact that her husband is guilty of incest. The imposition of discipline could expose the entire family to shame of horrendous proportions. What should a pastor do in such cases? Recently, when a man guilty of incest within his own family seduced another girl, the pastor declared his intention to proceed to church discipline. Rather than face the shame the man committed suicide, and the wife was tempted to blame the pastor for his death.

The current epidemic of sexual aberration produces situations of agonizing complexity. Involvement of the church members in complex and detailed histories is ill-advised. It is better to seek counsel from an

association of experienced pastors, especially since busy ruling elders do not have the time to study parallel case histories or to read manuals on how to counsel in such situations.

### **The question of delegation**

The dreaded disease of “committeitis” can severely handicap the efficiency of an eldership or a diaconate. The fact that these two spheres of responsibility exist highlights the reality of delegated authority. In Acts 6 responsibility and authority in a particular area were delegated to seven men. (This is usually looked upon as the establishment of the diaconate.) Most needs in life are met when competent persons do the work and others maintain a hands-off policy. We do not need a committee meeting to decide the color of the vestry walls or the composition of the parking lot pavement. Let such matters be assigned to people who are knowledgeable about them, and let them get on with the job without delay. Likewise in eldership sessions it is wearying and time-wasting to go into detail about the problems of every member of the church. By the time such a meeting is finished, the elders involved could have gone out on profitable pastoral visits and accomplished far more than by merely going over unimportant details or facts already known. Elders should avoid falling into the trap of thinking that they and they alone should be involved in pastoral care. “Body life” or “body care” belongs to all the members. This is well illustrated in Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12. It is true that difficult members must be the objects of special pastoral oversight, but the elders should not hesitate to delegate pastoral work to deacons where this is appropriate or where these men give evidence of possessing pastoral gift. By this method latent gift is sometimes brought to light, and the church is able to put new men into the eldership.

### **The protection of pastors and elders**

Many a pastor has been destroyed by malicious gossip. This has sometimes come about because the elders were careless or willfully negligent to obey the command given in 1 Timothy 5.19 “Do not entertain an accusation against an elder unless it is brought by two or three witnesses:” In other words, there must first be definite proof before a case is even considered. Calvin’s exposition of this text is so helpful that I reproduce it here in full.

Having given instructions about stipends for pastors, he now tells Timothy not to let them be exposed to slanderous attacks or burdened with unsubstantiated and unsupported accusations. It may seem absurd that he should state a law that applies to all men, as if it applied specially and exclusively to presbyters. For God requires in all cases that they should be established “by the mouth of two or three witnesses” (Deut. 17.6; Matt. 18.16). Why then does the apostle evoke this law for the protection of presbyters alone, as if it was a privilege peculiar to them, to have their innocence protected against false accusations? I reply that it is necessary to guard against the malice of men in this way. For none are more exposed to slanders and insults than godly teachers. This comes not only from the difficulty of their duties, which are so great that sometimes they sink under them, or stagger or halt or take a false step, so that wicked men find many occasions of finding fault with them; but added to that, even when they do all their duties correctly and commit not even the smallest error, they never avoid a thousand criticisms. It is indeed a trick of Satan to estrange men from their ministers so as gradually to bring their teaching into contempt. In this way not only is wrong done to innocent people whose reputation is undeservedly injured, but the authority of God’s holy teaching is diminished. And it is this that, as I have said, Satan is chiefly concerned to achieve, for not only does Plato’s saying apply here that “the multitude are malicious and envy those above them”, but the more sincerely any pastor strives to further Christ’s kingdom, the more he is loaded with spite, the more

fierce do the attacks upon him become. And not only so, but as soon as any charge is made against ministers of the Word, it is believed as surely and firmly as if it had been already proved. This happens not only because a higher standard of integrity is required from them, but because Satan makes most people, in fact nearly everyone, over credulous, so that without investigation, they eagerly condemn their pastors whose good name they ought to be defending. Thus Paul has good reason for preventing such a great injustice, and he says that presbyters are not to be given over to the malice of evil men till they have been convicted by legal testimony.

This principle is of so vital a nature that it should be included in church constitutions and should always be borne in mind during times of stress.

### **The question of division among elders**

Should the elders find themselves divided over an important doctrinal issue or over a crucial matter of discipline, and there is no code of practice by which they can refer to arbitration or receive help from other pastors or other churches, then the only recourse is to bring the matter to the congregation for a ruling. Yet in almost every instance bringing a complex doctrinal controversy, or a division among the elders, or a division between the pastor and the elders before the entire church membership has proved to be disastrous. The effects of such a procedure can be catastrophic for it provides an opportunity for jaundiced members to air all the grievances and all the records of wrongs (real or imagined) that they have endured.

The Corinthian church was able to refer a fairly long list of major problems to the apostle Paul. It ought to be noted that in his reply Paul did not counsel anyone to leave the church. There is no mention in the New Testament of a person's leaving one assembly and going to another. There was no question of dividing the body of Christ. Schism was anathema. On the contrary, the Corinthians were expected to continue working at the problems with patience and perseverance until they all were solved.

It is all too common in times of difficulty for Christians to follow the example of the sailors who decided to toss Jonah overboard because that immediately solved their problem, bringing an end to the storm that was menacing them. Sometimes it is easier to divide a church than to live with a problem.

Excommunicating dissenters may seem to be an easy way to achieve unanimity in a church, and firing a pastor who holds firmly to principle may seem to be a cheap way out of trouble. Many assemblies prefer to use these expedients rather than face up to controversial issues. Pastors themselves not infrequently opt for a quiet exodus, choosing not to risk unpleasant confrontations. Meanwhile, however, the real problems continue unsolved. How crucial it is to combine a spirit of love and gentleness with a determination to deal candidly and forthrightly with difficulties.

### **Initiatives for evangelism and mission**

There is need in the eldership for the recognition of gifts and functions which will fill the vacuum left by the apostles and their evangelists. Church planting did not cease with the apostles. It must still be promoted wherever possible in all the nations (Mt 28.18-20).

Eldership is essentially a work of leadership which requires creativity, enterprise, and aggressive evangelistic organization. This can be illustrated from warfare. Our Lord himself used such imagery when he spoke of storming the gates of hell. For illustration I refer to two famous generals, Rommel and

Montgomery, who were engaged in a protracted battle across North Africa during the Second World War. It was a battle demanding extraordinary skill in the use of military strategies, and both these men were unusually endowed with genius. Montgomery observed the difference in character between types of soldiers. Some were better equipped for aggressive assaults, the storming of strongholds, and the capture of enemy territory. Other troops, however, were better equipped to hold and defend with dogged tenacity positions which had already been gained and never give them up even under great pressure. His sagacious use of these character distinctions in his men contributed largely to Montgomery's final triumph over the clever Rommel. In the spiritual realm, too, we need powerful and aggressive stormtroopers to do pioneer work in evangelism; and we also need those who are tenacious in holding territory that has been won and defending it against the attacks of cults. What we do not need is men who are traditionalists, men who are unprepared to face the need for reformation. Traditionalists can be tenacious, but in the end they may be the cause of stagnation and discouragement.

To sum up, I note that there are those who excel in the work of keeping, caring, and maintaining, and there are those who shine in planning and executing assaults on enemy positions. For its success the latter work requires an enthusiasm which is not likely to come from an eldership which is complacent and satisfied merely in maintaining the status quo, one lacking in vision and evangelistic zeal.

### **Cooperation with other churches**

In his book entitled *Principles and Practices for Baptist Churches*, Edward T. Hiscox is extremely biased against church councils, for he sees in them the possibility for tyranny or coercion (p. 314). This whole question requires to be reviewed biblically and in historical perspective - which is beyond my present purpose. Suffice it to say that no independent church need bind itself to the jurisdiction of any outside ecclesiastical body. Having said that, however, I must add that every church, whether in a Presbyterian system or not, is bound by the very tenor of the New Testament to use the same love that Christ has for the whole body of Christ in the world.

Accordingly, as much as we are able we must express unity and cooperation with other evangelical churches. It is obvious that more can be accomplished in positive terms of promoting church planting and supporting missionaries if we associate in that work with other Reformed churches than if we insist on operating in isolation. Such cooperation will inevitably require that some men will have to act as full-time deacons as has been the case in Great Britain with its Grace Baptist Mission and in the United States with its Reformed Baptist Mission Services.

Historically it can be shown that the independency of local churches is in no way impaired by association. It can be argued that if a union or association drifts into error, then all who belong to it are adversely affected. It is possible for us to be pessimistic and be always thinking in terms of "downgrade", but at Tom Nettles points out in an article on "upgrade" (*Reformation Today* No. 102), we ought to remember that associations have often played a major role in recalling churches from error. Indeed it can be reasoned that by association with sound leaders or groups, local churches beyond counting have been kept on biblical lines and prevented from going astray. Having lived ourselves through a period of great apostasy (Modernism), we can understand why there is great suspicion about association. Yet the fact that enormous good can be achieved through association is well illustrated by the large libraries of many Reformed Baptist ministers. Who do they associate with in their studies? Who are the authors of the books on their shelves? Is not consultation with those writers a form of association?

As far as Reformed Baptist churches in Britain are concerned, it would appear that most of them are generous in sending messengers or delegates from their elderships or diaconates to conferences or other such assemblies. A positive step forward would be the inclusion in any protocol a statement that would urge elders to seek wherever possible to contribute to the spiritual health and welfare of sister churches, particularly by positive participation in the work of association.

Hopefully this discussion should show that in many churches clarity is needed, not only with regard to the functions of the eldership, but also with respect to the protocol they employ. Protocol is especially relevant for independent churches that have no synod, association, or other forum to which they can appear in a season of perplexity.

“For the waging of war you need guidance, and for victory many advisers” (Pr 24.6). In the spirit of this text I offer these thoughts, hoping that through judicious counsel and the wisdom that experience provides, our elderships may be established and our churches made safe and prosperous.

*This originally appeared in *Shepherding God's Flock - Essays on leadership in the local church*, editor, Roger O Beardsmore, 1988, Sprinkle Publications, Harrisburg, Virginia, USA, Now out of print.*