



Elders for better or worse?

Reconsidering eldership
in the local church

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Introduction

The rediscovery of the Bible's teaching concerning the importance of the local church and how it should be ordered was something of an epiphany for evangelicalism in the 1970s and 80s.

As Christians looked afresh at Scripture, they realised that God has not left us to devise our own schemes as to how a church is to be run. They found, in summary, that a local church is a company of believers who are a family in Christ, led by elders approved by the church in accord with the qualifications set out by the apostles, and supported in their work of leadership by deacons.

So, as Paul writes to the church at Philippi, he phrases his opening words as follows:

*To all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi
together with the overseers and deacons;
Grace and peace to you from
God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.
Philippians 1.1-2*

The title 'overseer' is interchangeable with 'elder' (see Acts 20.17, 28; Titus 1.5, 7). Since a church is to be like a family, under the headship of Christ, the elders are male, 1 Timothy 3.2, but with women, gifted by God, playing a significant role in promoting and maintaining the well-being of the congregation, 1 Timothy 3.11. The man to whom we often give the title 'pastor' is one of the elders who has particular responsibility for preaching and teaching, 1 Timothy 5.17.

Qualifications

The local church is not just a family, it is also the body of Christ, with every member having a part to play for the common good. The gathered membership of the church acts as the ultimate authority, under Christ and his word, Matthew 18.17; 1 Corinthians 5.4, 5. The elders, therefore, are accountable to the church and must be approved by the church before they can take office and begin to function as elders.

Godliness and maturity as Christians are essential characteristics of church leadership. Paul's epistle to Titus gives this description of what is required in an elder:

*An elder must be blameless,
the husband of but one wife, a man whose children (are faithful)
and are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient.
Since an elder is entrusted with God's work,
he must be blameless – not overbearing, not quick tempered, not given to
drunkenness,
not violent, not pursuing dishonest gain.
Rather he must be hospitable, one who loves what is good,
who is self-controlled, upright, holy and disciplined.
He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught,
so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine
and refute those who oppose it.*

Titus 1.6-9

This list of requirements broadly covers a man's family life, his personal life and his doctrinal stance. Men who are solid in these areas are the kind of men that churches need as elders.

Rethinking

Encountering afresh the Bible's teaching about elders many churches, in seeking to be obedient to the apostle's teaching, changed their leadership structure during the 1970s and 1980s. They often moved from a set-up of a pastor and deacons (who basically looked after the church building and finances) to a plural eldership supported by deacons. Instead of one elder (the pastor) focusing on spiritual care now there were a group of men leading the church. This brought a different dynamic and ethos to the churches.

Many congregations were blessed as they moved in this direction. It brought a strength to the leadership which wasn't there before and a new ownership of the work by the congregation from whom the elders were drawn. When I started as a young pastor, the church had an eldership in place already and those dear men proved an enormous help to me with their kindness and wise guidance, not to mention covering for my mistakes.

But, many churches having rightly proceeded to set up elderships, certain things had not necessarily been thought through. In a fallen world nothing is perfect. All men are sinners. Even when we seek to do the right thing, inevitably problems arise. Some of the difficulties concerning eldership could have been foreseen

and others perhaps not. As the years of having elders have passed some problems have come into clearer focus.

The aim of this booklet is to highlight a few of these issues which could require rethinking. It might be good at this point, if your church has elders, to pray for them.

1: An overview of Biblical eldership

Ninety-nine times out of a hundred the Lord God uses ordinary people to accomplish his purposes – especially his purposes of grace and goodness.

Following the death, resurrection and ascension of the Lord Jesus, he used fishermen and minor civil servants to spread the good news and establish the church. And still today he calls and equips ordinary people as church leaders.

Taking responsibility

The initial step in becoming part of the leadership of a local church is to be willing to take responsibility for God's family.

- Look at Acts 14.21-23

A church is made up of Christians. Being a Christian is not easy. It never was and it isn't today. And having warned the new Christians in the various towns that 'we must go through trials to enter the kingdom', the first response of Paul's missionary band in that context is to get elders appointed in each church. The new converts are vulnerable. Christians and churches always face challenges. But some of those new Christians were already showing signs of spiritual maturity and leadership potential to become elders. And elders are those prepared to take responsibility and try to help their fellow Christians. Elders are not of the essence of the church – that's the believers themselves – but elders are necessary for the well-being and health of the church.

- You see the same thing in Titus 1.5

There were believers in the different towns in Crete, but the new churches were a bit all over the place and needed straightening out and directing in a number of ways. The general culture of Crete was rather decadent and self-centred. It offered plenty of temptation for Christians to be slovenly and ungodly. Who would protect and direct them? Paul's first answer to that is to get elders appointed – good men who will take responsibility and care for and lead the churches.

- There is a similar message in the context of 1 Peter 5.1-4

What's the background to 1 Peter? It is that the churches are facing persecution. They are experiencing a 'painful trial', 4.12; the church folk are understandably 'anxious', 5.7; they need to 'stand firm in the faith', 5.9 despite the pressure, because at least for a little while, 5.10, there will be suffering. And right in the

midst of that Peter is encouraging the elders to do their job out of love for the people, 5.1-4. So, the elders are there to steady the church ship and to help individual brothers and sisters keep going in the faith despite the devil's attacks.

Such work is vital but it is too much to leave to one man – the pastor. He needs others around him to support him and help care for the people. There needs to be a good team.

We live in a society now in the West which is almost totally sold on individualism. We have become generally takers rather than givers. This has rubbed off on many Christians. So, they think, if I'm going to attend church then it's about what me and my family get out of it. We love the benefits of the church, but we don't want any responsibility. But church leaders – and elders in particular (including the pastor) – are those who under God are prepared to step up to the plate and take responsibility for the church and its people.

Such a man says to himself, 'Jesus Christ took responsibility for me and my sin, if he calls me, I am prepared to humbly take responsibility for the well-being of his church.'

Shepherds and fathers

What do elders actually do? There are two dominant pictures of the work of elders in the Scriptures. A shepherd is one picture. A father is another. Both images are about caring and, of course, they overlap in some ways and fill out the overall idea.

We will consider both. However, two initial points are to be made. *First*, both these jobs are for ordinary men. The first century shepherd was very much just an ordinary Joe – not a genius but unexceptional. And, of course, fathers are ordinary men. You don't have to have unusual skills or dozens of certificates to be a good father. *Second*, much of what it is to be a good father or indeed a good shepherd is learned on the job. Yes, read books about those things – that's good. But the real skills come as you are hands on. It is calming the child when he or she is crying in the night that makes a dad. It is dealing with a predator out in the field who wants to attack the flock that makes a shepherd. We develop as we do things.

- *Shepherds*

Look again at 1 Peter 5.1-2. What is the elder's work, Peter? Well, it is to be a

spiritual shepherd of God's people. What does a shepherd do? Psalm 23 gives us the key ideas.

*The LORD is my shepherd,
I shall not be in want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures,
he leads me beside quiet waters, he restores my soul.
He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.
Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death
I will fear no evil, for you are with me;
your rod and your staff, they comfort me.
You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.
You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.
Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life,
and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.*

Psalm 23

What do we see here? We see provision, guidance, protection, faithfulness and well-being.

Provision: The shepherd brings rest and green pastures; he feeds the sheep. We feed God's people with God's word, Matthew 4.4; 1 Peter 2.2. The pastor does this from the pulpit. Other elders usually do this in small groups or one-to-ones. We spell out God's love in Christ.

Guidance: Elders are those to whom church folk turn for guidance as they face perplexities in life in their work, marriage, children etc. Elders try to rescue those who stray and guide them back into the way.

Protection: As people walk through dark places, elders come alongside as a shepherd / friend and remind them of God's promises. Elders protect the flock from false teachers, who Jesus spoke of as wolves in sheep's clothing, Matt.7.15.

Faithfulness: Elders stick with people not just on the mountain tops but through the valleys of their experiences.

And all this is with an aim to their spiritual well-being – that they enjoy God and the gospel feast he has laid and arrive safely in heaven.

The Great Shepherd who is the Lord, uses elders as his under-shepherds to express his own care for people.

- *Fathers*

Look at 1 Timothy 3.4,5.

*(If anyone does not know how to look after his own family,
how can he take care of God's church?)*

So, elders, you are to look after people spiritually and care for them like your own children. Elders love their people with a real affection. And what are you looking for? Well, just as with your own children, you are looking for people to grow and to grow to maturity – so they can stand on their own two feet. There's tenderness – like a mother!

*We were gentle among you
Like a mother caring for her little children.
We loved you so much
that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God
but our lives as well,
because you had become so dear to us.
1 Thessalonians 2.7,8*

And also, a lot of encouragement, like a good father.

*For you know that we dealt with each of you
As a father deals with his own children,
encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God,
who calls you into his kingdom and glory.
1 Thessalonians 2.11,12*

Encouragement means both comforting and urging onwards.

And in both these pictures of shepherds and fathers, elders do their best to lead by example. The near eastern shepherd doesn't drive the flock – he leads it, John 10.3; 1 Peter 5.3. He goes first. How is this Christian life to be lived? 'Well watch me', says the elder, Philippians 4.9. And again, very often the ordinary people in the church find it much easier to relate to the example of an ordinary man – because 'he's just like us.' Similarly, a father is meant to set an example to his children. It's not just 'do as I say' but 'do as I do.'

Who are you looking after?

What is your flock? What is the nature of your people? I just want to point up 4 things here.

They are human, they are sheep, they are sinners, they are family.

- Human beings:

We are made in God's image, Genesis 1.27,28, who is, in his very essence, a relational being, a God of love within the mystery of the Trinity – the Father knows the Son and the Son knows the Father, Matthew 11.27, and no-one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God, 1 Corinthians 2.11. Because human beings are relational beings they must be treated as relational beings or else you will not do right by them.

So, they are people who need to be known. I know some are very private, but actually all people like attention because God has made us to be relational beings. That means that an elder needs to take every opportunity to be with his people. He can't spend all his time doing that – but he needs to factor in time. His people need to know that their elders know them.

- Christ's sheep:

The shepherd wants his sheep to follow him, see John 10.1-6. It's the same with congregations and church leaders. Note – here we have the other side of the coin from the previous point. It's not only that the shepherd must know his sheep, 10.27, but that they know him. He is not distant. He is not a stranger to them – they recognise his voice. They trust him. As they trust him they will follow his lead. They can't trust someone they really don't know. So, as is appropriate, an elder must allow his people into his own life somewhat.

- Saved sinners

The gospel teaches us that in Christ we are saints, but still sinners at the same time, Galatians 5.17. If we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves, 1 John 1.8. To pretend that we are already all we should be is hypocrisy – and that is the blight of many churches. Once we think we are sorted people we become like the Pharisees, thinking ourselves better than others.

The church needs to keep hearing the gospel – because they are still sinners and need to continually confess that and be reminded that their standing with God is not about their godliness, or their deserving, but always about his grace. So, an

elder's work is often to reapply the basics of the gospel to the people in his care. They need to be encouraged that God loves guilty sinners. It is Christians whom Paul assures, 'If when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!' Romans 5.10.

When we fall back into legalism we lose our joy, Galatians 4.15.

- *God's Family:*

Elders, you are looking after God's people not just as individuals but as a community, a flock, a family. And you are seeking, under God to build them together as a house for God, a temple of the Lord, 1 Peter 2.5.

As we have seen, there is a sense in which an elder is something of a father and mother to his church, 1 Thessalonians 2.7, 11. That is why the second proven ability, after being able to teach, to qualify as a church leader is to do with leading a family, 1 Timothy 3.4,5. Reconciling siblings in a parent's duty.

So as an elder, your work includes building up and preserving the unity of the church. You need to find ways of getting alongside people who have fallen out with each other and reconciling them, Philippians 4.2,3. You need to be a peacemaker, Matthew 5.9. And often you sow the seeds of peace by appreciating people and what they've done – and telling them so. And by encouraging others to do the same. Appreciating one another in the church and being thankful for one another creates harmony.

Thus, an elder is someone who is called by God and the church, to take responsibility for the church as a shepherd and a father, treating them as human beings who follow Jesus and, despite their sins, are God's family.

2: Elders who make things WORSE for churches

It is a terrible thing when those who ought to be a source of blessing end up deadening the spiritual vitality of a congregation or even bringing trouble to a church.

Sadly, this can happen. Here is a list of 10 types of elder or church leader who, I suggest, tend to do more harm than good. They may not all do damage to the same degree, but each of them, either consciously or unconsciously, undermines what a church is meant to be.

Dominating elders

Paul warns the churches against appointing overbearing men to be elders, Titus 1.7. On an individual level these may be gifted men, but they are not team players. They must have their own way when it comes to leadership decisions. They seek this either through force of personality and bullying or through political manoeuvring behind the scenes. They love an informal 'meeting before the meeting' to get supporters on board. This disrespects others and brings tensions among a group of elders or within the church. I have known pastors afraid of such elders.

Sadly, it is not uncommon for a whole eldership to adopt a dominating attitude. They take a position that what the elders say must be done without question by the church – as long as it is not obviously sinful. Church meetings are only to inform the church what is going to happen and involve no real discussion. Such elderships often justify this by referring to Hebrews 13.17, 'Obey your elders and submit to their authority'. This is functionally to make the word of the elders equivalent to Scripture. However, this stance misinterprets the Hebrews verse. *First*, the word used for 'obey' here is not the usual Greek word for obedience in the NT. Some modern translations render the verse, 'Have confidence in your elders', which is rather different from unquestioning obedience. *Second*, this forgets the context, which is that the job of leaders is to teach and obey the Scriptures themselves and teach others to do the same, Hebrews 13.7. It is not to insist on their own ideas as if they are infallible. A dominating eldership belittles the people of the church who are made in God's image and denigrates the status of the church itself as the body of Christ, in which all have a part to play.

Spineless elders

This is the other extreme. Sometimes churches appoint as their leaders, men who are nice guys and people pleasers. They will always be kind and gentle (which is right), but they will invariably take the easy path. They want a happy church before a holy church. They don't like drawing lines concerning beliefs or behaviour. They would rather compromise than take a stand. This is the way the salt loses its savour, Matthew 5.13. Paul tells us that elders must 'hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught,' Titus 1.9. They must stand on the apostles' teaching and not let the church be robbed of the gospel. Furthermore, they must be prepared to refute those who oppose sound doctrine, Titus 1.9. They must not be spineless and run away when it comes to ethical issues, 2 Timothy 2.19. Often weak elders have disrespectful children.

Spineless men are easily manipulated by others. Sometimes if such an elder is married to a strong-willed woman, it means that actually the wife calls the shots in the church. He comes home from the elders' meeting and tells her what has been agreed. But she doesn't like what is proposed. So, at the following elders' meeting he demurs from the previous agreement. The whole issue has to be discussed again, until eventually, (though what is going on remains unspoken) the elder's wife gets her way. Of course, it may not be the elder's wife but other people in the church who are able to manipulate him – perhaps a retired pastor, cf. 1 Kings 13.1-32. For all his niceness, such a man won't do for eldership. Churches need humble men who can listen to others, but who know their own mind as to what is right before God and have the courage of their convictions.

Rich elders

Paul warns that an elder must not be 'a lover of money', 1 Timothy 3.3. We are warned elsewhere that the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, 1 Timothy 6.10. That cannot be good for a church. Jesus declared plainly that we cannot serve God and money, Matthew 6.24.

I am aware, of course, that not all rich people are lovers of money. I know of one wealthy Christian who gives away 80% of what he earns. But sometimes, when it comes to appointing elders, church members take more notice of a man's social standing and his bank balance than they do of the NT requirements for eldership. They feel that because a man has made it in business, he is bound to be a source of strength, wisdom and yes, finance, for the church. But this opens the door to potential problems. The ethos of a church changes.

Firstly, it is right that the people of a church follow their leaders. Indeed, elders are called to set an example, 1 Peter 5.3. But if the people of a church begin to aspire to the lifestyle their well-off elders tend to enjoy, it will take the spiritual edge off the church. A church may think it is rich and needs nothing because it has a lot of money in the bank, when it is actually ‘poor, blind and naked’ spiritually, Revelation 3.17. Such a church can sustain itself without truly looking to the Lord. *Secondly*, when it comes to those that a church should honour with positions of leadership, Paul often directs us to brave people who are prepared to take risks for the gospel and the service of Christ’s people, Philippians 2.29, 30; 1 Corinthians 16.15, 16. But generally speaking, riches tend to make us too comfortable as Christians. Such a church will often shy away from any real sacrifice for the cause of Christ.

Management elders

Being an effective administrator is a good gift of God, Romans 12.8. In the secular workplace many men learn management skills which are highly effective for the commercial world. But a problem comes when they want to apply those same techniques to the church. A church is not a business, it is a family. The people of the church are not employees, they are brothers and sisters in Christ. People serve voluntarily, not because they are paid. Jesus specifically taught that the leadership style he desires in his church should be markedly different from that of the world, Mark 10.42-45. Christian leadership is humble servanthood not the management of a CEO.

It is too easy for leadership in the church to ape leadership in the world. That is why medieval Catholicism with its pope looked very similar to feudalism with its pyramid of power and its ‘emperor’ in Rome. I have heard Western Christians sometimes comment on, say, African churches that they have been too much influenced by their culture. The pastor and elders operate as if they are tribal leaders. Maybe that comment is correct. But we fail to realize that we too as 21st Century Westerners have been influenced by our culture. Bringing management techniques from business culture into the church is our form of doing the same thing. The management mindset is the cultural mindset of Western secular capitalism. It will cause difficulties in a church. We must keep returning to Christ and the NT for our models of leadership and the type of skills required.

Legalistic elders

One of the greatest dangers to the health and vitality of the churches is legalism.

It is believing that our standing with God depends on our own actions rather than completely on the grace of God through the redeeming work of Christ. Christians have been totally forgiven and given a perfect righteousness that is not their own and which cannot be taken away from them, Romans 3.21,22; Philippians 3.9. When this message is lost Christians lose their joy, Galatians 4.15 and are out of step with the Holy Spirit, Galatians 3.2,3.

Every evangelical would sign up to God's grace. But it is easily lost when, in a right pursuit of godliness, we forget that it is all of grace and fall into thinking that God's love for us depends on how well we are doing as Christians. Echoing Paul, having begun in the Spirit we think we must attain our goal by human effort rather than by relying on God. When such legalistic thinking affects a church, people begin to judge one another. Elders become those who, rather than lovingly helping brothers and sisters overcome their sins, Galatians 6.1, are grim and condemnatory. Church members live in fear rather than freedom. Sometimes it is not even God's commands, but things like Covid rules, or Data Protection rules, or Safeguarding rules, which are used by over-strict and finicky elders as a stick with which to beat the church. Everyone is afraid rather than affirmed.

Absent elders

The elders of a church are to 'keep watch over all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made (them) overseers,' Acts 20.28. To do this properly takes time, effort and involvement. Some gifted men desire the office of elder in the church but, in reality, are too busy with their secular work to effectively do the job.

When it comes to elders' meetings, they are often out of the country on a business trip. Perhaps they have a young family with whom they should rightly spend time too. People pick up that they always have a lot on. So, church members don't bring their troubles to them, and the other elders don't ask them to take on any of the leadership tasks. The truth is that though they may be good men and fulfil all the requirements of character which Paul sets out for eldership, they simply haven't got time. They should not have been appointed as elders in the first place.

Proud elders

Paul warns against appointing recent converts to the eldership, 1 Timothy 3.6, because being given such an honour so early in their Christian lives is likely to

make them conceited. But whether it is a recent convert or anyone else, personal pride has no place in an eldership. It is always sobering to remember that the devil was once a servant of God – an angel who fell through pride.

Pride in an eldership can manifest itself in many ways. It can be seen in failing to ever get their hands dirty. It can be recognised in an avoidance of lowly people of the church as if such people are beneath them, Romans 12.16. It can show itself in an eldership which becomes very defensive about any criticism and even aggressive towards anyone who raises a problem. It is apparent when elders will never admit that they have made a mistake or mishandled anything. 'Sorry' seems to be the hardest word for them. But this is a mistake. In fact, to say 'sorry' when necessary is a sign of integrity which will commend elders to the church.

Insensitive elders

I knew of a good man who was an elder for many years in the north of England and fulfilled the role well. On retirement he and his wife moved away and he took on the pastorate of a small church. It was a revelation to him. He said that before he never realised how difficult and demanding a pastors' life is.

Frequently tensions arise between the pastor and the other elders simply because the other elders are out of touch with what it means to be a pastor. They make demands and have expectations of the pastor and how he and his family should live, which they would never put on themselves. Such men can also be insensitive towards the women of their church. They fail to practise the basic rule taught us by the Lord Jesus Christ, 'So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you,' Matthew 7.12.

Distracted elders

It is true that elders should be in overall control of all the church does, 1 Timothy 5.19. This is corroborated by the fact that when churches were set up in NT times, it was elders who were appointed first, with no mention of deacons, Acts 14.23; Titus 1.5. It seems that only later as the work expanded that deacons were appointed to relieve the elders. We see this pattern in Acts 6, where seven men are asked to look after the distribution of food to the widows so that, in this case the apostles, could give themselves to prayer and the ministry of the word, Acts 6.3.

Hence, we find that although the elders ultimately are responsible for everything in the church, they can delegate some work to others while concentrating on the spiritual care of the congregation. However, there is a tendency in some elderships to be more involved in what might legitimately called 'deacons' work' and accordingly neglect the care of souls. This often happens because elders with a background in business or manual work naturally feel more at home in dealing with things like building projects and finances etc with which they are familiar. They are distracted from their true task.

Unteachable elders

Paul gives two fairly full descriptions of what is needed in a man's life for him to be an elder. These are in 1 Timothy 3.1-7 and Titus 1.5-9. No-one will be able to fulfil these requirements perfectly. There is no-one on earth who never sins, Ecclesiastes 7.20. But in Christ we are justified, stand right with God and seek to follow the Lord with a sincere heart. And there is a sense in which all Christians are 'works in progress' until we reach heaven. The reason that Paul and Barnabas were able to appoint elders fairly quickly in Lystra, Iconium and (Psidian) Antioch, was not because these men were full-grown Christians already, but because although there was already a degree of maturity, they were willing and ready to learn.

By contrast, when a church has an eldership which basically thinks it knows it all and is functionally unteachable, the work will soon become moribund. No new ideas are ever contemplated.

Although there are many other reasons why elderships go wrong, these 10 are common.

3: Elders who make things BETTER for churches

So, what should churches be looking for in their elders? Or perhaps we could better phrase that question: what should elders aspire to be for their churches?

Paul sets out the necessary character traits in the Pastoral Epistles, 1 Timothy 3.1-7; Titus 1.5-9. Many problems in church would be avoided if churches and leaders took Paul's instructions more seriously. Practically the pastor should preach expositions of those passages before elders are appointed in the church, so that the members have a firm grasp of what they are looking for as decisions are made.

But interwoven with those lists of upfront requirements in an elder are various Christian virtues which Paul would have assumed and which are foundational. Let me sketch 10 such virtues in elders which bless a church.

Supportive elders

The leadership of the church ought to be a good team. It is where brothers dwell together in unity that a church is a pleasant place and the Lord bestows his blessing, Psalm 133. That means that elders should have supportive hearts. They want to encourage everyone in the congregation and especially get behind the pastor who carries the majority of the preaching and is full-time in the work.

Elders ought to be particularly concerned for the well-being of the pastor and his family. They will often be the focus of the devil's attacks. One way elders can help is to make sure that their pastor is well supported financially by the church. This can lift many household concerns from the pastor and enable him to concentrate more fully on the work. Paul writes: 'Anyone who receives instruction in the word must share all good things with his instructor,' Galatians 6.6. The next verse in Galatians speaks about mocking God. In his commentary on Galatians Martin Luther goes so far as to say that when a church does not support its pastor properly, they are letting down God's servant and are making a fool of God who sent him.¹ To give well so as to support the ministry is a way to 'sow to the Spirit', Galatians 6.8.

Humble elders

Some pastors can use the church as a vehicle to promote themselves and their own reputation. And other elders can fall into a similar trap. They like to think

¹ *Commentary on Galatians*, by Martin Luther, Kregel Publications 1979, pages 366-371

that 'this is my church' and everyone knows that they are the man who needs to be asked before anything can happen in the church. They are the 'king-makers' behind the 'throne'. They are like Diotrephes 'who loves to be first', 3 John v9 and call the shots. The Greek word used here for 'loving to be first' is closely related to Christ having the 'pre-eminence' in Colossians 1.18. You can see how, unless they are humble, elders may obscure Christ from the people.

If anyone should have the same attitude as Christ Jesus, 'who being in very nature God...made himself nothing taking the very nature of a servant,' it is the elders, Philippians 2.5-7.

Caring elders

One of the marks of being called by God to be an elder is that a man naturally finds himself going in the direction of this work. He doesn't desire prominence in the church particularly. But he just can't help caring for others.

You can't help giving that phone call or sending that text just to ask how people are. He and his wife love to have people round for coffee to listen to them and their worries and to try to encourage them. Elders have a caring ministry and when you find your heart cannot help but do that, it is part of the call of the Holy Spirit. God is equipping you for the task he wants you to do, John 21.16. You have a desire, like that of the Lord Jesus to help the weary to find rest and to bring the wanderer home, Matthew 11.28; Luke 19.10.

Prayerful elders

An elder, like a father, longs to be able to help and to fix people's problems. But sometimes their situation is so difficult that you can't sort them out. Only the Lord can. So, an elder is a man of prayer.

We find this in Epaphroditus, a leader of the church at Colossae. Paul writes to his church, 'He is always wrestling in prayer for you, that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured,' Colossians 4.16. Part of the reason for the appointment of the Seven in the Jerusalem church was that the apostles might pray more, Acts 6.4. Management elders, immersed in secular ideas, are first concerned with planning and organising. But good elders know that for anything worthwhile to be accomplished God must work, John 15.5; 1 Corinthians 3.6. So good elders prioritise prayer.

Patient elders

Though you mean them well, people don't always do what they are told. It will

do no good if an elder gets irritable with them. Writing to the leaders, Paul says, ‘And we urge you brothers, warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone,’ 1 Thessalonians 2.14. Why doesn’t that lazy man move himself? Why doesn’t that timid person just pull herself together and get on with it? Why can’t that morally weak person have more backbone and resist the temptation for once? But these church members won’t be helped if elders just give up on them. Leaders need to care with patience.

And patience during plagues and persecution was one of the ways Christians stood out in the early centuries of the church and led to the church growing.² Elders need to exemplify patience.

Approachable elders

There are all kinds of ways for elders to be in touch with their people. They can live where their people live. They can show hospitality. They can phone or text. They can hang out with people. But for people to be helped by elders they must feel comfortable to open up to them. An elder has to be a friendly, approachable man. It is interesting that even the worst of sinners saw Jesus as approachable and he was sometimes castigated for welcoming them to his table, Mark 2.16, 17; Luke 15.1,2.

Elders need to be understanding, friendly and approachable men, not like the judgmental and forbidding Pharisees, who shut the kingdom of heaven in men’s faces, Matthew 23.13.

Thoughtful elders

The heart of what makes the church different from the world is that it really does have a message from heaven – the gospel, the Scriptures. This is the treasure of the church and elders must be men who have thought through God’s truth and are ready to defend it. Paul writes to Timothy, ‘What you heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching, with faith and love in Christ Jesus. Guard the good deposit entrusted to you – guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in you,’ 2 Timothy 1.13, 14.

Further, because we live in an ever-changing world, elders must ‘watch’ and think what ideas current society is using to attack God’s truth so as to guard the flock.

² See *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church: The Improbable Rise of Christianity*, by Alan Kreider, Baker Academic, 2016

Godly elders

There ought to be a sense of God's own presence with the elders. It is 'the truth that leads to godliness', Titus 1.1. We know God through his word and beholding his glory our lives are changed into his likeness, 2 Corinthians 3.18. Therefore, elders must be people who know the Scriptures and have a disciplined life of reading the Bible and seeking to put into practice what they learn.

It is in this way that elders become good examples for others to follow in their church life, personal life, family life, working life, 1 Peter 5.3.

Sacrificial elders

Leading a church requires sacrifice. Elders have to lead from the front when there are challenges like outdoor evangelism or planting a new church. They can't be backseat drivers. In our younger days we knew of two brothers who were elders in the same church who both sold their houses and bought cheaper ones in order to release money so the congregation could buy its own building. Just as Christ sacrificed himself for us, so we are called to be sacrificial for his cause, Mark 8.34, 35. Such sacrifice should be clearly seen in the elders of a church.

When you see a man (and his wife) who feels happy to suffer loss, even great loss, for love of Christ and the good of his people, you are looking at a man with an elder's heart.

Evangelistic elders

It is interesting that when Paul writes about the requirements for elders he includes saying 'he must have a good reputation with outsiders,' 1 Timothy 3.7. He is concerned that a man who is being contemplated as an elder should not be a hypocrite (the devil's trap) by being one thing at church and something quite different elsewhere.

This means that an elder should not be someone who hides his Christianity in the workplace or among his neighbours but rather is unashamed of Christ, Mark 8.38. In other words, he will take opportunities to share the gospel with others, Colossians 4.5,6. When a church has evangelistic elders it will be evangelistic itself.

It is elders with these kinds of characteristics who make things better for a local church. Again, at this point, it might be good to pray for your elders.

4: Training elders?

So where do we go from here?

Some people reading this booklet will conclude that though their elders aren't perfect, nevertheless they are good elders who bless the church. If that is the case, then take time to thank God for them and take whatever opportunities you have to encourage your elders and tell them that they are appreciated.

When there are problems

But others will read and realise that their elders are not at all what they ought to be. If there are glaring problems what is to be done?

The tenor of Scripture seems to be that an elder is appointed for as long as he feels able to do the work. This can bring long term stability to a church. But removing such a man who has gone wrong can be difficult and even traumatic for a congregation. One person I talked with recently said that it is often easier to dismiss a pastor than it is to remove a difficult elder from office. This can be true.

Realising this, some churches have opted for 'term eldership' – that is that men are appointed as elders for a period of time only – say 3 years – and then there is a review by the church at which point he can be asked to step down by the church, if necessary. This approach is understandable. But it can backfire. I have sometimes seen good elders removed from office in this way. He did nothing wrong, but in seeking to be faithful he has challenged some people (who needed challenging), ruffled their feathers and they have made sure he did not get enough votes to remain as an elder. The church has been robbed of a good man.

It is difficult to find an easy solution here.

We all need training

We all need training for any job we do. But often elders are simply appointed by churches and then left to get on with it. Where this is the case, it should not surprise us that problems arise.

Running a course for church leaders has a Scriptural mandate. The Lord Jesus trained his disciples. Paul trained men like Timothy and Titus. Also Paul commands Timothy, 'And the things you have heard me say in the presence of

many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others,' 2 Timothy 2.2. A teaching group based on the church's doctrinal basis would be appropriate here. This might also include, given various possible pastoral scenarios, a discussion of how to apply Scripture to such cases.

But for both the Lord Jesus and the apostle Paul, Mark 3.14, Acts 16.2, the main training of leaders took place by being with their teacher – they learned on the job. It is best both to have the teaching and opportunity to see how this works out in practice. Such 'on the job' training could be facilitated, with the church's agreement, by a man or men together taking a day off work, say once a month, to spend a day with the pastor – both in his study and visiting people.

Both the Lord and the apostle Paul then sent their trainees out, to 'try it for themselves' and then report back, Matthew 10.5f; 1 Thessalonians 3.2; Titus 1.5. The pattern of learning and then putting into practice is always worthwhile. How this is to be done in a particular church setting is a matter of wisdom. Certainly, we cannot hand the responsibility for serious pastoral situations to a trainee. However, we can think through a 'scale of appropriateness' within the different activities of the church and utilise some of the 'ordinary' works of the church – perhaps a midweek prayer meeting or a routine hospital visit – for training purposes. Either being present ourselves, or asking a mature church member to give feedback can be helpful. The disciples seemed to have talked together and to the Lord on their return about what they had experienced in their times of ministry without Jesus being present, Luke 10.17-21. So, a 'mission' was followed by a time of review.

If we use this kind of 'responsibility and review' method two essential matters come to mind.

A). These days anyone who is going to be involved in pastoral contact with others will need to have some training in safeguarding. This is essential both for the good of others and for the trainee themselves. Accusations of abuse (even if they are proved to be unfounded) can be enormously damaging. The people of the church are a family where no-one is taken advantage of, 1 Timothy 5.1,2.

B). If a trainee is going to be helped by receiving feedback on his efforts, it would be helpful if the pastor could talk through with him how to receive comments in a humble and gracious way, 1 Peter 5.5. A man who reacts badly to feedback out of pride is probably not fitted for church leadership. This is a test of spiritual maturity.

It also needs to be said that ministry has to work for the whole family. It would be appropriate for the pastor to meet with a husband who is being trained along with his wife and assess if the family would be able to cope with eldership. Obviously, some sacrifice is necessary when the head of a family steps up into leadership. But on the other hand, it is no good wrecking a family if a new elder allows the demands of the church to become more than the family can handle, 1 Timothy 3.4,5. Talk through with the couple how things could be handled in the most helpful way.

Hopefully, good training would mean that many problems with church leadership could be avoided.