



Pastors and Elders

A key relationship

John Benton

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Introduction

Churches need wise, loving and harmonious leadership teams. In the NT the elders (including the pastor) comprise the leadership, Titus 1.5; Acts 14.23.

A church with a caring, united, Bible teaching eldership is likely to be a pleasant place, where God commands the blessing, Psalm 133.1, 3. Therefore, harmony among the leaders is both precious and needs to be nurtured and protected. In particular, the relationship between elders and the man we call 'the pastor' is crucial.

Natural fault lines

However, there are usually a number of 'natural' fault lines which can easily be exploited by the devil to cause trouble among the leaders.

Usually, the elders are lay elders with secular work, whereas the pastor is employed and funded by the church. Elders have their times of work specified by their bosses and businesses whereas the pastor is freer to set his own timetable. There can, therefore, be pressure for the elders which does not apply to the pastor. This can lead to resentment.

Again, elders with secular employment tend to work in an environment in which efficiency is the watchword. By contrast, a pastor's work is a mixture of study, prayer and social interaction with people – often over coffee! The jobs have rather different mindsets. From these different mindsets misunderstandings can occur. The idea can enter that 'the pastor has it easy'.

Often, pastors were called from outside the original church fellowship, whereas the elders have been in a church longer and sometimes with family ties and particular friendships with one another. This can foster a 'him and us' attitude.

Fracture

Into such fault lines the devil, using the still fallen side of our human nature, seeks to pour in as much suspicion, discontent and division as he can, until eventually a leadership team is deeply fractured and yet another church is crippled in the spiritual battle. As I write, sadly, I have seen this happen in at least two churches in the past year.

Of course, it doesn't have to be a 'pastor v elders' division. Other elders can fall out with each other too. This booklet attempts to think through the relationships among leadership teams, especially that of between pastors and elders, so that these kinds of damaging divisions can be avoided for the good of God's churches.

1: The same but different

Traditionally, the man who is employed by the church and does the bulk of the preaching and visiting, we call 'the pastor' of the church. We will stick with that usage for brevity.

No distinction

At one level the NT makes no distinction between the pastor and the other elders. All elders are called to shepherd the flock, 1 Peter 5.2; Acts 20.28. The word 'shepherd' is the root from which we get the term pastor. So, we could say that all elders are 'pastors'. Further, the qualifications for appointment as an elder, given in 1 Timothy 3.1-7 and Titus 1.5-9, are fundamentally the same as those that ought to be applied when the church chooses a pastor. Together, these men have to responsibility to 'keep watch over...all the flock over which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers,' Acts 20.28.

The elders are to 'direct the affairs of the church,' 1 Timothy 5.17, and there is no indication in Scripture of another office above that of elder in the local congregation which has, in itself, more authority. The elders are a team of leaders, to whom, as they teach and try to exemplify in behaviour the word of God, the church is called to submit, Hebrews 13.17. Just as the elders are called to be servants without 'lording it' over the church, 1 Peter 5,3, so no leader is to 'lord it' over the rest of the team, 3 John v9. This is a council of equals when it comes to authority. This must be the case because the real authority in the church is not the elders themselves but the Lord Jesus, the Great Shepherd of the sheep Hebrews 13.20; 1 Peter 2.25 who rules and leads his flock through the Scriptures, the word of God, cf. John 10.3-5.

This plurality of elders provides many benefits for both the church and the leadership. It makes an eldership more...

- *Available:* One man cannot be constantly on call, always available. He will have other legitimate responsibilities in his life – perhaps his family or elderly parents. But a group of men can both share the load and be free to respond to needs in the church at different times.
- *Accomplished:* Individuals have different strengths and weaknesses, insights and blind-spots. We have different personalities. Some are gifted in one area but not in another, Romans 12.6-8. But together the elders

make up for one another's deficiencies and so are more balanced and all-round accomplished.

- *Accountable*: One man can fall into sin, error or become headstrong and wilful in his leadership. But in a group of equals this tendency can be challenged and checked. (Ultimately an eldership itself is accountable to the church meeting).

So, the main thrust of the NT on the matter of elders is on a group of men, chosen by God and the church, of equal authority. And yet, if we leave what Scripture says at that point, we will not have done justice to the subject. There are nuances in the Bible's teaching on this subject of which we must take note.

Extra respect

To Timothy, the apostle Paul writes, 'The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honour, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching', 1 Timothy 5.17.

There are a number of matters to note here. *First*, by implication all elders should be honoured / respected, 1 Thessalonians 5.12. *Second*, those who do the work of overseeing the church well are to be given 'double honour'. In view of the next verse, which speaks about remuneration for the work, double honour primarily has reference to a church employing certain elders. Yet Paul doesn't choose to use financial language here but that of honour. So, this would also imply that what he has in mind includes also a certain extra respect. *Third*, Paul then goes on to say that this double honour particularly applies to those 'whose work is preaching and teaching' – in other words to the pastor.

There is no difference in authority, but there is in honour – regard, esteem, deference.¹ These men often have a degree of spiritual wisdom beyond that of others. They can provide a necessary spark or act as a catalyst within the leadership group. For Paul, this extra respect for the man we call 'the pastor' is because of his work of preaching and teaching. It is linked to the foundational nature of the word of God for a church. It needs to be there because this man immerses himself in Scripture and ministers it as his life's calling. Without the Scriptures the church is nothing. The Bible is the treasure of the church. It is

¹ We see this kind of principle, for example, among the apostles with the emergence of Peter as 'first among equals'. He often takes the lead, both in the Gospels and the Acts. But that he was not regarded as a cut above the other apostles is shown by the fact that Paul felt able to challenge him publicly at Antioch because he was not behaving in line with the gospel, Galatians 2.11.

through the word of God that we are born again, 1 Peter 1.23, and the church, therefore, comes into being. It is by Scripture that the church is kept from error and God's people are fed and encouraged spiritually, Titus 1.9. Therefore, the man or men who God has set aside particularly to handle his word are especially important to a church and deserve to be given extra respect.

All elders should have an ability to teach, 1 Timothy 3.2, but the pastor is a man called and gifted by God specially for public ministry. When other leaders think that 'any of us could do the pastor's job' a leadership team runs into trouble.² To undermine the man chosen to regularly bring the word of God is tantamount to undermining the word of God itself. That is why, for example, Paul is so keen that no-one should look down on the young preacher Timothy, 1 Timothy 4.12. It is he who commands God's precepts and teaches God's gospel to the church, 1 Timothy 4.11.

This is not to say that a pastor is never to be challenged, even if he goes astray. Through Scripture, the elders have equal authority and can and should do this when necessary. However, a pastor should normally be given extra respect because of his vital work. There needs to be a recognition of everyone's gifts. But the giftedness and calling of a pastor in bringing the word of God is among 'the greater gifts', 1 Corinthians 12.31.

Practical reasons

That the elders and the 'pastor' are to be considered the same but different is not without its reasons.

First, in the culture of today's evangelical churches, the pastor is usually a man who has left his home, his livelihood and relocated to give himself full-time to the work of God. Usually, he is paid less money than his previous employment and less than other elders earn in their secular jobs. Surely, he deserves the 'extra respect' of his fellow elders and congregation. While other elders have their jobs and incomes, the pastor has put himself and his family out on a limb, in a way the others have not. That sacrifice will be honoured and recognised by any Christian who has the mind of Christ and by any spiritually mature leadership

² On a lesser scale, but nevertheless serious, it is parallel the challenge of Miriam and Aaron to Moses with which the Lord was not pleased, 'Has the LORD spoken only through Moses...Hasn't he also spoken through us?' Numbers 12.2. Korah's rebellion against Moses and Aaron had a similar spirit behind it, 'The whole community is holy, every one of them, and the LORD is with them. Why then do you set yourselves above the LORD's assembly?' Numbers 16.3.

team. Pastoral ministry is sacrificial in a way usually that other leadership positions are not.

Second, the pastor / preacher, in the pulpit Sunday by Sunday becomes the spokesman of God and the public face of the church in a way that other leaders are not. This may give him a certain profile, but it also makes him vulnerable and a particular target for malcontents and for the devil himself. Interestingly, the verses in 1 Timothy which speak about 'double honour' for certain elders are followed by verses dealing with accusations made against elders. 'Do not entertain an accusation against an elder unless it is brought by two or three witnesses. Those who sin are to be rebuked publicly, so that others may take warning', 1 Timothy 5.20,21.

In his sermons on 1 Timothy, John Calvin wisely comments that it is against preachers of God's word that malicious accusations are most likely to be made. 'Ministers as we know are more likely to be slandered and vilified than other people. Who is behind all this if not Satan, who cooks up every kind of mischief in his shop? The best way of making us tire of God's word is to find fault with his ministers. 'Have you heard the latest? First one thing, then another!' When rumours begin to fly and when they are believed, they put people off the word of God which loses the authority and respect it ought to have for us.'³ The devil understands how vital God's word is to a church and this is one of his prime tactics for undermining it.

Because the man who preaches the word of God to the people often challenges their sins and must teach the uncomfortable truths as well as the comforting ones, is more exposed and vulnerable to the devil's attacks, both the church and other leaders should honour him for being willing to take on such an exposed position and have an attitude of support. Pastors and elders are the same, but different. This needs to be recognised.

2: Causes of tensions in the team

Experience tells us that groups of men do not always work well together. Leadership teams can fall out with each other with devastating effects for churches. The reasons behind such conflict are sometimes sinful. At other times trouble emerges almost inadvertently. No one intended it but, blind-sided to various undercurrents within the group, suddenly trouble erupts.

It should be said, before we delve into this subject, that an eldership needs to have the same mind concerning the church's doctrine and also its general practice. If you have a situation where some elders want a Reformed church with Reformed practice while others desire say, a more charismatic church, there are bound to be tensions. A church's leadership needs to be on the same page about the kind of church they are trying to build.

But even where there is general agreement, troubles can arise. In this chapter we highlight some of the routes via which trouble comes so that we can check ourselves. 'Is this happening in our team?' A comprehensive list of the ways in which tensions and troubles break surface is impossible. Sadly, even Christian hearts can be deceitful beyond knowing, Jeremiah 17.9. But at least this little review will give us some understanding.

Inadvertent misunderstandings

One giant example of misunderstanding is found in Joshua 22. Having conquered the Promised Land, the so-called 'Transjordan tribes' of Reuben, Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh returned to their inheritance back across the Jordan river. A short time later they raised an imposing altar on their side of the riverbank. This was misread by the other tribes as evidence of apostasy and serving other gods. They prepare to go to war with their brothers. But they have misread the situation. When Phinehas the priest and the tribal heads of Israel enquire, the Transjordan Tribes are horrified. That is not what they intended at all. Rather they put up the altar, 'to be a witness between us and you and generations to follow, that we will worship the LORD at his sanctuary...Then in the future your descendants will not be able to say to ours, "You have no share in the LORD"', Joshua 22.27. Civil war was narrowly averted. But it is an illustration of how well-meaning people can fall out simply through miscommunication and misunderstanding.

Here are some of the ways such inadvertent misunderstandings can come about

in an eldership.

- We misunderstand each other when some elders are more influenced by empathy and others are more concerned for justice. We read situations differently. There needs to be Biblical balance, 2 Samuel 18.5; 19.5,6.
- We fall into misunderstanding when we assume different means of communication to be 'the usual channels' for everyone on the team. Perhaps an older elder does not check his emails as often as others do. Something important is missed. He was instead expecting a telephone call. He feels a fool and tension results.
- We misunderstand each other when some members of the team don't communicate openly or fully. It may be because some elders are shy or diffident or feel overawed by others on the team. It could be that one elder thinks that by keeping silent he is shielding others from what he believes they don't need to know. But when this happens people may feel belittled, left out of decisions and the thinking behind them. This can lead to resentment.
- We misunderstand each other when we do not have enough time. A pastor, for example, may feel too rushed to share what's on his mind and simply goes ahead and makes a decision, without referring to other elders because he felt time was short and a decision had to be made. Or an elder can be too pressurised with his secular work to give time to reading the minutes of a meeting or completing the task he promised to get done. There is guilt which can turn sour.
- We misunderstand each other when there is an inability among the team to talk about how the team is working. When elders only focus on *what* they have to do but not on *how* they are doing it, they don't spot problems or find ways of improving. This can lead to a sense of failure which causes tensions all round.
- We misunderstand each other when there is an inability to have honest conversations with one another. We need sometimes to talk to each other about the impact we have on each other. We need to have 'difficult conversations' before they become too difficult, and things break down.

Relationships within an eldership are just as much 'the task' as the work the

team is doing for the church together. The church has chosen the elders not, first of all, with the idea of collecting a set of natural friends but with the aim of the well-being of the church, so there is always going to be work to do in this area.

Therefore, building an effective eldership means investing the time, focus, persistence and humility, Philippians 2.1-5, and to keep working at these unintentional mistakes. Brotherly kindness is needed.

Sinful problems

There are multiple instances in Scripture of partnerships disintegrating because of sin intruding into the thinking of one or more members of the group.

We can think of Joseph whose brothers turned against him, because of Jacob's favouritism and probably Joseph's own unwise, untimely words in sharing of his dreams, Genesis 37.8. Similarly, David became the object of Saul's persecution because of jealousy, 1 Samuel 18.8,9. 'Saul has slain his thousands, but David his tens of thousands.' How that popular chant galled the king. The administrators and satraps plot to denigrate Daniel in the eyes of King Darius and have him demoted, because they did not want this foreigner as their superior. Daniel ends up in the lion's den, Daniel 6.4. There is rivalry among the twelve disciples of Christ as they speculate about who will be the greatest, Mark 9.34. Paul warns the elders from Ephesus that 'even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw disciples after them', Acts 20.30.

Given this very clear vein of team-destructive sin that runs throughout the Bible it would be very foolish for any eldership team to think 'this could never happen to us.' Rather, the apostle Paul warns, 'Keep watch over yourselves...' Acts 20.28.

To get a handle on relational or inter-personal sins, it is good to remind ourselves of Paul's words in 1 Corinthians concerning love in the church. A lack of love is the root of such sins and can occur not only in the church generally, but among a leadership team.

'Love is patient. Love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres', 1 Corinthians 13.4-7.

Relational sins come into focus as we imagine the opposite of how Paul

describes love. Patience becomes impatience; not envying turns to jealousy etc... Let's see some brief examples of how these sins can tragically work out among an eldership.

Fourteen relational sins

All the following have an element in of sinfulness in them, but not all are equally sinful. However, all are capable of doing a great deal of damage to an eldership.

Impatience: Quick thinkers on the eldership can become impatient with those who like to take their time to work things through. Leaders are meant to be patient with everyone, 1 Thessalonians 5.14. If a church has elders who have had high flying jobs and are used to making decisions feel that, e.g. the pastor is somehow blocking the way forward for the church, resentment can emerge.

Harshness: Impatience, (as well as other attitudes), can easily turn to harsh words or behaviour. Scripture says, 'A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger,' Proverbs 15.1. The last thing a church needs is a group of angry elders.

Jealousy: We find that jealousy is a major Biblical reason for the breakdown of teams, e.g., 1 Samuel 18.8, 9. One example of how this works out is if a church has a pastor who has been used of God and is particularly loved by his people, other elders in the church can become jealous of the esteem in which he is held. Another example is, some (like former pastors now made elders whose ministries were not a success) can have a less than helpful attitude towards the pastor and even plot to bring his downfall.

Pride: It was pride, of course, which turned the devil from being a servant of God into God's opponent, 1 Timothy 3.6. If a church has a pastor who has become too self-important, Titus 1.7, insisting on having his own way and simply requiring other elders to 'rubber stamp' his decisions, then the other elders feel undermined and demeaned.

Rudeness: To be rude is to act unbecomingly or in a way that causes unnecessary offence. Sometimes things that are meant as a joke actually end up embarrassing the other person. This can cause a rift on an eldership team. For such things there needs to be an apology. A more serious way of acting rudely is for some of the elders to meet secretly to fix what they want to happen at the full elders' meeting.

Self-seeking: Here we have an elder or a pastor who is more concerned for himself and his own reputation than he is about the church and the Lord's work. This often happens when a church has a pastor has been in the church many years, then when he approaches retirement age he can seek to 'hang on' to his position longer than he should. Trouble ensues.

Quick anger: Titus 1.7 tells us that an elder should not be quick tempered, ready to fly off he handle at the slightest provocation. 'Man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires', James 1.20. I have come across elders whose main 'weapon' in elders' discussion is to threaten to resign unless they get their way. This really is blackmailing others. It is often the sign of an angry, overbearing man.

Bearing a grudge: This is the opposite of keeping no record of wrongs, 1 Corinthians 13.5. An elder who can't overlook affronts or the minor sins of others will be vulnerable to this and want to 'pay back' others on the team, 1 Peter 4.8. This spells disaster.

Gloating: Closely linked to bearing grudges (and indeed to rivalry) is revelling and smiling to oneself when things go wrong for others. Rejoicing in evil is mentioned as the opposite of love in 1 Corinthians 13.6. To have such an attitude towards another elder is a failure of love. Though nothing may be said, it will come across. Again, this is not what a church needs. Elders should be good brothers to each other.

Lies: Some elders are prepared to be less than honest. They may do this with the desire to forward 'the bigger picture'. But it is always wrong. Dishonesty has a way of becoming known. 'Be sure your sins will find you out', Numbers 32.23. It undermines trust on the team. As much transparency as possible is required among elders.

Exposure: This is the opposite of protecting people and, while remaining honest, covering for them. Sometimes a young pastor will make mistakes, but other elders will encourage people to cut him some slack as he learns the work. However, there are others who may be keen to expose his mistakes.

Suspicion: Instead of trusting each other, some elders can approach their task with a continual attitude of suspicion towards others. They guess (usually wrongly) the motives that another elder has for proposing something rather

than giving him an honest hearing. This makes for a dark atmosphere in elders' meetings.

Cynicism: Some elders can become jaded. They don't approach their task with hope. 'We've tried that before – it doesn't work.' 'She will never change'. These kinds of sentences are often on their lips. It brings discouragement. It often indicates that they themselves are not in a good place spiritually and indicates a lack of faith in the Lord and his goodness.

Giving up: This is the opposite of perseverance. Here are elders who to put off making a decision or give up on something very easily. It verges on laziness, Proverbs 6.6-8, and leaves other elders continually frustrated or having to carry the can. The elders need to be all committed to getting the job done.

To discuss

Elders' teams need to be aware of themselves. Perhaps the headings in this chapter might make a profitable discussion for an elders' 'Away Day' or something similar which seeks to keep the group in harmony with each other. It might be a way of initiating needed 'difficult conversations'.

3: Difficult pastors

Apart from the Lord Jesus, Hebrews 4.15, there is no such person as the perfect pastor. Every pastor has his own foibles and personal fears. Every pastor is still a sinner, 1 Timothy 1.15.

Elders have their faults too. This means that a good leadership team will need to cut each other some slack. Of course, this does not apply to serious sins which must be confronted. But it does mean, for example, that it is wrong for leaders to be keen to criticise each other. Jesus' command to beware of judging others, Matthew 7.1' applies to leaders too. Instead, Peter says, 'love covers a multitude of sins,' 1 Peter 4.8. Patience is required. Generally, there should be a supportive attitude towards each other.

But having said that, it is worthwhile to bear in mind that pastors can have or develop their own peculiar problems. Though most pastors are humble well-meaning men, among them are to be found some characters who might be difficult to handle for various reasons. In this chapter we flag up some of the less than helpful types of pastors, and some of the difficult circumstances which pastors may find themselves in, which bring pressures on to the leadership team. How are pastors to recognise such faults in themselves? How can other elders be most helpful and respond to such situations?

Our method will be as follows. We will list some types of difficult pastor, expose the challenges which arise because of the problem and then briefly suggest how to best respond.

- **The Career pastor**

You come across men in ministry who take on a little church but see it simply in terms of being a 'stepping-stone' to 'greater things'. Here they will learn their trade. But their real ambition is for a bigger congregation in a more influential place (with students). They are always on the look-out for the next move up what they see as 'the pastoral ladder'. Here the pastor's ambition is not so much for the church, cf. 2 Corinthians 12.15, but for himself and his own reputation. As this becomes obvious (and it will) his present congregation will feel belittled. They will no longer take the word of God seriously. They think, 'here is the pastor exhorting us to make sacrifices and work hard to build up the church, but he intends to be on his way in a couple of years and leave us to it. We are not good enough for him'. Elders need, in a brotherly way, to raise this problem with the pastor. An honest conversation needs to be had.

- **The Invalid pastor**

A man may come to a church and a few years into his ministry contract a long-term illness. He cannot do the things he once did. This can be a disappointment for a church and an eldership. However, the church needs to act in love. There certainly should not be moves to dismiss him from the work. There needs to be trust that the Lord Jesus knows about the situation. Perhaps in coordination with the GP there needs to be a discussion about what can be expected now by way of work. If the pastor was carrying a lot of the admin or the visiting of the church, find a way to relieve him of such things. Maybe the church needs to allow the pastor to take more holidays – as the Metropolitan Tabernacle did with an ailing C. H. Spurgeon. The apostle Paul’s great friend Timothy did not have great health we remember, 1 Timothy 5.23. It may be, if possible, that in discussion with the pastor, an assistant pastor needs to be sought for the church. The main thing is that such a scenario must be handled sensitively and with kindness. Most long-term illnesses are accompanied by a degree of feeling depressed. The pastor may feel a failure. So, it is especially incumbent upon his fellow elders to encourage the pastor and to pray for him and his wife. And it is worth remembering that often deep lessons of the faith and walking with Christ are learnt in times of suffering. The church may well end up with a better pastor than they ever had before, 2 Corinthians 1.3,4.

- **The Overbearing pastor**

Pastors and elders need to be courageous, robust men. After all they are called to protect God’s flock against wolves. They have to correct headstrong people and rebuke those who contradict sound doctrine, Titus 1.9. But if we are not careful that force, and intransigency for truth required in shielding the church, can tumble over into an attitude of a man always having to be right. This is to become overbearing and unable to listen to others. It can happen to both elders and pastors, but because he is the chief teacher especially to a pastor. It is related to pride and makes him almost impossible to work with. He must have his own way on the leadership team. Such men need to be challenged in a brotherly but firm way by the other elders or else the church will become the pastor’s little ‘kingdom’ and no longer God’s family. Many churches have become ingrown and been ruined in this way. Two things need saying. *First*, you can tell the difference between a legitimately strong pastor and a sinful, overbearing man by whether or not he can admit mistakes and say sorry. Remember the apostle Paul was willing to apologise, Acts 23.5. *Second*, Paul insists that even when leaders have to oppose people in error they should do so with kindness and gentleness without being quarrelsome, while remaining firm,

2 Timothy 2.24-26. Overbearing people lose that humble kindness.

- **The Distracted pastor**

Sometimes a pastor can be diverted from his duties by other things and the church and eldership begin to feel they are being short-changed. Examples of the causes of this are the following: Committees – a man might get invited to join various steering committees by his denomination or group of churches or a conference. He feels this is a privilege, but the other leaders are concerned it will take too much of his time. Home schooling – a ministry couple may buy into this for the good of their family, and yet the man gets involved to relieve his wife and this takes time out of pastoring. Academic pursuits – sometimes a minister decides he would like to complete a Masters or a Ph.D. in theology. This might be intended for the overall good of the church, but sermon preparation and visitation become neglected. I'm sure there are other situations I haven't mentioned. Such matters can cause trouble in the leadership and the church. The church and the pastor see these things from different angles. The way to address such matters is pre- rather than post. Before taking on such things, the pastor ought to openly lay such things before the eldership and probably the church meeting as well. Some churches seeing their pastor being invited to wider ministry might feel it a privilege and be supportive, others may be more sceptical. The aim must be preserving the unity of the church, Ephesians 4.3.

- **The Young pastor**

In my experience, three particular factors seem to shape the attitudes of young pastors, perhaps, more than they should. *First*, we now live in a rather individualistic and risk averse society. Instead of the 'out and out for Christ' zeal of previous generations who were prepared to spend themselves for the kingdom, Philippians 2.30, young pastors appear to be a lot more cautious about what they will and what they won't take on. *Second*, the Bible college training given to men today focuses almost exclusively on matters related to study and preaching. This gives the impression that pastoring equates with preaching to the neglect of people. However, although Jesus preached, he spent much time among the people, taking notice of individuals and caring for them, e.g., Luke 19.1-10. Young pastors can spend hours trying to produce the perfect sermon and say they have no time for anything else. I heard of one young pastor who said, 'Well, if I'm expected to preach at this wedding on Saturday, I can't possibly preach on Sunday as well.' *Third*, young parents, these days, expect fathers to be more involved 'hands on' with their children. This is not all bad, but it can be overdone and again it can eat up a pastor's time. This adds up to young pastors

being less available. Such attitudes can leave a church disappointed. If a church is thinking of taking on a young pastor straight from college these things need to be aired. In particular, the matter of perfectionism in preaching (often linked to pride) needs to be addressed. An eldership will need to pray and to try to cultivate a more mature views of ministry.

Other situations

There are a couple of other situations which are perhaps worth mentioning. If a church has elders who came to Christ under the pastor's ministry and were nurtured in the faith by him this may go sour. When they were converted, they idolised the pastor, but now as they have grown up in the faith, they see that, like any of us, the pastor has his faults. Instead of praying for him and helping him, they want to get rid of him. Again, if a church has elders or indeed a pastor with dominant or manipulative wives, then, like Jezebel with Ahab, those wives can want to pull the strings of power in the church through their husbands. This always ends in conflict or defections from the church and among the leadership team.

In all such situations it is incumbent upon all leaders to humble themselves before God and to keep their eye on the main matter. The church is God's church not ours. Unity and love in the truth of the gospel is always the priority.

'I...urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with each other in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace,' Ephesians 4.1-3

4: Helpful attitudes for a leadership team

The angels teach us a profound lesson. It is this: you cannot be a good worker for the Lord without first being a heartfelt worshipper of the Lord. Worship is prior to work. When, in Scripture, the angels are sent on their various missions, they come from having been engaged in worship, e.g. Isaiah 6.

Elders who worship together

There are many elements which go towards making a healthy leadership team for a church, and later in this chapter we will briefly look at some of them. However, it seems that worship provides the proper context and indeed seedbed for all of them. At the core of any church ought to be a group of leaders who love the Lord Jesus and frequently worship together, John 21.16.

This is not without Scriptural precedent. The ascended Lord Jesus left behind a group of apostles worshipping him together: 'While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven. Then they worshipped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. And they stayed continually in the temple praising God', Luke 24.51-53.

It is probably in this context that we should understand Peter and John going up to the temple to pray, Acts 3.1. And when it comes to apostles handing over responsibility for the daily distribution to the widows to 'the Seven' saying they would 'give attention to prayer and the ministry of the word', Acts 6.4, we would be foolish to rule out corporate prayer.

Later we are specifically told that while the leaders of the church at Antioch were worshipping together, the Holy Spirit spoke to them, Acts 13.2. And again, in Revelation 4, 5, whereas the 24 'elders' around the throne of God are probably angelic beings, nevertheless the use of the word 'elders' here does seem to imply that it is particularly incumbent upon the leaders of a church to be those who worship together, Revelation 4.10; 5.8, and stimulate the worship of the church generally.

This is extremely important because the atmosphere of worship sets the tone for how leaders approach the affairs of the church and how they interact with one another. Worship will curb pride, personal agendas, jealousy, hurtful remarks and many other things which can damage an eldership. It will promote a reverence about the work. 'This is Christ's church, not ours'. This is an element

which is sadly missing among many teams. Meetings become more 'business-like' and secular. There is little idea of 'waiting on the Lord'. But if elders can prioritise sharing the things of Christ and worshipping together it brings a great change. Probably elders should meet together regularly just for worship and only secondarily for 'business'. We want the Lord Jesus to be truly at the centre. Worship puts everyone on the same page as saved sinners.

Team spirit

Helpful attitudes towards one another on an eldership include support, forgiveness, accountability, collegiality, appreciation and encouragement. There are probably more but these make a good start.

- *Support*

An eldership team (including the pastor) need to be supportive of one another. The cause of Christ has many enemies, both seen and unseen, within the churches and outside. If we have an outlook that is ready to do our fellow elders down, then we have already joined the enemy ourselves. We need to have a heart which wants to build others up, including our colleagues in leadership, Ephesians 4.29. This is how trust grows.

- *Forgiveness*

Your fellow elders will be far from perfect. They (and you) may well cause offence at some point as sinners do. Yes, gently challenge them, if necessary, but always maintain a readiness to forgive and reconcile. The devil is able to use anger to devastating effect, Ephesians 4.26, 27.

- *Accountability*

A man's life is rarely an open book to other people. We are good at covering up, Genesis 3.7. But as trust grows in an eldership, the more transparent we can be with each other the better it will be for us and for the church. We must allow the questions we would rather not be asked. Jesus asked his disciples what they were arguing about on the road. Embarrassingly it concerned which of them would be greatest in the kingdom, Mark 9.33. Further, elderships should examine themselves from time to time and ask, 'Did we get that right?' And if they didn't be willing to apologise to the church. Without this the leadership team can become a self-serving and arrogant cabal often subject to the problems of 'group think'.

- *Collegiality*

Elders must have thorough discussions about difficult matters in the church. There will be different points of view which are aired. But having reached a decision together before God and with a clear conscience elders must stand together. Though the decision might not go down well with everyone there should be no 'leaks' or private briefings outside the elders' meeting to the effect 'well, of course, I didn't really agree but they wouldn't listen to me'. Such things fracture the unity and will sow the seeds of self-destruction in the eldership.

- *Appreciation*

Nothing builds trust and a good team spirit like appreciation. An elder's work is often tricky and difficult. A pastor's preaching often has to emerge from a long wrestle with the text amid a busy week. For a fellow leader to say 'Thank you' or even 'Well done' can mean such a lot to a man. The apostle Paul felt able to express his appreciation of Timothy even to other people: 'For I have no one like him who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare. For they all seek their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ', Philippians 2.20, 21. Don't flatter, but get into the habit of appreciating one another on the leadership.

- *Encouragement*

This differs from the previous paragraph. Whereas appreciation concerns what we have done, Scripturally, encouragement is much more about reminding people of what God has done and the word of God. It is about what he has done and what his word promises. As the apostle Paul writes about the Second Coming, the Thessalonians are to 'encourage one another with these words', 1 Thessalonians 4.18. The writer of Hebrews, that great exposition of the work of Christ for our salvation, describes his letter as 'my word of encouragement', Hebrews 13.22. A group of elders should be those who are deep into their Bibles and able to spur one another on with the sure and certain promises of the word of God. Perhaps it ought to be a regular exercise for each elder to have a Bible text or thought up his sleeve to bring to an elders' get together.

More could be said, but the best elderships have these kinds of attitudes towards one another. And these attitudes will be best fostered by a heart of love and worship towards the Lord Jesus at the centre of things.

5: A team that truly benefits the church

Men may seek to become an elder for numerous wrong reasons. The Pharisees loved prominence. They felt themselves to be above others and therefore were entitled to lead. They enjoyed 'laying down the law' to other people and bossing them around, Matthew 23.5-7. Leaders in churches today are not immune from such motives.

But Jesus said, 'The greatest among you shall be your servant. Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted,' Matthew 23.11, 12. Eldership is not to be about meeting some foolish 'need' in ourselves. It is meant to be about service – serving God and God's children, the church. To help the church must always be the focus. The great requirement for being an elder is a servant heart.

Serving the church

But now we need to take a moment. We need to ask the question 'what kind of service actually benefits the church?' We can stray on to by-paths which give the appearance of service but are really not. The most obvious of these is to become a people pleaser. Of course, we like to please others when we can, but if we are not careful, we will end up simply feeding their natural self-centredness and sin and at the same time lay ourselves open to manipulation.

True service in the church is about building others up in faith and love and that happens through the word of God. Elders must challenge their people's sins as well as comfort them with the promises of God, Ephesians 4.16. All the members of a church should seek to do this, but it is especially the work of the pastor and elders.

Just as at creation, it is the word of God which brings life. The Genesis account repeatedly emphasizes, 'And God said...', Genesis 1.3; 1.6; 1.9 etc. Our Lord Jesus tells us, 'Man shall not live on bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God,' Matthew 4.4, and he said that in the context of quoting Scripture.

So, truly serving the church is inseparable from the word of God.

Yes, there needs to be service in terms of love and care, but such love and care are the fruit of God's word taking root in our hearts, Mark 12.29-31. By God's grace through his word sinful hearts are turned around so that they begin to love

God and to love others.

Word-centred leadership

The leadership team that truly benefits a church is a word-centred team. The whole eldership pulls together to propel the church in a Godward direction through the teaching and preaching of the Bible. It is because the real authority in the church is the word of God that three things, which we have already noted in this booklet, follow:

- All the elders including the pastor have the same authority – it is word of God. There is no hierarchy of power or right to give orders over others in the team because all are under the word of God. The authority in the church lies not in men but in Scripture.
- It follows therefore, that because the elders are to lead the church according to the word of God, then all elders must be able to teach the word, 1 Timothy 3.2; and defend the truth, Titus 1.9.
- Because the word of God is the treasure of the church which brings life to all who receive it, this explains the extra support and honour which ought to be given to the pastor – because he labours in the word and doctrine, 1 Timothy 5.17.

It was, we remember, the fact that Scripture and not men is to be the over-ruling authority in the church which was the controversy at the very heart of the Reformation to which we trace back the origins of our evangelical churches.

Further, it is this principle which both protects and gives health to the church. Elders may give their own advice to their people, but they cannot insist their people follow it or bring church discipline if they don't. All they can insist on is what God's word says. This keeps the church from becoming a cult. And again, it is the word of God which is frequently referred to as 'sound doctrine' in the NT. That is because it makes individual Christians and churches 'sound' – spiritually healthy. It is the word which truly benefits the church.

