

Thoughts From Other Minds:

When we examine the New Testament there needs to be no question of the fact that those invested with the gift and function of government are called elders. Titus was left in Crete that he might ... 'ordain elders in every city' (Titus 1:5). ... Paul sent to Ephesus and called thither the elders of the church (Acts 20:17). Peter writes to exhort the elders ... to shepherd the flock of God (1 Pet. 5:1, 2). That these elders ruled the church is apparent. The elders whom Titus was to ordain in Crete were also called bishops and stewards of God (Tit. 1:7). In his charge to the elders at Ephesus Paul says, 'Take heed to yourselves and to all the flock over which the Holy Spirit hath made you overseers (bishops)' (Acts 20:28). And 1 Timothy 5:17 makes clear that all elders ruled, though ... some ruled better than others, and some, in addition to ruling, laboured in the word and doctrine.

There are certain observations to be elicited from these passages and others of kindred character.

1. Plurality. This feature lies on the face of the evidence. Titus was enjoined to ordain elders in every city. ... Paul called to Miletus the elders of the church and charged them, as a plurality, to shepherd the flock of God. The writer ... to the Hebrews writes, 'Remember them that have the rule over you' (Heb. 13:7). ... It is the simple truth that singularity has no place in the government of Christ's church. In every case the singularity exemplified in diocesan episcopacy, whether it be in the most extreme form of the papacy, or in the most restricted application of local diocesan bishops, is a patent deviation from, indeed presumptuous contradiction of the institution of Christ. Plurality is written in the boldest letters in the pages of the New Testament, and singularity bears the hallmark of despotism to Christ's institution.

...This principle has oftentimes suffered eclipse within the presbyterian fold. ... by the entertaining of the notion that to the minister of the Word belongs priority or pre-eminence in the government of the church. It is true that the minister as a teaching elder has his own distinctive function in the preaching and teaching of the Word. ... It is natural and proper that his knowledge and experience should be given due respect in the deliberations which must be undertaken by the elders in the exercise of the government of the church. But it cannot be too strongly emphasised that, in respect of ruling, the minister of the Word is on a parity with all the others who are designated elders. ... Ministers of the word in presbyterian denominations are not immune to the vice of autocracy and they are too ready to grasp at an authority that does not belong to them. This evil ... only illustrates the need for constant vigilance, lest the elementary principles of presbyterian government be violated and desecrated. It is not only by erroneous theory that presbytery is prejudiced, but also by practice which subtly annuls the theory professed.

John Murray, *The Form of Government*, Collected Writings, Vol. 2, pp. 345-46.
(to be continued next Lord's Day)

Camperdown Noorat Terang Presbyterian Pastoral Charge

12 February 2017

Sermon: "Eldership: its Qualifications, Duties and Rewards # 1"

Scripture: Acts 14:8-23; 1 Timothy 3:1-16

Sermon Notes

Introduction: Session has resolved to proceed with an election of elders and the rules of our church require me as the minister to 'expound in each congregation in his charge the biblical teaching on the office of eldership.'

As a presbyterian church we owe our polity to Reformation of the Church in Scotland in the 16th century. At the heart of this movement was the desire to restore the authority of the Bible as the Word of God in and over the Church—and the Reformers rejected episcopacy (Bishops) as having no basis in scripture.

In April 1560 the Lords of the Congregation asked John Knox for a statement regarding the reformation of religion in Scotland, and he and others with him produced the *First Book of Discipline*, recommending on the basis of submission to Scripture that the church be governed by ministers and councils of elders.

With the adoption of this book by the parliament (1560) and the General Assembly (1561) the Church of Scotland became a presbyterian church, a church governed by presbyters (that is, elders). Then, wherever Scots migrated, they established presbyterian churches, churches governed by elders, like the PCV, est. 1859.

1. Government of the church by elders

Some Christians favour episcopal church government, with diocesan bishops ruling over many clergy and congregations; others favour congregationalism/independency, with the congregation as the final authority over its faith and life.

However, we believe that God's pattern of government is by elders exercising authority in a series of ascending assemblies or courts, Session, Presbytery and General Assembly, and, in our country, the General Assembly of Australia.

There were elders in the Old Covenant Church (Ex 3:16, 18); and there were elders in the New Covenant Church (Acts 11:30, 15:6); the apostles appointed elders in each church (Acts 14:23) and Paul left Titus (1:5) to appoint elders in Crete.

These elders have a legitimate authority from Christ through the apostles to act together (corporately) to govern their congregations and to make decision that were binding on the whole church (cf. Acts 20:28; 1 Tim 5:17; 1 Pet 5:1-3).

Also, there are scriptures that remind Christians of the authority of their elders and of their duty to respect that authority (1 Pet 5:5 (where Peter is continuing to teach about 'elders', not the honour due to the aged); Heb 13:17; also 1 Thess 5:12).

While we do not say that every detail of our presbyterian polity is found in scripture, we do say that it is 'founded on the Word of God and agreeable thereto'.

It give corporate leadership of each congregation according to apostolic teaching and practice and mutual interdependence of congregations as set forth in Acts 15.

Our ministers do not have executive authority; rather, the oversight of congregations is by the elders meeting with the minister as moderator (chairman); we do not have 'bishops'; instead, elders and ministers meeting as presbyteries and as assemblies oversee the affairs of our church.

2. Government by godly elders

Key passages are 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9; the apostle Paul had left Timothy in Ephesus and Titus in Crete, and an important part of their work in both places was the appointment of elders—and so in his letters to them he lists the qualifications of elders, to which we turn briefly today to return next Lord's Day in detail.

Right motive for eldership: The apostle writes 'If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task.' Traditionally, 'overseer' has been translated 'bishop' - but comparison with Titus 3:5-7 shows that 'overseer/bishop' here is the same as 'elder', 'overseer' = what they did; 'elder' = who they were.

'Overseer' means pastoral oversight ; the elder is a shepherd (1 Pet 5:1-2); the pattern is not Pharaoh's taskmasters, but Jacob's care for Laban's flocks (Gen 31:40); desire is not to be for the honour due to an elder, but for the noble task, the heavy responsibility of caring for God's blood-bought people (Acts 20:28).

The first question when considering a call to eldership is not "Do I want to be an elder?" but "Do I want to be an overseer over God's flock?" - caring for God's people, loving them even when they are not lovable, praying for them, spending oneself for them in costly self-denial after the example of Jesus?

Before voting for someone to be an elder, ask, "Would he be more interested in the work of an elder than in the honour of an elder? Has he shown any pastoral interest, any care for others in the congregation? Could I trust him to love me, to work for me, to watch over my faithfulness to Jesus, to rebuke me if I was wandering?"

Right character for eldership: the work is noble, and so an elder must be 'above reproach' - and what this means is spelled out in the following verses. He must also have managerial qualities, demonstrated in his management of his home; he must not be a recent convert, and he must have a good reputation with outsiders.

Apart from some qualities peculiar to elders (such as 'able to teach') his character is not that of a super saint, but of a mature Christian. Unbelieving friend, such character can be yours through faith in Jesus as the Son of God who died for people of bad character like you so God could forgive you and make you new (2 Cor 5:17).

Christian friend, if this character reminds you of your lack of a godly character, could it be that you are failing to 'work out your own salvation'? Are you neglecting the prayerful reading of the Bible, or cherishing some sin? Be encouraged and work at holiness; Christ died to save you from sin and to change you into his likeness.

Rev Peter Phillips, Camperdown Noorat Terang Presbyterian Charge, 1 Warrnambool Road, Terang, 3264.

Phone: (03) 5592 1041 Mobile 0407 072 991 Email: peterwphillips@bigpond.com

My Notes:

Questions for Reflection:

1. Read and reflect upon Exodus 3:13-18; what does this tell us about the way God's Old Covenant people were organised?
2. Read and reflect upon Acts 11:30, and Acts 15; what do these tell us about the way God's New Covenant people were organised under the apostles? (cf. also Acts 14:23 and Titus 1:5).
3. Read and reflect upon Acts 20:28; 1 Timothy 5:17; 1 Peter 5:1-3, 5, Hebrews 13:17; what do these teach about the authority of elders?
4. Read and reflect upon 1 Timothy 3:1-3; why do you think in 1 Timothy 3 the apostle begins the description of the qualifications of such persons with 'desire' and with 'overseer', rather than 'elder', and how does this relate to testing a call to eldership and to voting for persons to become elders?
5. The apostle says that an overseer must be 'beyond reproach' (1 Tim 3:2); how might we be discouraged by this? How does the context help us to understand what he meant? Reflect on the other qualifications given by the apostle Paul for 'overseers' (1 Tim 3:2b-7); how are these good and wise?