

Introduction

History

The London church is 30 years old this year. We are entering a new chapter in our history, and it seems the Spirit has prepared elders to help take us forward. We have been praying for God to raise up elders for some time, and, more recently, men have been identified who appear ready to take on this responsibility. They have received training and are ready to be presented to the congregation for feedback. More on that later.

We had a period in the late 90's and early 2000's when Adrian Hill and John Partington served as elders. We are very grateful to them for the wholehearted way they took on their tasks. All of us were helped in one way or another, and many are the thanks to God that have been offered as a result of their service to us. However, we have not had a functioning eldership for about ten years. That being the case it is important that we take time to examine the scriptures before appointing an eldership for this new era.

Paul reminds Titus, "The reason I left you in Crete was that you might put in order what was left unfinished and appoint elders in every town, as I directed you." Titus 1.5 We in London have 'unfinished business'. It is my hope that, God willing, the teaching day, these notes and abundant prayer will see us appoint an eldership in London town on 16th September.

Limitations

These notes are not a comprehensive examination of every scripture or issue related to elders. Rather, I hope they cover the issues most relevant to us, here, in London, in our church, our city and our culture, at this time in our history, August 2012. With that in mind we will look at three main points: i. What is an Elder?, ii. What does an Elder do? and, iii. An Elder's vision.

What is an Elder?

Old Testament Background

God has always wanted His people well shepherded. When Moses was struggling to take care of Israel God sent Jethro to help him think differently about his role. He was told to "select capable men from all the people—men who fear God, trustworthy men who hate dishonest gain." (Exodus 18.21). We will see these qualities mirrored in the New Testament later when it comes to considering elders.

David is an example of the shepherd-king whose ultimate example was Jesus himself (John 10.1-18), and who is the model for all elders. What qualities did David have that commended him for this role? Psalm 78 gives us an insight:

"He chose David his servant and took him from the sheep pens; from tending the sheep he brought him to be the shepherd of his people Jacob, of Israel his inheritance. And

David shepherded them with integrity of heart; with skillful hands he led them." Psalm 78.70-72

David learned from looking after literal sheep. He risked his life, was often tired, hungry, thirsty, uncomfortable and in danger. He fought the lion and the bear to protect the sheep (1 Sam 17.36). He took care of the sheep when no one was looking, demonstrating integrity and perseverance. Excellent qualities for a shepherd, a king or an elder.

First Century Culture

Jewish and Gentile households were broadly similar in that they formed a crucial part of society's structure. Extended families were the norm with several generations living under the same roof including servants and slaves. The entertaining room in a moderately well-to-do household could hold around thirty people comfortably-perhaps half as many again in an emergency. A meeting of the 'whole church' may have reached forty to forty-five people. Leading a household of this variety and size would be an excellent training ground for elders in the early church. The home was where family and ministry were done - one overlapping and involving the other. Church was not done 'at church' (as we might understand it), but at home.

Conversion to Christianity often involved a whole household following the lead of the household head (see Acts 16.15, 31-34, 18.8). This may explain the recognition of elders relatively quickly in the early church - especially if the men involved had been elders in the local synagogue.

Some cities (Corinth is a good example) had a 'patron' system, where influential families oversaw a section of a city. This was likely adopted as a structure by the church and was, again, an excellent training opportunity for elders in overseeing not only their own house church, but others in their area.

Two Words

Two words used to describe elders in the New Testament need examination. The first is presbuteros (Titus 1.5) translated 'elder'. It is a description of age and status in the community. The second is episkope (1 Timothy 3.1) translated 'overseer'. This is a description of function, meaning a guardian, supervisor, inspector, someone who visits to examine, someone who watches over someone or something. These are not two different types of people, but different ways of describing the same person. The word 'poimen' is another descriptive term meaning shepherd (Acts 20.28, Eph 4.11, 1 Peter 5.2).

Two Lists

The passages in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 contain the greatest quantity of information on elders and their qualities. A quick look will reveal that the lists have some similarities and some differences. Why might this be? Perhaps because the church in Ephesus had different needs to the church in Crete. For example, the passage in Titus contains the instruction, '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.' (1.9). Why is this not also in 1 Timothy? It is of greater significance in Crete where, "...there are many rebellious people, full of meaningless talk and deception, especially those of the circumcision group. They must be silenced, because they are disrupting whole households by teaching things they ought not to teach—and that for the sake of dishonest gain." (1.10-11)

While all the qualities are important it may be that some are more significant than others depending on the context in which the elder might serve. It follows that an elder capable of serving in one church might not be able to serve in a different church, or at a different time in the life of that church. It also brings to light the fact that what is most important is not 'ticking boxes', but looking at the character of the man involved. An elder can be recognised as such if he has these 'qualities' in good measure. The lists should not be used as check-lists, but as pointers to the kind of person ready to be recognised as an elder.

Blameless

Perhaps the most sobering word to an elder candidate is the one translated 'blameless' in Titus 1.6. *Anegkleptos* is not implying sinlessness, but that this is a person whose reputation is likely to bring credit to the church. Hence its use also in 1 Corinthians 1.8 regarding the church as a whole. A different word with the same basic meaning is used in 1 Timothy 3.2, *anepileptos* - translated 'above reproach'. This word implies that the man not only has a good report, but that he deserves it. The private and public person match. Plutarch uses the same word to describe the character of a person who teaches children. In other words we would be completely happy to have this person look after our children. In many ways, the rest of the qualities in Titus and 1 Timothy are further expressions of this over-arching idea.

Marriage and Family

Bearing in mind that the Bible is not calling for perfection, let us now look at the qualities focussed on marriage and the family.

1. "faithful to his wife", Titus. 1:6 - literally a 'one-woman (wife) man'. Covenant is something God takes very seriously. Faithfulness to one's spouse is the emphasis. Divorce is not specified as an issue. We must not add to what they text says. It is possible for someone divorced to serve as an elder, but the circumstances are important. For example, someone married at 18 and divorced at 20, then remarried at 25 and faithful to his wife for 30 years is a very different scenario from someone married and divorced several times. Our position is that divorce does not automatically disqualify someone serving as an elder.
2. "a man whose children believe", Titus 1.6 - literally 'children having faith'. The fact the word 'children' is used probably indicates the children are still at home. The Bible uses the word 'believer' as a synonym for a Christian. 'Having faith' most naturally means sharing in the faith of the father, embracing it and following it. Our position is that at least one of the children must be a Christian for someone to serve as an elder, but not necessarily all. The important issue is one of direction or trajectory. Are the as-yet-unbaptised children on the path to conversion? A related question is, what if one of the children falls away? Consider the following different stories; a child baptised at 16 who leaves home at 18 and promptly rejects their faith is a very different situation from a child baptised at 16 who falls away at 45. Our position is that a child falling away does not necessarily disqualify someone from serving as an elder. Each case on its merits.
3. "not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient", Titus 1:6. The word translated 'wild': *asocetia*, means reckless living; debauchery, disobedient. The word translated 'disobedient': *anupotaktos*, means unruly, insubordinate, disorderly, contumacious, lawless. The children of an elder can be 'naughty', but not rebellious.

4. "whose children obey him with proper respect" I Timothy 3:4. The NIV 84 translation puts the emphasis on the children. The NIV 11 translation has, "see that his children obey him, and he must do so in a manner worthy of full respect.", putting the stress on the father. Either way, the issue is one of true respect, in other words this is a household where respect is a high value, and the kind of obedience expected is not fear-induced. The father is producing real faith in his children, not conformity.
5. "manage his family own well, (If anyone does not know who to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?)" I Timothy 3:4-5. He must be able to build a healthy family. Managing the family well, for example, would imply that there is no crippling debt through folly. The word 'manage' is *proistecemi* meaning to manage, stand before, lead.

A general principle seen in all these qualities is that the character developed by leading, building, maturing and growing a healthy family are the primary qualities needed in shepherding a church.

Character and Ministry

Having looked at the family, now let us look at the qualities connected generally with character and ministry.

1. "Not overbearing", *authadeces*, meaning self-willed, stubborn, arrogant, Titus 1:7
2. "Whoever aspires to be an overseer desires a noble task" 1 Tim 3.1. The man must desire the function not the position, the task not the office. This is not a person who wants to be called 'elder', but who wants to do some 'eldering'.
3. "Not quick tempered", *orgilos*, inclined to anger, flaring, Titus 1:7
4. "Not given to drunkenness", *paroinos* – literally being drunk, loss of self-control, Titus 1:7
5. "Not violent", *plecækteces*, not a bully, 1 Tim 3:3
6. "Not pursuing dishonest gain", *aischrokerdeces*, shamefully greedy, Titus 1:7
7. "Hospitable" - a combination of two words, *philo* and *zenos*, meaning a lover of strangers. Titus 1:8
8. "Loves what is good", *philagathos*, a fosterer of virtue - Titus 1.8
9. "Self-controlled", *soæphrocen*, of a sound mind, sane; temperate, discreet, wise, 1 Tim. 3:2
10. "Temperate", *nephalion*, sober, not given over to emotions, of a sound mind, sane; temperate, discreet - 1 Tim 3:2
11. "Upright", *dikaion*, just, equitable, fair - Titus 1.8
12. "Holy", *hosios*, devout - Titus 1.8
13. "Disciplined", *egkrates*, strong, stout; possessed of mastery; master of self, empowered - Titus 1.8

14. "Must hold firmly to the faithful message", antechomenon - meaning to resist, withstand, seek after - Titus 1:9. He needs fighting skills (God is a warrior), stamina for the fight until we die, not afraid of the fight.
15. "Good reputation with outsiders", marturia - meaning 'testimony', 1 Tim 3:7
16. "Able to teach", apt or qualified to teach - didaktikon, 1 Tim 3:2. Teaching is a habit.
17. Men people can have confidence in, Heb 13:17, NIV11. Peithoœ, to persuade; believe; trust. The Hebrews passage does not mention elders, but in addressing leaders in a mature church it surely includes them. Of course, trusting them does not imply we have to like them. Sometimes leaders with conviction need to speak uncomfortable truth.
18. Must lead by being an example, I Peter 5:3. When you don't have time to be a good example you don't have time to lead. 'tupos', meaning - image, pattern, example, sign. Elders are not men who come out of their cave to tell others what to do then return to their lair. They are front-line disciples inspiring others by their example.

What Does an Elder Do?

New Testament Example

The New Testament gives us some interesting insights into what elders did - and some clues as to what elders are called to do today.

- Act 11 - in the first mention of elders we see that they are connected with taking care of poor disciples
- Acts 13 - a healthy church in Antioch seems to be functioning perfectly well without elders. Elders are always desirable, but it helps to remember that the Holy Spirit always makes up for what any group of disciples may lack.
- Acts 14 - the first mention of elders being appointed. This is a sign of the early Christian movement maturing.
- Acts 15 - a crucial role is played by the elders in a situation of potential division. The elders work as a team with the apostles and unity is promoted as division is averted. If elders can work in harmony with leaders having other gifts, unity will always be possible in the church. No one role or office has all the gifts needed for a church (see Eph 4.11). Our position is that the elders will work together with the evangelists, those with the gift of teaching and other significant leadership gifts.
- Acts 20 - sadly, not even elders are immune from straying. Paul tells them to watch over one another (v28) with the implication of we might call discipling one another. He also tells them to watch over the flock. More on that in the next point.

Helping Members

The many and various ways elders can and should help the members of the church are unlimited, but here are three particular ways drawn from three passages:

1. Watch, Acts 20.28-31

Paul instructs the Ephesian elders to 'watch ...over all the flock', to be 'shepherds of the church of God'. The enemies are outside, 'savage wolves will come in', and the enemies are inside, 'even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them'. Elders look both ways. The shepherding image implies loss of sleep, and an expenditure of energy. Elders watch over the flock and watch out for the flock (see also 1 Peter 5.2). Of course, all disciples have the same charge implied in Hebrews 3.12-13 and so on, but elders have a view of the bigger picture and a responsibility to deal with the bigger more complex issues that the average Christian is not equipped to handle.

2. Touch, James 5.13-20

An elder is expected to touch the lives of individual members. They are not to spend all their time in meetings, but be in touch with people. The passage in James 5 is fascinating for several reasons. Elders are willing to place themselves in danger for members (sickness is sometimes contagious). They know the needs of members and respond to them. Not every illness needs the prayers of an elder and the anointing with oil, but when needed they will be in attendance. Sin may or may not be the cause of the illness, but an elder is also called to ask members if they have sin to confess. This can be a sensitive area - especially when sickness is the context. Elders are not afraid to 'go there', to ask the difficult questions and risk offending people for the sake of truth and righteousness. They are not 'nice guys'. Jesus was a divisive figure a lot of the time - some people hated him and tried to kill him even though he was the good shepherd. Our shepherds need an edge of steel at times. They are not in a popularity contest.

3. Example, 1 Peter 5.3

Elders are called to be an example worthy of imitation. Certainly they do not need to be perfect, but in their eagerness to serve they will provide the kind of example that will inspire others to service.

Helping The Lost

If any person aspires to lead others they must love God. And if we love God we love who He loves. He loves His children that are saved, and He loves those who are lost. Jesus as the good shepherd wanted to bring still more sheep into his sheep pen (John 10.16). So do all disciples, and an elder is someone who's heart beats with passion for the lost sheep. The parable of Luke 15.4-7 expresses it best. There we see a shepherd sacrificing to save the one lost sheep. Afterwards Jesus tells us that, "I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent." (Luke 15.7)

Our position is that Elders will have a personal ministry, leading a family group, discipling other family group leaders, sharing their faith, reaching out to build relationships with the lost and studying the Bible with seekers.

Leadership

Example is everything in leadership - therefore elders must be leading something and someone (1 Peter 5.3). The task is important, not the title (1 Tim 3.1). An elder will be dealing with a lot of problems, and there are always more than enough 'problems' to keep them fully occupied, but this has to be balanced with an outward focus. Elders in this church will study the Bible with people.

"the pastors and teachers" in Ephesians 4:11 might be most accurately translated "teaching shepherds". Either way, the shepherds are in a team. They are able to equip others and form part of a leadership and gifts palate that keeps the church connected and maturing.

"The elders who direct" (1 Tim 5:17) implies that not all elders direct the church. Some do, and some do not. In the context of 1 Timothy it is not entirely clear what this means in detail, but we can imagine that some elders (perhaps the ones who combine the gifts of elder *and* evangelist, or the ones with the ability to teach and preach in a more persuasive and inspiring way than other elders) have a more influential role in the direction of the church than the rest of the elders.

We need elders and evangelists in a team together. Elders seem to focus mainly on looking inward (the reason why there is so much focus on their family life in the lists of qualities), and evangelists keep the church facing outward (there are no requirements regarding family life in the Bible for them). Evangelists and elders are good for each other. Elders on their own can go off track (perhaps this is what happened in Acts 20), and so can evangelists. These two roles or gifts are not designed as checks and balances, or meant to keep an eye on one another, but to bring the best out of one another. They are building a house together, but with different jobs.

A common question when it comes to elders and evangelists is, "Who has 'authority'?" By which is usually meant the final authority. In one sense the one who has authority is - the one who has authority! It is about trust, character and recognising God's calling on an individual or group. The bible does not tell us that all authority resides in any one person, group or office. 'Authority' is given to *both* elders (Titus 1.9 - help keep standards clear, implication of 1 Tim 5.17) *and* evangelists (2 Tim 4.2, Titus 2.15). The 'leaders' of Hebrews 13.17 have authority, whoever those leaders are. Those God has put to 'watch over' and 'direct' us are the ones who have authority for as long as they exercise their responsibilities faithfully.

An Elder's Vision

We need elders to be men of vision. Their role cannot be simply maintenance or problem-solving. A vision is vital to keep us on track towards the goals God has in mind for us individually and as a church. What inspiration do we find from two elders of bible times?

Peter

Peter was an elder as well as an apostle (1 Peter 5.1). What was on this elder's heart? What was his vision? In 1 Peter his concerns include that disciples grow in their faith and remain holy, set apart from the world. He also has instructions for households - slaves, husbands and wives. Finally, there is an emphasis on standing firm through difficult times and holding on to faith, "the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast." 1 Peter 5.10

In 2 Peter his theme is 'reminders' (2 Pet 1.12). What does he remind them of? Amongst other things, "to stimulate you to wholesome thinking." 2 Peter 3.1 And later to "be on your guard so that you may not be carried away by the error of the lawless and fall from your secure position. But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ." (2 Peter 3.17-18) Elders who do these things will be lifting those they shepherd to a glorious and godly vision.

John

What about John? He may have been not only an apostle and an elder, but an evangelist as well. He speaks as an elder in the letters of 1, 2 and 3 John. What is his vision?

In 1 John three issues surface: "We write this to make our joy complete." 1 Jn 1.4, "I write this to you so that you will not sin." 1 Jn 2.1, and, "I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life." 1 Jn 5.13. He wants his and their joy to be filled up, to help them avoid sin and to be confident in their salvation. Excellent elder topics!

In 2 John he emphasises love, "I ask that we love one another. And this is love: that we walk in obedience to his commands. As you have heard from the beginning, his command is that you walk in love." vv5-6. He has a warning, "Watch out that you do not lose what we have worked for, but that you may be rewarded fully." v8, and a command, "If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not take them into your house or welcome them. Anyone who welcomes them shares in their wicked work." vv10-11. We need elders with the vision to urge us to love one another, to hold on for our reward and to not tolerate false teachers.

3 John has this simple but profound command, "Dear friend, do not imitate what is evil but what is good." v11. What an excellent summary of an elder's vision - building a Christian community that loves what is good.

Elders are not maintenance men, nor committee men, they are men on a mission with a vision. Let us pray for elders like that and encourage the elders in that task.

Our Part

When God blesses us with elders, what is our part in their work? We will summarise this under four headings.

Gratitude

It is important that we not only *feel* grateful that these men are willing to serve in this challenging role (a role, frankly, that few of us desire!), but that we *express* gratitude to the elders. They need encouragement just like anyone else, but especially because they hear more bad news than the rest of us.

Learn

If we trust these men, they must be people from whom we can learn a lot about the Christian life. Get to know the elders, listen to them carefully, ask questions about faith and family life, imitate them. There is little point in having elders and not being eager to learn from them.

Support

When someone is prepared to go ahead of us, blaze a trail and serve wholeheartedly for our benefit it is our responsibility to cheer them on. We are not to be sceptics, cynics and carping critics, but cheerleaders. The principle of Hebrew 13.17 applies here, "Do this so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no benefit to you." Let us be the kind of church that holds up the hands of elders engaged in God's service.

Pray

Leaders are always a primary target for the evil one. When an elder struggles it effects the whole church. Since we are blessed by God to be served by elders it is our responsibility to pray for them. Make them and their families the subject of regular and fervent prayer. It is the least we can do, and the most we can do.

London's Future Leadership

When elders are recognised, what difference will that make to the leadership of the London church?

Practical Arrangements

The elders and evangelists will form the leadership of the London church - replacing the current London leadership team and Advisory group. The elders will meet as a group every other month and together with the evangelists every other month. The evangelists will continue to meet every week at staff meeting.

The local leadership teams will remain responsible for their local ministry. This development has no direct effect on their operation. If a region has no elder within it, an elder based in a different region will be available to them.

What next?

The names of the men commended by the London leadership team have been announced: Andrew Agerbak, Mike Farrell, Mohan Nanjundan, Paul Rowden and Toks Sowoolu. We now request feedback from the congregation on their suitability to serve. This feedback can be given via eldersfb@icoc.org.uk.

Here are some guidelines regarding this feedback:

- If you have a personal issue with one of these men (if you believe they have sinned against you and it is not yet resolved), you must take it to them personally. This is not appropriate feedback.
- We need your name on the feedback because, i. Only feedback from church members will be considered, ii. We may need to follow up on issues.
- If you have no access to email please ask a friend to help you
- The deadline for feedback is Sunday 2nd September
- If you were unable to attend the teaching day on eldership it is important you listen to the recordings before sending feedback. They are to be found on www.iccmisions.org and www.nwlcc.org.

Comments could be along the lines of,

"I commend brother X as an elder because",

"I am not sure brother X is suited to be an elder because", or

"I have a question I would like resolved about brother X"

Charles Elikwu, Franklin Walters and Malcolm Cox have been asked to read, pray over and assess the feedback. They will talk to individuals if necessary and make a recommendation to the London leadership team by Sunday 9th September. God willing we will then be able to recognise some or all of the proposed elders at the London 30th anniversary service on Sunday 16th September.

Conclusion

Not every issue connected to eldership has been covered in this article, but hopefully enough detail has been discussed that we can evaluate the commended brothers in a healthily biblical way. Now let us "put in order what was left unfinished and appoint elders in every town, as I directed you." Titus 1.5

Your brother,

Malcolm

(On behalf of the London leadership team; Malcolm Cox, Mike Desouza, Charles Elikwu, Adrian Hill, Mohan Nanjundan, Toks Sowoolu)