

Transcript of text used in 'A brief history of Eldership'

PART ONE

The role of Elder and the functions of Eldership have evolved from their roots in scripture and continued through the history of the United Reformed Church. References to Elders in the Old Testament tend to emphasise the leadership and authority which they exercised. In Exodus 12. 21 it is the Elders who can be trusted to implement God's instructions given through the prophet Moses, in order that the whole community is held together at a time of urgency.

It is likely that, originally, Elders were heads of families or clans. Evidence of the presence of Elders is found in peoples other than the Israelites, such as the Hittites and the Moabites. Numbers 11 is the story of a time when Moses was hard pressed by the anxiety and distress of the people who found themselves out in the desert and complaining about how their God had treated them. They have nothing but manna to eat and look back fondly to their days of slavery in Egypt. They demand meat to eat, and Moses is at the end of his tether with them. God's answer to Moses' cry for help is to ask him to select 70 Elders, to whom some of the spirit resting on Moses will be delegated. In this way the weight of leadership will be shared. The meat shortage is solved by a sudden influx of quails brought in on a strong wind.

As the Israelites settled down in Palestine, especially later under the Kings, the solidarity of the family or clan broke down as groups diffused into villages and cities. So, it is likely that the Elders in each local area became co-opted bodies. As well as local Elders, there was a national body of Elders referred to as "the Elders of Israel", which later became the Sanhedrin or Jewish Council. This is the body which Jesus encounters in the Gospel accounts such as Matthew 21:23.

From earliest times, the Christian churches had Elders. This was probably because the model was already present in Judaism. Some of the Elders in the early Church clearly brought their Jewish traditions with them. Acts 15 tells of the Council of Jerusalem in which the potential conflict between Jewish and Gentile culture within the Church was averted by the collective wisdom of the Apostles and Elders. This chapter shows how the Church had to wrestle with new ways of living faithfully from its earliest days, and the important role that Elders had in leadership. In Acts 20:17-35 Paul is talking to the Elders from the Ephesus Church and gives them charge as "overseers" (Greek word *episcopo*)

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and “shepherds” who should keep the people in line with the true message of Jesus Christ. Elders had a role in administration in those days, such as being responsible for receiving collections of aid at a time of famine as given in Acts 11:27-30. The part they played in pastoral care is indicated by James 5:14 in which Elders are asked to visit the sick and pray with them.

By the time of the second generation of Christians, the role of the Elders had become established, and they seem to have been given a certain amount of authority, as suggested in 1 Timothy 5:17-19. Some Elders engaged in preaching and teaching, and this passage is often cited when Ministers of Word and Sacraments are referred to as the “teaching Elders”.

There is another New Testament term describing a form of ministry: *diakonia*. This means “service” and is used of all kinds of service from waiting on tables (Acts 6:1-6) to the ministry of the Apostles to Paul’s collection for the Church in Jerusalem (2 Corinthians 8 & 9). Towards the end of the New Testament times *diakonos* comes to be used for the office of “Deacon”. This term was universally used within Congregational Churches, where the term Elder was not usually to be found before the United Reformed Church came into being.

Throughout the New Testament there are different words for different sorts of ministry, but it is not always clear to what exactly they refer, and they have been translated in various ways in different times, places, and church traditions. A term used to describe one function of ministry within the early Church is *episcopo*, which means oversight. Within the New Testament the word *episcopos* is sometimes used of an Elder and sometimes applied to the Eldership as a group. The title is also used for a role which differs from that of Elder and implies a more individual form of oversight. Then it is usually translated “bishop”, and it is from this that the office of Bishop has developed within the so-called “Episcopal” churches. Another word used for forms of ministry in the New Testament is *presbuteros*. From it we derive the word ‘Presbyter’ (as in Presbyterian!), but this can be translated out as Presbyter, Elder, Minister or Priest and in the New Testament period does not seem to have had an exact definition. Another term again is ‘*Diaconos*’ – Deacon. This normally refers to the ministry of service. There is no one fixed pattern for different forms of ministry in the New Testament. Over the first couple of centuries of the life of the Church these various forms and titles for different sorts of ministry eventually settled into a three-fold pattern: The Bishop, the Priest and the Deacon. For Catholic, Orthodox and Anglican churches, they

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understand this pattern of ministry to be essential for the Church to truly be the Church.

PART TWO

John Calvin (seen in this picture) is a foundational figure in the reformed tradition and ministered in the church in Geneva. He believed that the New Testament did not explicitly teach that ministry had to be in the 3-fold pattern. Through his reading of scripture, and to meet the needs of the new reformed Church in Geneva, he developed a four-fold pattern: Pastor, Teacher, Deacon and Elder. It is from this tradition that we receive the gift of Eldership in the URC. Eventually in many reformed churches this became a two-fold pattern. The functions of Pastors and Teachers became Ministers of Word and Sacrament, and the functions of Elders and Deacons become our Elders. In some parts of the Reformed family Elders are ordained, and in others they are not. The URC has received Eldership as an ordained ministry from the Scottish and English Presbyterian tradition. In Calvin's Geneva, Elders and Ministers worked together in the Councils of the Church to exercise oversight of the life of the Church. This is why our Synods, and the General Assembly are still made up of a mixture of Elders and Ministers.

The Reformation in Scotland owes much to John Knox (1514 – 1572), who exercised both political influence and religious leadership in the formation of Presbyterianism there. In August 1560, after the passing of Acts to bring about the disestablishment of the Roman Catholic church in Scotland, Knox and five other ministers were given the task by the Scottish Parliament of organising the newly reformed church (the Kirk). They worked for several months on the 1st Book of Discipline as the document describing the organisation of the new church. The Parliament did not approve the plan for financial reasons, but the intention for the role of the Elders can be seen.

In the 1570s the Kirk had to deal with a shortage of clergy, a lack of income and the threat of a Catholic Counter Reformation or ('Re-formation'). The *Second Book of Discipline* (1578) set out the vision of a Presbyterian Kirk. The text was consistent with the ideas of Andrew Melville, who was a scholar, theologian and religious reformer. He was not the only influence on its creation as it was produced by a committee of over 30 members.

The 2nd Book of Discipline lays out the functions of Elders in ways which are not dissimilar to those described in the United Reformed Church Manual,

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although possibly with greater fierceness and attention to the role of the Kirk in line with its place in local and national governance.

Towards the end of the sixteenth century, as part of the Reformation in England, Presbyterians and Congregationalists rejected the idea of the Local Church as a diocese under the authority of the Bishop and departed from the Roman Catholic and Anglican form of the threefold ministry. Instead, local congregations called a Minister of Word and Sacraments who was surrounded by a group of Elders or deacons. In congregationalism Deacons were not ordained.

The role of the deacons is suggested in this extract from a guide written in the 1920s. Within Congregationalist polity, every local church congregation is independent, ecclesiastically sovereign or “autonomous” in contrast to Presbyterian polity in which higher assemblies of congregational representatives can exercise authority over individual congregations. When it was formed in 1972 the United Reformed Church brought these two polities together within four Councils of the church – Church Meeting, District Council, Provincial Synod, and General Assembly. This was subsequently reshaped into three Councils – Church Meeting, Synod, and General Assembly.

Within the Churches of Christ there were comparatively few stipendiary ministers. Each local church, however, had a number of ordained Elders who carried a great deal of responsibility not only for the oversight of the local church but also the conduct of worship, including the administration of the Sacraments.