



Lukas Vischer: The Office of the Elders

1. Place and Date of Publication

The Office of the Elders, in: Lukas Vischer (ed.): The Ministry of the Elders in the Reformed Churches, Berne 1992, 9-95.

2. Historical Context

Numerous Reformed churches examining the World Council of Churches' study on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry (Lima 1982) criticized the office of the elders to be missing in the text. But the critics were not able to give a common answer to the question of how the office of elders might have been properly described. To clarify the question, the Swiss Federation of Protestant Churches convened an international consultation on "the ministry of elders" in Geneva in August 1990. The consultation was chaired by Lukas Vischer. His article served as a background of the report (cf. annex).

3. Summary

The office of elders has always played an important role in the Reformed tradition. But it is interpreted and organized in different ways. Though elders occur frequently in the Old and New Testament, no specific order can be derived from biblical references.

The Reformed understanding of ministries is generally shaped by a marked anti-hierarchical ethos. A World Alliance of Reformed Churches commission report (1959) describes the office of the elders in diaconal terms: "Elders ... have to assume leadership responsibility in witnessing on Christ's behalf within the structures of the secular order, and in bringing ... the work of God in secular history to the attention and to the intercession of the Church". In 1966, the Alliance emphasizes the Reformed conviction "that oversight (episcopate) within the Church is *basically* a *corporate* task."

A survey of the Reformed tradition reveals a variety of meanings and tasks of elders. Elders visit the families, settle quarrels, give advice, deal with ecclesiastical discipline, and share the "spiritual jurisdiction" with pastors. As early as 1632, the Bohemian-Moravian Unity of the Brethren mentions "sister elders". In Zurich, the Reformers cooperate so closely with the Christian city magistrates that the office of elders doesn't play an important role. Johannes a Lasco stresses the authority of the whole community and introduces even a time of probation for all officeholders. Theodor Beza lays the foundation for the "Presbyterian tradition": The collegial government of presbyters (elders) is to serve, on the part of individuals, as a protective wall against any aberration into tyranny. On the other hand it prevents the chaos which democracy may bring about. The "Congregationalists" stress the independence of each congregation: All believers share the task of decision-making in responsibility to Christ alone.

Today, each church has to consider through which structures it wants to give expression to the essence and mission of the church in its specific situation. The classical Reformed order calls for the four offices of pastors, teachers, deacons and elders; further offices can always be created. In any case Christ is not represented by individuals; he is witnessed to by the cooperation of collegiums. "The Holy Spirit wanted to prevent anybody from dreaming of principality or domination in the question of church government" (Calvin, Institutio IV,4,4).



**The Ministry of the Elders
in the Reformed Church**

Edited by Lukas Vischer

THE MINISTRY OF THE ELDERS IN THE REFORMED CHURCHES

**Papers Presented at a Consultation
Held in Geneva in August 1990**

edited by Lukas Vischer

Berne 1992

Veröffentlichung Nr. 5

Evangelische Arbeitsstelle Oekumene Schweiz
Sulgenauweg 26, CH - 3000 Bern 23

Leiter: Lukas Vischer

1992

PREVIOUS PUBLICATIONS

No. 1 Reformed Witness Today. A Collection of Confessions and Statements of Faith issued by Reformed Churches, (edited by L. Vischer) 1982, 468 p.

No. 2 Church History in an Ecumenical Perspective. Papers and Reports of an International Ecumenical Consultation, October 1981, 117 p.

No. 3 Towards a History of the Church in the Third World. The Issue of Periodisation. Papers and Report of a Consultation, July 1983, Geneva, (edited by L. Vischer) 1985, 135 p.

No. 4 African Church Historiography: An Ecumenical Perspective. Papers presented at a Workshop on African Church History, held at Nairobi, August 3-8, 1986, (edited by Ogbu U. Kalu) 1988, 223 p.

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PREFACE

This volume is an attempt at assessing and clarifying the significance of the ministry of elders in the Reformed churches today. It is the result of an international consultation which was convened by the Swiss Federation of Protestant Churches in August 1990 in Geneva. The statement agreed upon by the consultation was published by the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (Studies No. 19, Geneva 1991).¹ This volume contains the papers which were presented at the consultation. They provide the background of the conclusions reached by the consultation.

I wish to thank the authors for participating in this exchange and making available their papers for publication. May the volume help to renew the debate on the significance of eldership both in the Reformed churches and in the ecumenical movement in general.

April 1992

Lukas Vischer

¹ Copies can be obtained from the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, 150 route de Ferney, 1211 Geneva 2, Switzerland.

A

ELDERSHIP - A GENERAL SURVEY

THE OFFICE OF THE ELDERS

Lukas Vischer

Introduction

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1. Elders
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Introduction

The office of the elders has always played an important role in the Reformed tradition. According to the Reformed understanding, it is clear that the church lives because it "hears the voice of its Lord." The Reformers therefore put primary emphasis on the fact that in the church there must be an office for the proclamation of the Word and the administration of the sacraments. But in the Reformed churches, the pastors or shepherds never stand alone. They are always surrounded by a collegium of elders who share in the governance of the congregation. This office of the elders is so widespread that many see in it *the* distinguishing sign of the Reformed tradition. It is no coincidence that a branch of the Reformed tradition calls itself "Presbyterian."

A quotation can demonstrate the strength of John Calvin's conviction that the collegium of the elders was an essential structure for the church.

Governors were, I believe, elders chosen from the people, who were charged with the censure of morals and the exercise of discipline along with the bishops. For one cannot otherwise interpret Paul's statement "Let him who rules act with diligence." Each church therefore had from its beginning a senate, chosen of godly, grave, and holy men, which had jurisdiction over the correcting of faults. Of it we shall speak later. *Now experience itself makes clear that this sort of order was not confined to one age. Therefore this office of government is necessary for all ages (Institutes 4. 3. 8).*

How is this office to be understood in its specific details? Why is it so important to the life and witness of the church? How should it be organized today? The study at hand will investigate these questions. As much as the Reformed churches emphasize the importance of the elders, there is no self-evident agreement on these questions. The office is interpreted and organized in different ways, in theory as well as in practice.

This diversity became all too clear in the examination of the texts of the World Council of Churches on "Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry". Numerous Reformed churches did not spare their criticism. How is it possible, they asked, that in these texts the office of the elders, which is so deeply rooted in the Reformed tradition, does not even appear? How will it be possible to reach a consensus on the ministry and ministries if this particular ministry is simply overlooked?

Of course the question "How do you understand the office of the elders?" could not fail to arise. How might the texts of the World Council of Churches have been written in order to do justice to the insights and convictions of the Reformed churches? The Reformed churches' criticism of others entails for themselves the responsibility of giving a common answer to these questions on the office of the elders but this responsibility has not yet been met.

There are good reasons for this. The justification for the office is at closer inspection not so apparent as it might appear at first glance. The arguments used at the time of the Reformation are no longer automatically valid today. The ways of dealing with the Holy Scriptures and the dialogue among various confessional traditions have led to new perspectives which must be taken into account. Some questions on the ministry are being answered differently in different Reformed churches today.

This study is addressed to people engaged in the ecumenical movement. Even more, it is above all an attempt to bring more clarity to the understanding of the Reformed churches themselves. What is essential in the office of the elders? Why should there be such a collegium or consistory in the church? And how should it be structured?

A. THE TOPIC IN THE WORLD ALLIANCE OF REFORMED CHURCHES

The question of the meaning of the office of the elders has been raised and discussed again and again in the World Alliance of Reformed Churches. The existence of the World Alliance inevitably raised the question of the identity of the Reformed tradition. And wherever this question is posed, the office of the elders must also be discussed. Two themes stand out in the history of the Alliance: the question of the common confession and the question of the correct understanding of the office of the elders.

1. The First Years (1877-1884)

From the beginning, at the first two General Councils, the office of the elders was discussed extensively. In Edinburgh (1877)² the topic was treated in three lectures, from differing points of view, and in Philadelphia (1880)³ it was discussed under the general title "The distinguishing principles of Presbyterianism." The discussion raised so many open questions that a commission was assigned to produce a comprehensive report. It was presented at the third General Council in Belfast (1884).⁴ After that the topic receded into the background for a long while.

The concern of this debate was not to deliver a comprehensive biblical and historical justification for the office of the elders. The speakers were all good Presbyterians and naturally assumed that the office, as it had developed in the Presbyterian tradition,

² Reports of Proceedings of the First General Presbyterian Council, Edinburgh 1877, ed. J. Thomson, Edinburgh 1877, pp. 98-123.

³ Report of Proceedings of the Second General Council of the Presbyterian Alliance, Convened at Philadelphia, September 1880, ed. John B. Dales and R.M. Patterson, Philadelphia 1880, pp. 148-176, 213-223.

⁴ Minutes and Proceedings of the Third General Council, Belfast 1884, ed. George D. Matthews, Belfast/Edinburgh/London 1884, pp. 131-136; cf. also pp. 373-400.

was an essential structure of the church. With rare spirit and eloquence, Professor Samuel Wilson of the United States expressed himself:

Thus going to the Word of God, to the whole Word of God, reverently to learn what form of government Christ has given to the Church, and pressing out the very essence of all dispensations, and lifting the name right from the sacred page, with the breath of Jehovah upon it, we exclaim, Presbyterian!... If our system be not *jure divino*, we as Presbyterians, especially as a Presbyterian General Council, have no right to exist... Boast they of apostolic succession! We claim patriarchal succession. Presbyterianism is older by millennia than the apostles. The apostles only take their place in the unbroken line of Presbyterianism, which had been in successful operation for thousands of years before Peter cast his first net or caught his first fish. At Horeb, in the light of the burning bush, *nec tamen consumebatur*, Moses received his great commission, which ran thus: "Go gather the elders of Israel together!" Jehovah sent Moses down to Egypt to convene the Presbytery. Through the elders, the representatives of the people, he was to act, and through them he did act. From the burning bush at Horeb Moses went to the Presbytery...⁵

Others spoke with more reserve. They also assumed that the office of the elders belongs among the indispensable characteristics of the Presbyterian tradition, but at the same time stressed that in theory as well as in practice some points were in need of clarification and renewal. How should the relationship between pastor and elder be viewed? What exactly is the theory of the two kinds of presbyters? What status do "ruling elders" hold? What are their responsibilities? Who chooses them and how are they brought into their office?

⁵ Philadelphia 1880, pp. 150, 152.

The discussion of these early years did not, however, lead to any tangible results. The open questions found no common answers. The report to the General Council of Belfast limited itself to a description of the prevailing practices. Its conclusion presented a somewhat despairing recommendation:

The only practical suggestion which the Committee ventures to make in closing this report is that provision might be made by Presbyteries, with special reference to the instruction of eldership, for an occasional course of lectures on the distinctive principles of Presbyterianism, the practice and proceedings of ecclesiastical courts, and the government and discipline of the Church.⁶

At this time, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches was in essence a union of Presbyterian churches from the Anglo-American tradition. Only a few European churches belonged to it. As a result, the discussion inevitably focused on relatively narrowly-formulated questions. The study commission had the intention of producing a comprehensive picture of the practices of various Presbyterian churches. The list of the twenty answers it received to its questionnaire, however, is characteristic: "six from Great Britain and Ireland, six from the United States of America, four from the Continent of Europe, and four from the Colonies of Great Britain."⁷ It comes as no surprise that the discussion on this narrow basis did not lead to any satisfactory results. The historically-conditioned character of the office of the elders, as it had developed in the Presbyterian churches of Anglo-Saxon origin, could but inadequately be considered. The scriptural basis of the office of the elders was, in this first debate, more asserted than actually demonstrated.

⁶ Belfast 1884, p. 136.

⁷ Belfast 1884, p. 132.

2. The General Councils of Princeton and Sao Paulo (1954-1959)

The question of the office continued to surface in the discussions of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches. In the 1920's, the Alliance was occupied with the appeal of the Lambeth Conference and sought to define the Reformed position regarding the Anglican insistence that a common understanding of the ministry was a prerequisite for the unity of the Church:

If we start by making the Ministry the primary issue, and if we say that we cannot recognize the Church standing of Communion which have not the same ministerial order as we hold it, then reunion has no future... But if we start with the Church rather than with the Ministry and if... we are able to recognize one another's Communion as branches of the Church... then we can go on to discuss a subject such as the Ministry, in which some Communion are clearly defective in their ordering, and can discuss it in another spirit and on a quite different plane.⁸

A truly new consideration of the office of the elders came again in the 1950's. Much had changed in the intervening years. The great majority of the Reformed churches on the continent had long since joined the World Alliance. The approaches of "Zürich" and "Geneva" were represented in a lively way in the debates. The number of Reformed churches from Asia, Africa, and Latin America was steadily increasing. The events of the thirties, especially the experience of the Confessing Church in Germany, had generated a new awareness of the importance of the office of the elders in crisis situations. Beyond this, their participation in the ecumenical movement challenged the Reformed churches to expand their understanding of the ministry. Several member churches were participating in discussions on unification and had to know clearly which consensus on ministry they could join. At

⁸ Carnegie Simpson at the General Council of Pittsburgh (1921); cf. Marcel Pradervand, A Century of Service, Edinburgh 1975, p. 120.

the same time within the churches, the position of the laity, in particular of women, had become a much-discussed topic. What is a living church in which all members make their contribution to missionary witness? What role should the elders have in such a church?

The General Council of Princeton (1954) resolved to commission a study on ordination. The words of the resolution are revealing; the emphasis is on the call to break new ground:

[Resolved,] that the Alliance appoint a Commission to formulate *afresh* the Reformed doctrine of ordination, and of the service in the church, of minister, elder and deacon, *with particular reference to the ministry of women*, according to the *Word of God* and in the light both of the *ancient tradition* of the Church and the *human situation today*. The Commission is hereby instructed to examine and to make use of any materials and results available from the studies undertaken by the Commission on the Life and Work of Women (World Council of Churches).⁹

The report of the Commission was presented to the following General Council and accepted by it with approval and appreciation. The study thus came to a close, and the General Council resolved that "the present Commission as organized be dismissed with thanks."

The report of the Commission described the office of the elders - surprisingly - as a diaconal office:

The relation between the Elder and the Minister... has been very close. But the Elder has too often been relegated to the position of... ministerial assistant... and the ministry of the Elder has not been distinguished enough from that of the Minister.... it has not been

⁹ Proceedings of the Seventeenth General Council of the Alliance of Reformed Churches holding the Presbyterian Order, held at Princeton, NJ, U.S.A., 1954, ed. Marcel Pradervand, Geneva 1954, p. 37.

recognized that the Elder has a distinct share in the ministry of the Church in his own right... *this study shows that the eldership is a diaconal ministry...* Elders are deacons who have the special responsibility for spiritual government in the Church.¹⁰

The duties of the elders are not restricted solely to the inner life of the congregation. They go beyond the traditional function of church discipline. The elders have a share in the mission of the church. In the language characteristic of the fifties this was expressed:

Christ's rule is not limited to the internal affairs of the Church, but has to do with the whole position of the People of God in the World over which Christ rules... Elders who almost universally have secular occupations, have a special responsibility within this *diaconia*. They have to assume leadership responsibility "in witnessing on Christ's behalf" within the structures of the secular order, and in bringing... the work of God in secular history to the attention and to the intercession of the Church.

3. A Third Attempt (1960-1974)

With this report, however, the topic was in no way exhausted. Shortly after the General Council of Sao Paulo (1959) the possibility of a new study was considered. The open questions called for an answer. In particular the member churches which had decided to participate in negotiations on unification were in need of guidelines. In the sixties an additional factor arose. The World Alliance of Reformed Churches was negotiating with the International Congregational Council, seeking a possible unification. In 1966 a common declaration was approved by both organizations, which among other points stated:

¹⁰ Interim Report of the Commission on Ordination and the Ministry, 1959. The Report was never printed and is almost impossible to find today.

As world families of churches, we do not claim to contribute any "special doctrines" to the rest of the Church. Out of the experience of our own histories, we do, however, at this time tend to lay emphasis upon the ministry of the whole people of God, upon the diversity of gifts which are to be shared within one fellowship of faith, upon the responsibility of the churches to provide that God's word shall be preached and that the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper shall become a vital force in every congregation, and upon the task of letting our common worship and witness penetrate into the whole present life of humanity. We also lay emphasis upon the primacy of fellowship within the whole order and service of the Church, *upon the participation of the whole people together in the government and ministry of the Church*, upon the sovereignty of God over the whole society of man...

No institutional form of the Church either covers the whole field where Christ expects the Church to serve and to be joined to him in ministry or stands as the sole locus of authority for the Church's common faith, whether congregation or presbytery. The locality of the Church is where Christ is carrying out his ministry in and for the sake of the world. *An important consequence of this view is our conviction that oversight (episkope) within the Church is basically a corporate task.* Thus we lay stress upon the freedom and responsibility of congregations, upon government by covenant and constitution, and upon the conciliar process at all levels of the Church's life. *By faith and practice, our Churches tend to deny that any individual minister or representative may in his own person assume sole ministry or authority in any matter fundamental to the Church's life, either by succession or by appointment.* In this view, therefore, the whole people accepts responsibility for authorizing and sustaining *whatever ministries are required by their mission.* Indispensable among these ministries, precisely because it stands for the equipping of the whole people in their faith, worship and service, is the special ministry of Word and sacrament, with the responsibility of leadership and

pastoral care which the faithful exercise and such a task requires.¹¹

The emphasis lies here on the authority of the local congregation. There is no direct mention of the ministry of the elders. Was it not inevitable, however, to reconsider the significance of this ministry, in the context of the statements on the church made in the common declaration? Could the office of the elders still be called an indispensable characteristic of the Reformed tradition? Or was it one of those ministries which could be created or dissolved by the congregation according to the needs of its mission?

The Executive Committee of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches resolved in 1967 to set a new study in motion.¹² After first considering a historical study, the Executive Committee placed the emphasis on an overview of the current practices in the member churches.¹³ Robert W. Henderson, of the University of Tulsa, Oklahoma, U.S.A., was given the assignment; the results of his research appeared a few years later under the title *Profile of the Eldership: 1974*.¹⁴

Henderson began in 1969 with a questionnaire addressed to local congregations. It had only limited success; he received no more than 136 responses. Henderson redoubled his efforts with a wide-ranging survey of the churches themselves at the national level. In addition to the Presbyterian and Congregationalist member churches a series of non-member churches, even the Disciples of Christ in the U.S.A., were included. The responses from a total of about sixty churches were examined in the final report.

¹¹ Quoted in Marcel Pradervand, *A Century of Service*, *op. cit.* pp. 221ff.

¹² *Minutes of the Executive Committee*, Toronto, Canada, July/August 1967, pp. 14ff. Mimeographed.

¹³ A summary of the entire study is given by Robert W. Henderson in an article that appeared in *Reformed World*: vol. 32/8, pp. 363-374 and vol. 33/1, pp. 10-17.

¹⁴ *Profile of the Eldership: 1974*, Geneva 1975.

The resulting picture was exceedingly varied. It did show that the ministry of the elders existed in some form in every church surveyed. The form in which it was realized, however, differed from church to church. The report to the General Council of Belfast (1884) already had revealed differences, but the diversity (and confusion) had grown. It became extremely clear that the Reformed family today is shaped by a variety of traditions and a diversity of situations. Henderson attempted in his *Profile* to give an impression of this situation. Shaping his analysis about a set of fundamental questions, he produced a highly instructive report.

However, the overview expresses at the same time a certain embarrassment. A whole host of questions were posed by his report. What are elders? Do they have an office comparable to that of the pastor? Or are they assistants to the pastor? How should the relationship between pastors (teachers) and elders be understood? What relationship do elders and deacons have to each other? Who may become an elder? Is the office open to women? How are elders chosen? How are they inducted into their office? Do they hold an ordained office? Or are they seen as laypersons? For how long are they appointed? Where do their duties lie? Do they have a specific mandate? Or does everything which has to do with the growth and the witness of their community fall within their responsibility? What are the consequences of defining their duties over against those of the pastors on the one hand and deacons on the other? What is the relationship of the office of the elders to the congregation? What kind of authority do they have with regard to the congregation? How is the government of the church on the supra-congregational level seen? What share do the elders have in government on the regional level? And above all, the most far-reaching question: What scriptural basis do individual churches give for the office of the elders?

It is apparent that such an overview of the situation in the various churches can hardly offer more than answers which lead to more unanswered questions.

4. Where Do We Go from Here?

Since the *Profile of the Eldership: 1974*, the situation in the Reformed churches has changed even further. The World Alliance of Reformed Churches has grown in recent years: numerous new member churches, especially from Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Pacific have joined. A survey today would probably reveal an even more diverse picture. The inventory of embarrassing questions has also grown. At the same time the debates within the ecumenical movement have gained even more urgency. The report of the World Council of Churches on "Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry," as well as many interconfessional dialogues led by the World Alliance of Reformed Churches in recent years, call for a clearer position on the office of the elders. How can this clarity be attained? Three considerations come to the fore:

- A careful look at the origins and the historical development of the office of the elders is the precondition for a more far-reaching understanding. How did this office arise? What changes has it undergone in the centuries since the Reformation? The variety of forms in which the office exists today has at least part of its basis in history. With regard to the office of the elders, the Reformation represents a deep break in the tradition of the Church: new perspectives gained importance. The text from Calvin cited in the introduction is the expression of an insight about the essence of the church and its form which all Reformed churches acknowledge to this day. However, the concrete form which Calvin gave to the office of the elders is not the only model. In the sixteenth century we already find several models side-by-side, and in the course of the following centuries further perspectives for

the shaping of the office of the elders became important. The approaches of the sixteenth century were reflected in different ways in the later historical development. Only a survey of this history can make the current diversity comprehensible. The Reformed church today cannot canonize a certain historical form of the office of the elders as it once existed. Not even reference to Calvin guarantees that all the unanswered questions can be settled. It is far more important to seek lasting and guiding inspiration from the variety of historical forms.

The second requirement is a new examination of the biblical testimony. What does the New Testament say about the ministry of the elders? Can the ministry be justified at all on the basis of the biblical testimony? Methods of interpreting Scripture have changed markedly since the Reformation. The exegetical methods of the Reformers have been superseded in more than one respect. Is, therefore, their understanding of the office in the church also untenable now? The sense that no defined structure for the office can be derived from the New Testament has become stronger and stronger in recent decades. What does this mean for the office of the elders? What importance does the Reformed insight have in this new exegetical situation?

On the basis of these two considerations, we can then perhaps ask what meaning the office of the elders has today in the life of the church, and which form it should assume. The witness of the Reformed churches today as well as their responsibility in the ecumenical movement must be considered in answering these questions.

B. THE OFFICE OF THE ELDERS IN THE REFORMED TRADITION

How did the office of the elders come into being? How did it develop in the succeeding centuries? A thorough description of the history of the office of the elders would go beyond the purpose of this study. The following short survey should give a general idea of the variety of forms the office has taken.

1. The Bohemian-Moravian Unity of the Brethren

At the General Council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches in Edinburgh (1877), the representative from the Bohemian Brethren declared:

I do believe that I am representing here the oldest Presbyterian Church of Europe... the Unity of the Brethren. Ere John Calvin was born the Brethren had Elders, and what was more, they had female elders too... Earnest and pious elders are the backbone of the Presbyterian Church. Our Church is a witness to it. What she has been, and is now, she was and is through the means of the elders.¹⁵

In what way can an office of the elders be found in the Bohemian-Moravian Unity of the Brethren?

"Elders" (*starsi*) have indeed been mentioned since the beginning of the Unity. Even before the brothers elected their own priests (1467), the direction of the Unity lay in the hands of elders. They gave direction and monitored the pastors and members of the Unity. "No pastor shall travel about alone, but a worthy comrade shall be designated for him by the elders in order to have a worthy witness,

¹⁵ Edinburgh 1877, *op. cit.* p. 121.

so that his reputation gives no cause for offence."¹⁶ The ordinance of 1499 put great emphasis upon the fact that the highest authority in the Unity should be exercised by the "community of all the servants of the Unity from the highest office down to the lowest," in other words a synod.¹⁷ The smaller council (the *Vorsteher-Ältesten*) was accountable to this community. The council had a important position in guiding the Unity. "Its role is to order, to decide, to announce its decisions, and to present any issues upon which it cannot agree to the community, which has the final decision in all matters."¹⁸ The members of the smaller council were elected for life; new members were elected from suitable candidates presented by the synod. Pastors as well as lay persons could become members. The head of this council was described as a judge. The elders within the Unity were thus similar to a collegium of "apostles" who shared in the government of the Unity. Even when one was elected to the leading position, his status was not higher than the others; he held this position only to serve the order of the Unity.

According to the understanding of the Unity, the fundamental office within the church was the pastor.¹⁹ In their view, the New Testament titles "Bishop" and "Presbyter" referred to the same office. They distinguished, therefore, only between two levels: presbyters (pastors and bishops) and deacons. The collegium of the elders therefore was not a group of persons with a special status, but simply the guiding body, composed of all types of servants of the church: pastors, deacons and lay persons.

On the level of the individual community within the Unity, offices existed which resemble closely the office of the elders within the

¹⁶ "Kein Priester soll allein wandern, sondern von den Ältesten soll ihm ein würdiger Wandergenosse bestimmt werden, damit bei ihm ein würdiges Zeugnis sei, dass sie allenthalben ohne Anstoss seien." Joseph Th. Müller, *Geschichte der Böhmisches Brüder*, Hermhut 1922, vol. 1, p. 101.

¹⁷ *ibid.* p. 281; for the earlier period see p. 228.

¹⁸ "Er hat zu verordnen, festzusetzen und seine Entscheidungen kundzutun und worüber die Mitglieder des Engen Rates sich nicht vereinigen können, das sollen sie der Gemeinschaft vorlegen und hier liegt die letzte Entscheidung für alles," *ibid.* p. 281.

¹⁹ *ibid.* p. 283.

Reformed tradition. The ordinance of 1499 as well as earlier texts mention "helpers" and "judges" who assisted the pastor and his ecclesiastical assistants, the deacons.²⁰ The tasks of these judges involved the entire external and social life of the brethren. The "helpers" were to visit the families of the brethren at least once every three months. They were to settle quarrels and arguments and ensure that secular courts were not used. They were to stand by the brethren and give them advice in all their secular dealings. In the later texts, especially in the ordinance of 1632, "sister elders" are also mentioned.²¹

Ecclesiastical discipline played an important role within the Unity. The community in Christ could only be maintained if every member sought to follow Christ. As Müller explains, "Brotherly community is conceived so strongly and inwardly that not even the most secret sin of the individual is considered a private matter; on the contrary, sinners have endangered the community through their sin and thus require the forgiveness of the community."²²

The example of the Unity of the Brethren was not without influence on the Reformation. The brethren sought contact with the Reformers; in particular, several meetings with Luther took place. A representative of the Unity visited Strasbourg in 1540 and had several discussions with Calvin and Bucer. Subsequent to these discussions a correspondence with the two Reformers developed.²³

20 *Ibid.* p. 285; compare for the earlier period p. 230.

21 *Ibid.* p. 286.

22 "Die brüderliche Gemeinschaft ist so stark und innerlich gefasst, daß auch die geheimste Sünde der Einzelnen nicht als Privatangelegenheit angesehen wird, sie haben vielmehr die Gemeinde durch ihre Sünde in Gefahr gebracht und bedürfen darum auch ihrer Vergebung," *ibid.* p. 214.

23 *Ibid.* vol. 2, pp. 116-124.

2. The New Starting Point of the Reformation

How did the Reformers conceive of the office of the elders? In what form did they each introduce it in the course of the Reformation? Before individual instances are presented, the basic understanding of the ministry, that which forms the starting point for the Reformers of the Reformed tradition, will be reviewed in rough outline.

- a) The central matter of concern for the Reformers was to create room within the church for the proclamation of the Gospel. The Word of God was constitutive for the Church: "The holy Christian Church, whose sole head is Christ, is born out of the Word of God and does not listen to the voice of a stranger (Berne Theses 1528, 1)."²⁴ The Reformation sought to make the Word of God heard. The Gospel was to be preached and the sacraments administered; all other activities were subordinated to this one goal. Ministers were indispensable for the life of the Church. They were responsible for the proclamation of the Word of God and had to make certain that it bore fruit. The *raison-d'être* of every ministry was to serve this goal. Office was not primarily an "honor," but a service. Neither the name of the office nor its legitimation through tradition were decisive factors. The ministry was "apostolic" in so far as the office holders proclaimed the Word of God and administered the sacraments appointed by Christ. All offices had to be exercised according to the mandate they have been given.

- b) The Reformers held that the community grew from preaching, baptism and the Eucharist. The word of God called people into a living community which honored God. The preaching called for the obedience of every individual member and of the community as a whole. Guidance and discipline were needed to build this community in the Gospel. To bring about this obedience a group of experienced persons, working alongside

²⁴ "Die heilige christliche Kirche, deren einziges Haupt Christus ist, ist aus dem Wort Gottes geboren und hört nicht auf die Stimme eines Fremden."

and with those who were entrusted with the proclamation of the Word and the administration of the sacraments, were to watch over the preaching, the celebration of the Eucharist and the life of the community. This responsibility lay first of all with the community as a whole and all its members. But just as a special office was needed for the proclamation of the Word, so also a special office for guidance and discipline was required within the Church. This task could not be exercised by an individual: it was to be exercised cooperatively.

- c) Administration and welfare also belonged to the building of the community. God's *caritas* was to be witnessed to in word and deed, in the community and by the community. For this purpose the office of the deacons had been established. The role of deacons was to ensure that the ministry of order and love was carried out. They held their own office with their own mission. The Reformers of the Reformed tradition dismissed unanimously the idea that the office of the deacon was to be understood as the first level in the pastoral hierarchy and that its function was solely confined to the liturgy. Deacons were appointed to accomplish acts of welfare and to remind the community as a whole of its diaconal mission.

- d) In the Reformation of the Reformed tradition, the understanding of ministry and ministries was shaped and driven by a marked anti-hierarchical ethos. The office of the bishop was not altogether rejected. It might exist, as long as its carrier truly fulfilled the mission of the proclamation of the Word. The emphasis, however, lay in the fact that the offices were performed cooperatively. No one office was inherently superior to the others. The *verbi divini ministri* were all on equal footing with one another. For the sake of good order, specific persons might, with mutual agreement, hold leading positions for a specific amount of time. They fulfilled the function of representative leadership within the context of the collegium, but they were not distinguished from the other members by a

special hierarchical level. Pastors, elders and deacons were in principle not superior one to another. The tasks they exercised had different purposes and goals. A certain order of precedence inevitably followed from this. But the office bearers were on equal footing in the sense that they formed a collegium and carried out certain tasks cooperatively.

- e) In particular, the government of the church on the regional level was to be carried out collegially. The individual Reformers played a prominent role in their town or district. They viewed themselves as appointed to this task through an extraordinary calling. But the regular government of the church was to be carried out by synods.

3. The Reformation in Zürich

The Reformation in Zürich was a reorganization of the church as well as of the city. Zürich understood itself as a Christian community, and it would be inappropriate to assume a clear distinction between church and state at that time. Within this Christian community, ecclesiastical and state administrative authorities could be distinguished from one another. The Reformation in Zürich raised the question of how the tasks should be divided under the new circumstances. The Reformation in Zürich was characterized by a close cooperation between the Reformers and the city magistracy.

The central reorganization that Zwingli programmatically demanded was the free preaching of the Word of God. The Word of God had to have free rein. This demand rested on an understanding of the office of the preacher as fundamentally important for the building of the church. At the same time, Zwingli also saw the necessity of an office of government and discipline. He held the opinion that this was primarily the task of the magistracy. Just as the magistracy had promoted the acceptance of the Reformation in the city and later also in the countryside, so it was now to consider itself responsible

for the growth and maintenance of the Christian community. Zwingli bridged the gap "between the conception of presbyters as the elders of the early Christian communities and the *seniores* as understood by the secular authority" so that "the organs of the civil community of Zürich became the Christian authority."²⁵ That is, "the secular authorities, called *seniores*, were equated with the elders (presbyters), who were given, as in the early communities, more than simply the task of the proclamation of the Word."²⁶

"An authority separate from that of the city council was created only for matters concerning marriage."²⁷ In order to fill the vacuum which resulted from the abolition of the jurisdiction of the Bishop of Constance, a marriage court was created at Zwingli's request in 1525; a year later it was expanded into a moral court (*Sittengericht*). The marriage court in Zürich was a Christian-civil, or ecclesiastical-municipal, administrative body. It was composed of two pastors and four representatives of the council (*Rat*). Its function was to rule in matters of marriage or moral concerns. It had no power to sentence. The marriage court was thus an instrument of the Christian community. "In Zürich, the theocracy as Christian authority had created an all-powerful civil authority, into which the marriage court was integrated."²⁸

The consequence of this close cooperation with the civic administrative bodies was that the office of the elders in its ecclesiastical sense played no role in those Swiss churches influenced by the Reformation in Zürich. The second Helvetic Confession, written by Zwingli's successor Heinrich Bullinger,

25 Johannes Georg Fuchs, "Das schweizerische Staatskirchenrecht des 19. Jahrhunderts als Folge zwinglianischen Denkens und als typische Schöpfung des Liberalismus," *Zeitschrift für Rechtsgeschichte*, vol. 100 (1984), p. 281.

26 *Ibid.* p. 286.

27 "Nur für Eheangelegenheiten wurde eine eigene Instanz neben dem Rat geschaffen." E.F. Karl Müller, *Kirchenzucht in der reformierten Kirche*, RE, X, p. 486. Zwingli writes in the *Expositio Fidei* (1530): "In ecclesia Christi aequè necessarius est magistratus atque prophetia" (IV 30).

28 "Die Theokratie als christliche Obrigkeit hat in Zürich eine obrigkeitliche Omnipotenz geschaffen, in die das Ehegericht... eingefügt wurde." Walter Köhler, *Zürcher Ehegericht und Genfer Konsistorium*, Leipzig 1932, vol. I, p. 202.

discusses in detail the ministries of the Church, but the office of the elders is only touched upon briefly, and the office of the deacons is not mentioned at all. In the enumeration of church offices, the presbyters are mentioned and their office is described as follows: "Presbyters are elders (*seniores*), as it were senators or fathers of the church, who guide the church with beneficial advice."²⁹ This formulation was apparently chosen deliberately: the implication is that the office of the elders can also be exercised by a magistrate.³⁰

The attitude of the Reformers in Zürich towards the civic administrative authorities was later expounded theoretically by Thomas Erastus (1524-1583), a doctor and theologian from Baden in Switzerland. Erastus was convinced that a distinct and separate ecclesiastical discipline was no longer necessary after the state had become Christian. The ecclesiastical discipline could be carried out by the civil authorities.

A special office of the elders was nevertheless later introduced in Zürich. The city council decided in 1628 that each congregation should form a committee to handle its concerns.³¹ At first these directors functioned only as advisors, but later they developed into an actual ecclesiastical organ. The members were understood as advisors to the pastors on the one hand and as representatives of the community on the other hand. Especially under the growing influence of democratic conceptions arising in the nineteenth

29 "Presbyter sind Älteste (*seniores*), sozusagen Senatoren oder Väter der Kirche, die die Kirche mit heilsamem Rate leiten," Second Helvetic Confession, c. 18.

30 On the basis of the Second Helvetic Confession, Jean-Jacques von Allmen comes to the rather rash conclusion that the Reformed tradition actually recognizes only one office as essential: "Il n'y a qu'un seul ministère essentiel à l'Eglise, le ministère pastoral de succession apostolique chargé de faire connaître l'Évangile, de faire croître l'Eglise par la vie sacramentelle et de faire respecter l'altérité de l'Eglise par rapport au monde. L'unicité de ce ministère est si fortement souligné que Bullinger a écarté du chap. XVIII de la *Helvetica posterior* les fonctions que, dans les églises de type plus calviniste, on appellera celles des Anciens et des diacres." Le Saint Ministère selon la conviction et la volonté des Réformés du XVI^e siècle, Neuchâtel 1968, p. 110. But the emphasis on the office of the proclamation of the Word is rooted in the specific circumstances in Zürich. This emphasis does not represent the definitive Reformed tradition, but rather one model within it.

31 Johannes Georg Fuchs, op. cit. p. 286.

century, the church committees were viewed more and more as instruments of democratic representation within the church.

4. Johannes Oekolampad and Martin Bucer

To a far greater extent than Zwingli, the Reformers of other cities sought the independence of the Church from the civil authorities. The ecclesiastical authorities were in charge of the government of the church as well as of the exercise of discipline within the church. The keys had been given to the Church, and could not be transferred to the magistrate. Johannes Oekolampad, the Reformer of Basel, wrote in a letter to Zwingli: "These authorities who take away the authority of the church grow far more unbearable than the Antichrist himself... Christ did not say 'if your brother sins, tell it to the authorities,' but to the church."³²

Wherever the Reformers proceeded on this assumption, a separate ecclesiastical office of discipline originated in the course of the Reformation. This office was a committee, whose members were usually called *seniores* or elders, that exercised discipline in the name of the church.

Johannes Oekolampad should be mentioned first in this context. In 1530 in Basel he took the initiative of creating a ecclesiastical system of discipline. In a detailed speech directed to the pastors he described and justified the project. He proceeded on the assumption that Matthew 18:15-18 was also valid for the church of his time, but he felt it unrealistic under the circumstances then prevailing to give the final decision to the community. He suggested rather that "as during the times of the apostles, certain elders should be appointed to monitor the discipline of the church." This committee (*qui olim presbyteroi dicti*) was to consist of twelve responsible persons of

³² "Unerträglicher als der Antichrist selbst wird die Obrigkeit, die den Kirchen ihre Autorität nimmt ... Christus hat nicht gesagt 'wenn dein Bruder sündigt, sage es der Obrigkeit,' sondern der Kirche." Walter Köhler, *op. cit.* vol. I, p. 305.

good reputation: four pastors, four representatives of the estate of the magistrates, and four representatives of the people. A committee consisting of three persons was to fulfill the same task in the village communities. The purpose of the committees is clear: Oekolampad thus proposed to create an independent ecclesiastical community alongside the secular community. The "censors" (*honestus ille XII censorum concessus*) were identified with the presbyters of the Holy Scripture. Two-thirds of this committee were laymen in origin, but according to Oekolampad's understanding they occupied an ecclesiastical office.³³

This proposal encountered numerous difficulties in its realization. The resistance of the civic authorities led to limitations and modifications, but Oekolampad succeeded in carrying out his plan. However, the new order was only of limited duration; by the late 1530's, after Oekolampad's death, it was abolished by the city council. Nevertheless, the influence of this attempt on other cities must not be underestimated; although it did not meet with approval in Basel, the order was influential in Strasbourg and later in Geneva.

The Reformation in Strasbourg presents a more complex picture. Martin Bucer, the chief Reformer of Strasbourg, also dealt with the question of establishing discipline and government according to the Holy Scripture. His attempt to be faithful to the evidence of the Bible determined his ideas, proposals and methods concerning the office of the elders. At first Bucer looked for a reorganization of the administration of the church through cooperation with the civic authorities (*cum magistratu*). The city council had played an important role in the introduction of the Reformation in Strasbourg, and had taken over numerous administrative and juridical tasks that formerly had been exercised by the bishop. To institute the new order, the assistance and cooperation of the civic authorities was clearly necessary.

³³ Walter Köhler, *op. cit.* vol. I. pp. 279ff.; cf. also Akira Demura, Church Discipline according to Johannes Oekolampadius in the Setting of His Life and Thought, diss. Princeton Theological Seminary, 1964.

On October 30, 1531 the office of the *Kirchenpfleger* was introduced in Strasbourg. These laymen were appointed by the city council and were to supervise the life of the church. Two-thirds of the committee came from the patrician families of the city council (*Ratsgeschlechter*); one-third were appointed from the people. The seven communes of the city could each propose three *Kirchenpfleger*. In the first years, the responsibilities of the *Kirchenpfleger* were limited to the supervision of the preaching and life of the pastors.³⁴ Their mission was expanded in 1534: "Together with the pastors they shall care for the members of the community who call themselves Christians and who have received baptism. They shall omit nothing that leads to the hope that these will come to know Christ the Lord, hearken as members of the community to his Word, receive the sacraments and testify through their lives that they live according to their baptism and the grace of God, through which they have been called to His son."³⁵ Although the *Kirchenpfleger* were appointed by the city council, they nevertheless had to fulfill a duty within the church. Their office was distinct from the function of the public morals court and the police. It served to create space within the Christian community for the Word of God and for his will. The city council thus understood itself to be responsible for a task which was essentially ecclesiastical in nature.

Bucer equated these *Kirchenpfleger* with the elders of the New Testament. For example, in the treatise "Von der wahren Seelsorge" (1538), he distinguishes different offices necessary for the Church. There were first the "shepherds" who were entrusted with the guidance of the church. Bucer counted as "shepherds" both the pastors who proclaimed the Word, and the *eltesten* (elders) who were responsible for discipline within the church. He could also

³⁴ Gottfried Hammann, Entre la Cité et la Secte. Le projet d'Eglise du Réformateur Martin Bucer, Genève 1984, pp. 60, 323.

³⁵ "Sie sollten zusammen mit den Pfarrern Sorge tragen für die Glieder der Gemeinde, die sich Christen nennen und die Taufe empfangen haben, nichts versäumen, das darauf hoffen läßt, daß sie Christus, den Herrn, kennen lernen, als Glieder der Gemeinde auf sein Wort hören, die Sakramente empfangen und durch ihren Lebenswandel beweisen, daß sie ihrer Taufe und Gottes Gnade Rechnung tragen, durch die sie zu seinem Sohne gerufen worden sind," *ibid.* p. 323.

speak of *eltisten* who preached and *eltisten* who did not preach, but only occupied the office of admonition. The "shepherds," both pastors and laymen, exercised their task as a collegium.³⁶ One among them might hold the office of episcopal director, but he remained a member of the collegium.³⁷ Alongside the office of shepherd, the office of teacher was also discussed. Teachers were all those who carried out the task of teaching in the community or in the school. They also worked together with the shepherds in the synods. Finally, the office of the deacons was added. In his early years, Bucer held the view that the work of the deacons had to be done by the civic authorities. In the course of the years, he became more and more convinced that the diaconate was to be considered an ecclesiastical office. In his later work "De regno Christi" (1550) he sought to show that this office was necessary in order to make real the community of the saints.³⁸

How did the *Kirchenpfleger* function in this system? Could they truly be equated with the elders in the New Testament? Were they actually able to enforce discipline as the New Testament intended? They were appointed by the city council and their ministry included the whole population of the town. Could more than "external" discipline be expected from their work? Bucer addressed these questions with increasing emphasis. It became clearer to him as time passed that there had to be a distinction between the Christian polity as a whole and the confessing community of those living as Christians. An actual "inner" discipline was only possible within the "confessing communities." This distinction was already made in his treatise "Von der wahren Seelsorge" in 1538. It was consolidated in the last years of his work in Strasbourg in several concrete projects. Bucer called for the formation of confessing communities within the

36 "Les prédicateurs et les presbytres se regroupent donc en un commun ministère de travail pastoral, ministère qui ne peut être complet que dans cette dualité, les uns étant des ministres ordonnés (dans le sens canonique du terme), les autres des laïcs. En faisant du ministère de 'hirt' un ministère d'une part spécifique et de l'autre lié au sacerdoce universel, Bucer surmontait théoriquement l'ancienne séparation d'état entre clerc et laïc." Gottfried Hammann, *op. cit.* p. 286.

37 *Ibid.* p. 289.

38 *Ibid.* pp. 249ff.

Christian polity which would join together to give consistent and rigorous expression to Christ's demands on his people. He retained the office of the *Kirchenpfleger* to maintain the external discipline within the community of the whole city. But Bucer also demanded the appointment of special "elders" to exercise church discipline within the "communities" of committed Christians. He saw the city under two aspects: the totality of those baptized and the community of those who truly followed Jesus Christ in faith. The office of the elders received in turn a new meaning through this second aspect.³⁹

Bucer's plans could be realized only partially. A few years later, Strasbourg was re-catholicised, and Bucer was forced to emigrate to England. The Reformed community in Strasbourg survived only as a minority.

5. John Calvin

The attempts made by Johannes Oekolampad and Martin Bucer to reintroduce ecclesiastical discipline were taken up and developed further by John Calvin in Geneva. His view of discipline in the church as well as of the office of the elders has had a profound impact, and has become in many ways the norm for the Reformed tradition.

In Calvin's understanding, the ministry of the elders held a permanent place in the church. In his reflections about the Church Calvin proceeded from the assumption that God himself was the exclusive Lord over the Church. God exercised his rule through the Word. Even though God's rule could have been exercised directly or through celestial messengers, it had pleased God to use human

³⁹ Oekolampad as well as Bucer identifies the *seniores* or *Kirchenpfleger* clearly with the elders of the New Testament. The hypothesis of T.F. Torrance that the actual model for the new order were the *seniores* or *gerontes* of the North African Church mentioned by Pseudo-Ambrose, Origen, Cyprian, Optatus and Augustine, can therefore not be supported. Both Reformers shared the opinion that they were giving new effect to a biblical model. The testimony of the Fathers was only quoted in a secondary way. See T.F. Torrance, The Eldership in the Reformed Church, Edingburgh 1984.

beings as instruments. The ministry was the "sinew" (*praecipuum... nervum*) that held together the body of the Church. The primary responsibility of the ministry was preaching, because the proclamation of the Word and the correct administration of the sacraments were the two signs through which the true Church could be recognized. The office of pastors included a third task as well, the exercise of discipline, and this task the pastors shared with the elders.⁴⁰

Calvin gave a short description of the office of the elders in the New Testament: "Each church had from the beginning a senate, chosen from godly, grave, and holy men, which had jurisdiction over correcting faults." He was firmly convinced that such a committee ought to be a permanent part of church order.⁴¹

Calvin placed great emphasis on the independence of the church from the authority of the state. The exercise of discipline was the concern of the church: it had to be carried out by ecclesiastical organs and could not be transferred to the civic authorities. Calvin explains in the *Institutio*:

The jurisdiction of the church pertains to the discipline of morals which we shall soon discuss. For as no city or township can function without magistrate and polity, so the church of God needs a spiritual polity. This is, however, quite distinct from the civil polity, yet does not hinder or threaten it but rather greatly helps and furthers it. Therefore, this power of jurisdiction will be nothing, in short, but an order framed for the preservation of spiritual polity.⁴²

Further on he states:

Truly, if a man more closely weighs Christ's words (Mt. 18:15-18), he will easily see that a set and permanent

40 Cf. in reference to this passage Elsie A. McKee, Elders and the Plural Ministry: The Role of Exegetical History in Illuminating John Calvin's Theology, Geneva 1988, p. 25.

41 Institutio 4.3.8.

42 Institutio 4.11.1.

order of the church, not a temporary one, is there described. For it is not fitting for us to accuse to the magistrate those who do not obey our admonitions... the church cannot go without the spiritual jurisdiction which it had from the beginning. For when emperors and magistrates began to accept Christ, this spiritual jurisdiction was not at once annulled but was only so ordered that it should not detract from the civil jurisdiction or become confused with it.⁴³

The struggle for the independence of the church's discipline remained significant throughout Calvin's whole life. Already in the first years of his work in Geneva there had arisen a conflict with the city council over the question of admission to the Lord's Supper. Calvin was expelled from the city; he then served for several years in the French community in Strasbourg. There the order he had conceived was realized. Alongside the pastor stood twelve presbyters or *seniores*, who had the responsibility for deciding on all matters and presiding in everything that concerned the governance of the church (*omnibus in rebus quae ad ecclesiasticam politiam pertinent*).⁴⁴ After his return to Geneva, Calvin succeeded in carrying out his plans despite the opposition of the city council. The *ordonnances ecclésiastiques* of 1541 sheds light on the new order then introduced in Geneva. Four offices are mentioned explicitly - the *pasteurs*, the *docteurs*, the *anciens* and the *diacres*. Concerning the *anciens*:

Leur office est de prendre garde sur la vie d'un chacun, d'admonester amiablement ceux qu'ils verront faillir et mener une vie desordonnée.

Twelve elders were designated. They were to represent the different quarters of the city, "afin d'avoir l'oeil partout." The twelve were elected from the various civil committees of the city. Their names were presented to the pastors, and if they met with approval, they were then submitted to the city council, which made the final

43 *Institutio* 4.11.6.

44 Walter Koehler, *Zürcher Ehegericht und Genfer Konsistorium*, Leipzig 1932, vol. I, p. 525.

decision. The pastors and the elders formed together the *consistoire*, the authority responsible for ecclesiastical discipline.

Although the *consistoire* was an ecclesiastical organ, the magistrates had nevertheless a significant influence *de facto*, so that the argument that the circumstances in Zürich and Geneva did not, in practice, differ fundamentally might well be valid.⁴⁵ Calvin, however, stressed the independence of the discipline of the church and indeed succeeded in establishing this independence and increasing it over the course of the years. In 1560 it was decreed that the *syndic* (i.e. the mayor) had to appear without the signs of his office at the sessions of the *consistoire*. The purpose of this measure was to emphasize that he held the office of the elder not as a representative of the civic authorities, but as a member of the church. The revision of the *ordonnances ecclésiastiques* in 1561 made the distinction between ecclesiastical and civic authority even stronger than the version of 1541. Calvin also emphasized repeatedly that discipline had to be exercised in the spirit of the Gospel. Discipline was intended to serve God's honor in the church. It sought to keep healthy members from being infected; its goal was repentance. It was to correct, not condemn. Exaggerated severity of discipline violated the rule of love and could easily lead to divisions within the community.⁴⁶

In theory as well as in practice, Calvin held the view that four offices were necessary for the church. In the *Institutio* as well as in the *ordonnances ecclésiastiques* the *pasteurs*, *docteurs*, *anciens* and *diacres* are spoken of. The *pasteurs* fulfilled the mission of the proclamation of the Word and the administration of the sacraments. They were further responsible for spiritual care and discipline. The *docteurs* or teachers fulfilled the task of teaching the Gospel in the schools. The *anciens*, or elders, were charged with discipline and the *diacres*, the deacons, had to ensure that God's love was demonstrated concretely in and beyond the church. The deacons

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 556.

⁴⁶ *Institutio* 4.12.2-5, 8-9, 11.

were not merely helpers of the *pasteurs*. Their office had its own honor and its own mission and was necessary for the testimony of the church at all times. The *diacres* had to make certain that the church took seriously its duty to testify with real works of love. Calvin distinguished two different kinds of diaconal service: the diaconal administration on the one hand and direct diaconal work on the other. Drawing on Romans 12:8, he states in the *Institutio*: "Since it is certain that Paul is speaking here of the public office of the church, there must have been two distinct grades of deacons. Unless my judgement deceives me, in the first clause he designates the deacons who distribute the alms. But the second refers to those who had devoted themselves to the care of the poor and the sick. Of this sort were the widows whom Paul mentions to Timothy (I.Tim. 5:9-10). Women could fill no other public office than to devote themselves to the care of the poor."⁴⁷

There is a close connection between the office of the *pastors* and that of the *elders* in Calvin's thought. They are both presbyters in the biblical sense of the word and the offices that have been entrusted to them are in their fundamentals identical in more than one way. For this reason they are seen and understood as a collegium. They are nevertheless also distinct from one another. Whereas the *pastors* are entrusted with the proclamation of the Word, the administration of the sacraments, and the governance and discipline of the community, the *elders* are responsible only for governance and discipline. Whereas the *pastors* are ordained for their ministry, the *elders* are and remain laymen who fulfill an ecclesiastical mission. They are not ordained, but they are blessed for their mission in a solemn service. While the *pastors* exercise their service for life, the *elders* are elected for one year.

⁴⁷ *Institutio* 4.3.9. For the topic of the deacons and deaconesses see Elsie A. McKee, John Calvin on the Diaconate and Liturgical Almsgiving, Geneva 1984, and Diakonia in the Classical Reformed Tradition and Today, Grand Rapids 1989.

Calvin's new order differed from the episcopal order in that the guidance of the church was now carried out cooperatively by the *pastors* and the *elders*. It now had an explicitly anti-hierarchical tendency: individual and arbitrary decisions were to be avoided. At the same time the new order was characterized by the fact that laymen could occupy ecclesiastical offices. The *elders* as well as the *deacons* were laymen who had been called into ecclesiastical service. They were laymen in comparison to the *pastors*, but they fulfilled an ecclesiastical task in relationship to the church and the public.

How did Calvin justify this order? In particular, how did he justify the office of the elders? His explanation starts from the essence of the church. The Church had received a threefold authority. It had the authority to formulate the confession of faith, to draft its constitution on the basis of the Holy Scripture and to exercise discipline among its members. The offices of the church had to correspond to this threefold authority. The *pastors* were the instruments which served to fulfill the first two commissions; the *elders* were appointed to realize the discipline of the church.

Calvin saw his approach confirmed by the testimony of Holy Scripture. He referred to a number of passages, beginning with the instructions given in Matthew 18:15-18. In his eyes, this passage was an unmistakable reference to the necessity of ecclesiastical discipline. In the first edition of the *Institutio* Calvin left the meaning of the word "church" in this passage unexplained. "If a brother refuses to listen to you, report the matter to the church; and if he will not even listen to the church, you must then treat him as you would a pagan or tax-collector" (Mt.18:17). Later - in a development which can also be observed with other Reformers - he concluded that "church" means here a responsible committee. Just as the Jewish community needed a Sanhedrin, so the Christian community needed a comparable authority. Calvin found further references to this authority in I. Corinthians 12:28, where "leaders" are mentioned, and in Romans 12:8, "If you are a leader, lead with zeal." But the

distinction found in I Timothy 5:17, "Elders who do well as leaders should be reckoned worthy of a double stipend, in particular those who labor at preaching and teaching," became more and more important to him. He was of the opinion that two different kinds of presbyters were mentioned here. "There are those who serve in the Word and the others who have not the office of the sermon but still fulfill their task faithfully; with this second kind, he [Paul] no doubt refers to those who are entrusted to watch over the life (of the community) and to correct those who have erred through excommunication."⁴⁸

How did Calvin arrive at the four offices? The New Testament references which he uses mention numerous other "ministries" that have to be fulfilled within the church. How did Calvin decide to declare specifically *these* four offices as essential? The decision was based primarily on Calvin's understanding of the church. The mission given to the church entailed in his eyes the necessary consequence that the church had to be endowed with certain ministries at all times; other ministries mentioned in the New Testament were limited to the church's early period alone. They were "extra-ordinary" ministries: apostles, prophets and evangelists had the task of giving the first testimony and founding the church. Only under exceptional circumstances, in times of distress and disorder like the Reformation, would God again raise prophets to lead the people back to the truth of God's Word. The "wonders and signs" that accompanied the preaching of the apostles were also limited to this early time. In Calvin's day, after the church had been founded, they were no longer necessary. This distinction between the first years of the mission and first spread of the church on the one hand, and the following centuries on the other, enabled Calvin to distinguish between temporary and permanent offices in the church. The church in his day needed only those offices that served to maintain and renew it. Calvin and the other Reformers shared the

48 Institutio 4.11.1.

opinion that the missionary duty was limited to the early years of the church.

Calvin's exegetical conclusions are not in and of themselves convincing to the modern reader. Compared with modern exegetical methods, the combination that he used seems arbitrary and artificial. It would, however, be an error to assume that Calvin forced the texts to agree with the opinions he held. His interpretation is consonant with the exegetical and hermeneutic tradition of his time. In his time and before, the texts had been interpreted in a similar way.

Calvin's view of the church and its offices is impressive in its logical consistency. But his views also contain ambiguity and unanswered questions which later led to various options, controversies and conflicts. Three aspects deserve special attention:

- *What is the relationship between pastors and elders?*

Calvin viewed them together as the collegium of presbyters as it is mentioned in the New Testament; but he also described the two offices as distinguishable from one another. The *pastors* fulfilled the task of preaching the Word, which was fundamental to the church. They were ordained to this service. The *elders* on the contrary were laymen who had been called into the service of the church. What then are the elders? Are they really presbyters in the same sense as the *pastors*? Or are they rather a committee that assists the *pastors* in the fulfilment of certain tasks?

If the *elders* are on an equal footing with the *pastors*, they would need to be ordained as well. If they maintain an office that differs in its essence from that of the *pastors*, they could not be called presbyter. Apparently, the presbyters of the New Testament collectively bore responsibility for all aspects of the governance of the church - from the proclamation of the Word to the administration and governance of the church. Did not Calvin

develop this one collegial office into two fundamentally different offices?

In the course of subsequent centuries this question has been a source of renewed uncertainty within the Reformed tradition. There are two ways to overcome the dilemma. *Pastors* and *elders* can be strictly put on an equal footing with one another. The *elders* are then understood as holders of an office; they are called to this office for life and are also ordained. Alternatively, the offices can be distinguished clearly from one another and the name "presbyter" no longer used for the *elders*. The *pastors* then occupy the office that is fundamental to the church. In exercising this office they are surrounded by a committee of laymen, who share in the guidance of the church.⁴⁹

- *The mission of the elders*

Calvin saw the central task of the elders as pastoral work and the exercise of church discipline. But does the biblical testimony actually clearly demand an office within the church that serves exclusively to accomplish these tasks? The New Testament mentions a number of ministries that have to be carried out in the church. Are they really limited to the early period of the church? All the offices mentioned in the New Testament serve the missionary witness of the church. Considered against the whole of the picture presented by the New Testament, Calvin's concentration on pastoral care and discipline seems to be a

⁴⁹ This question, among others, was also debated at the Westminster Assembly (1634). Even though there was a petition in this direction, the assembly could not agree to adopt the theory of two different presbyters based on 1 Tim. 5:17. The assembly held the opinion that a special committee is necessary for governance, but it did not use the name "presbyter" in this context. The decision was formulated as follows: "As there were in the Jewish Church elders of the people joined with the priests and Levites in the government of the Church, so Christ who hath instituted government and governors ecclesiastical in the Church, hath furnished some in his Church besides the ministers of the word, with gifts for government, and with commission to execute the same when called thereunto, who are to join with the ministers in the government of the Church, which officers Reformed Churches commonly call elders." Cf. Peter Colin Campbell, The Theory of Ruling Eldership, Edinburgh and London 1866, p. 36.

reduction in scope. This narrow interpretation had to be broken through sooner or later.

- *The role of the community*

How does the community share in the governance and discipline of the church? Though the anti-hierarchical tendency of Calvin's works is clearly apparent, the participation of the community there described is nevertheless quite limited. Neither the pastors nor the elders were elected by the community in Geneva. The character of the order in Geneva was far more oligarchical than democratic. Sooner or later, therefore, the question of the authority of the community as a whole had to be raised anew in the Reformed churches.

In considering these unanswered questions, it is important to keep in mind that Calvin presented his view of the office of the *elders* as a matter of personal judgment. He left no doubt about the fact that the church always needed offices in order to fulfill its responsibilities, but his main concern was that certain duties of the church be truly carried out. Whenever Calvin spoke of the individual offices and their forms, he used remarkable caution. In his reflections on the *elders* as well as in those on the *deacons*, clauses that indicate reservation, such as "I believe"⁵⁰ or "if my judgement does not deceive me"⁵¹ appear. Calvin left room for further insights and developments. Furthermore, in his dealings with other churches he did not insist upon the order which he promoted in Geneva. For him this order was not the condition for the unity of the church. As long as the Gospel was proclaimed, unity could be attained under different ecclesiastical forms.

50 Institutio 4.3.8, 9.

51 Institutio 4.3.9.

6. From Calvin to the Presbyterian Order

Calvin's theology and the order that had been created in Geneva on his initiative had a tremendous impact. His ideas and impulses were received and acted upon in many places. But as this happened, these ideas and practices were at the same time developed further.

Two factors must be mentioned directly in this context. First, the order as it was introduced in Geneva assumed a different form when implemented in a context where the Reformed Church comprised a minority of the population, as for example in France or in the refugee communities in Frankfurt or London. Whereas in Geneva the order had to be laboriously negotiated with the civic authorities, the church could more easily adopt its own order in a situation where it comprised a minority. The independence of the church did not have to be fought for, but was already *de facto* established.

The second factor was the confrontation between the presbyterial order and other conceptions of the church: the order inspired by Calvin had to prove its worth in conflict with other systems. New aspects developed in importance through this conflict; in particular, the conflict with the episcopal system in England had far-reaching consequences. Calvin had not been involved in this controversy. He remained cautious in his judgement, although he clearly viewed the presbyterial order as biblical. His description of the bishops of the early church shows that he did not fundamentally exclude the possibility of an episcopal office. The necessary conditions were that the office not be inherently superior to the other offices, and that the bishop really fulfill the task of proclaiming the Word.⁵² The situation in the second half of the sixteenth century was different from that in the first half. By then the question had grown in importance: did the Reformation criticism of the Roman understanding of the episcopal office also apply to the Church of England? In the conflict with the episcopal system, the conviction that the presbyterial order was the

⁵² Institutio 4.4.2-3.

order given to the church by God was offered and defended with growing emphasis. The presbyterial order was elevated to become a characteristic of the true church.

a) *Confessio Gallicana* (1559) and *Confessio Belgica* (1561)

These two confessions came from churches that were minorities in their surroundings. In both confessions the offices are discussed in detail. The *Confessio Gallicana* says:

29. Quant est de la vraye Eglise, nous croyons qu'elle doit estre gouvernée selon la police que notre Seigneur Jesus Christ a establie: c'est qu'il y ait des Pasteurs, des Surveillans et Diacres (Acts 6:3-5; Eph. 4:11; I Tim. 3), afin que la pure doctrine ait son cours, que les vices soyent corrigés et reprimés: et que les pauvres et tous autres affligés soyent secourus en leurs necessités et que les assemblées facent au nom de Dieu, esquels grans et petis soyent edifiés.
30. Nous croyons tous vrais pasteurs en quelque lieu qu'il soyent, avoir mesmes autorité et egale puissance sous un seul chef, seul souverain et seul Evesque Jesus Christ (Mt. 26:26-27 et 18: 2-4.), et pour ceste cause que nulle Eglise ne doit pretendre aucune domination ou seigneurie sur l'autre.⁵³

These general statements are explained in more detail in the second part of the confession, the "Discipline ecclésiastique":

L'office des Anciens sera de faire assembler le peuple, rapporter les scandales au Consistoire, et autres choses semblables, selon qu'en chacune Eglise il y aura une forme couchée par escrit, selon la circonstance des lieux et des temps. Et n'est l'office des Anciens comme nous en usons à présent, perpetuel.⁵⁴

⁵³ Wilhelm Niesel (ed.), Bekennnisschriften und Kirchenordnungen der nach Gottes Wort reformierten Kirche, Zürich 1938, p. 73.

⁵⁴ Discipline Ecclésiastique 21, cf. Niesel, ibid. p. 77.

Les anciens et Diacres sont le Senat de l'Eglise auquel doivent presider les Ministres de la parole.⁵⁵

These quotations refer to the individual community. But the "Discipline ecclésiastique" also speaks explicitly of colloquia, synods and larger assemblies at regional and national levels. The communities had to send representatives to these assemblies. The *anciens* and the *diacres* were to be represented in these delegations as well.

Que les ministres ameneront avec eux au Synode chacun un ancien et un diacre de leur Eglise, ou plusieurs.⁵⁶

The *Confessio Belgica* discusses the offices in a similar way:

Credimus, veram hanc Ecclesiam Spirituali illa politia quam nos Deus verbo suo docuit, gubernari debere: ut, videlicet, Ministri seu Pastores sint, qui verbum Dei annunciant et Sacramenta administrent: Seniores quoque sint et Diaconi, qui cum Pastoribus, Senatum quasi Ecclesiae constituent: ut hac ratione vera religio conservari, veraque doctrina passim propagari possit, quin et homines vitiosi, spiritualiter corripiantur, atque refraenentur: pauperibus item et afflictis... succurratur.

... Credimus interea, quamvis utile et bonum sit, Gubernatores Ecclesiae ordinem aliquem certum inter se ad conservationem corporis Ecclesiae instituere et stabilire; debere tamen eos studiose cavere, ne ab iis deflectant, quae Christus unicus Magister noster instituit.⁵⁷

Both confessions give highest importance to the correct order of the church. The fact that the offices are mentioned in the confessions of the two churches is significant in itself. It indicates the conviction that God wanted that specific order and that it therefore had to be

55 Discipline Ecclésiastique 20, cf. Niesel, *ibid.* p. 77.

56 Discipline Ecclésiastique 3, cf. Niesel, *ibid.* p.76.

57 Confessio Belgica XXX and XXXII, cf. Niesel, *ibid.* pp. 131-132.

actualized in the church. It is also significant that both confessions emphasize the equality of the pastors; in the church no one was fundamentally superior. Finally, another new aspect of the order of the church is seen here: different levels of the life and organization of the church are clearly envisaged. The government of the church demanded not only a council on the community level, but also on the level of the district, the region and finally the nation. The elders participated in these synodal assemblies.

b) Johannes a Lasco and the Refugee Communities in London

Another important model in this period is the order introduced by Johannes a Lasco in the refugee communities in London.⁵⁸ The Protestant Church in England experienced a period of unexpected development under Edward VI (1547-1553). The persecutions on the Continent drove waves of refugees across the Channel where they were hospitably received and permitted to establish their own communities with their own rites and church constitutions. Several communities emerged in London distinguished from one another by their different languages. In 1550 Johannes a Lasco was appointed superintendent of these communities.

A Lasco came from Poland. He was born in 1499, the son of a noble family, and had the opportunity to study in Italy. He was ordained as a priest in 1521. Sojourns abroad brought him into contact with Erasmus, Zwingli, and Oekolampad, but he actually joined the Reformation only much later, in 1539. In 1540 a Lasco moved to Emden, the capital of East Frisia. In 1543 he accepted the call of Count Enno II to introduce the Reformation in East Frisia, where he followed closely the model of the Swiss Reformation. This work, however, did not last long; after the Schmalkaldian War in 1548, East Frisia had to submit to the Interim. A Lasco moved to England.

⁵⁸ In reference to Johannes a Lasco see Petrus Bartels, Johannes a Lasco, Elberfeld 1860; Naunin, "Die Kirchenordnungen des Johannes Laski," Deutsche Zeitschrift für Kirchenrecht vol.10 (Tübingen 1909), pp. 24ff., 196ff.; Oskar Bartel, Jan Laski, Berlin 1964; Benno Gassmann, Ecclesia Reformata: Die Kirche in den reformierten Bekenntnisschriften, Freiburg 1968.

A Lasco had already created a new ecclesiastical order in East Frisia. In London he clarified his thought on this subject. A description of his church order is found in the work *Forma ac ratio tota ecclesiastici Ministerii in peregrinorum... Ecclesia instituta Londini in Anglia*, written in 1553 and published in 1555.⁵⁹

In this work a Lasco mentions two offices: the elders (or presbyters) and the deacons. Among the elders, he distinguished two groups. One fulfilled the service of the Word and sacraments; the other, called *subsidiariae gubernationes* (I Cor. 12:28), together with the preachers guided the community and ensured the purity of the teaching and of the administration of the sacraments. In the name of the community the elders exercised supervision and discipline over all-officeholders. One of the elders held the office of superintendent. Among his tasks were the monitoring of the ministries of the community, the organization of assemblies of church ministries, the protection of the correct doctrine, and the maintenance of peace within the community.⁶⁰ The superintendent had an ordering function among the elders. But he, like all other officeholders, was subject to the discipline of the community.

The governance of the church lay in the hands of the assembly of the elders, called the *coetus*. Each week the elders of the community came together under the chairmanship of the superintendent and dealt with the questions concerning the community. They admonished sinners and settled disputes and quarrels. Each month the elders and deacons met and discussed the problems of poor relief. These assemblies were public. The officeholders exercised ecclesiastical discipline among themselves four times a year. Each left the room in turn, so that the others could speak freely about him. These assemblies were also open to all community members.

59 Die vollständige Gestalt und Art des kirchlichen Dienstes in der in London errichteten Fremden-gemeinde, in: A. Kuyper (ed.), Joannis a Lasco Opera, vol. II, pp. 1ff.

60 Naunin, op. cit. p. 190.

In addition to the assemblies of the individual refugee communities, a Lasco's order also called for another monthly assembly in which the officeholders of all the communities gathered together under the chairmanship of the superintendent.

A Lasco stressed the importance of offices to the church. The officeholders were seen as the representatives of Christ on earth. They were appointed as "servants of the Word, servants of the divine institution, servants of God." But a Lasco also stressed the role of the community as a whole. "The assembled community is the focal point; it is consulted in all decisions."⁶¹ The community also participated in the election of the officeholders, appointing candidates from among its own ranks. The officeholders then elected the most capable. Within a fixed time period, the community could state its reservations about the elected persons; if they did not do this, their silence was considered assent and the elected person was solemnly inducted into his office by prayer and by laying on of hands. He thus became an instrument of God within the community.

All officeholders, not only the preachers, were inducted into their office by the laying on of hands. The ordination was carried out by all the officeholders, who laid their hands on the person to be ordained.

If we survey this order, the following details stand out:

- A Lasco's order, like others, distinguishes between two different kinds of elders, those who serve in Word and teaching and those whose task is limited to governance and administration. But a Lasco's order puts stronger emphasis than others on the fact that all elders are on an equal footing. Not only the preachers, but also the *gubernatores* were elected for life and receive the same solemn ordination. In Geneva the elders were elected for

⁶¹ "Die versammelte Gemeinde steht im Mittelpunkt und ist stets mitgefragt." Gassmann, *op. cit.* p. 197.

only one year and were received into their office in a service of worship.

- Much as a Lasco emphasizes the equality of the elders and of all the officeholders, he still creates room for a quasi-episcopal office. Although the superintendent was basically an elder among elders, he still had a special position among them. He exercised a sort of personal *episkope*. A Lasco saw the office of the superintendent as analogous to the special position of Peter among the other Apostles.
- A Lasco proceeds from the assumption that the community is the ultimate holder of ecclesiastical authority.⁶² Despite the emphasis placed on the importance of offices to the church, he at the same time stresses that the officeholders serve the community and are responsible to it. Great importance is placed on the transparency of all decisions to the community.
- The governance of the church is viewed consistently as collegial. All essential decisions were made by the *coetus* cooperatively - in the individual communities as well as on the supra-communal level. In later work in Poland, a Lasco introduced synods in which preachers and laymen were given the same voting rights.

A Lasco's work in London, as in East Frisia, came to an early end. When Mary Tudor took over the scepter after the death of Edward VI in 1553, the refugee community in London was dissolved. The order created by a Lasco suffered the same "diaspora" as the London refugee community itself.⁶³ The order as such did not live on, but many of its principles and regulations were included in other Reformed church ordinances.

62 Naunin, *op. cit.* p. 354.

63 Gassmann, *op. cit.* p. 199.

c) Theodor Beza

Theodor Beza, Calvin's successor in Geneva, was an important link in the chain of the further development of the understanding of office in the Reformed tradition. His statements on the office of the elders in his numerous works and wide-ranging correspondence largely agree with Calvin's views. However, Beza transcends Calvin insofar as he makes Calvin's statements more precise and consolidates them into a coherent theory. As Calvin's successor, he exercised considerable influence in the Reformed churches. His advice was sought after, listened to, and followed.

How could the true church be recognized? Like many other Reformers (but unlike Calvin) Beza named three characteristics: the true proclamation of the Word, the right administration of the sacraments, and the exercise of ecclesiastical discipline.⁶⁴ But in Beza's development of this topic, significant shifts in emphasis can be seen. With Beza the emphasis lay on the Word and on doctrine. The primary and decisive characteristic of the true church was that it represented the true doctrine. The witness of both the Old and New Testaments and the teaching of the apostles had been disfigured and kept in darkness by the papacy. The Reformation had brought the true doctrine to light: it was now essential to preserve the teaching unadulterated. But the Reformation was not limited to the restoration of true doctrine; it also extended to the true order of the church. Beza stressed more and more that it was essential for the church to regain the apostolic order given by God. He was able to state that the Reformation had restored original purity as much in the "doctrine as in the order which the Lord has established in his house."⁶⁵ In Beza's eyes the true order was the presbyterial order which he promoted: it made possible that exercise of discipline which belonged to the characteristics of the true church. For Beza,

⁶⁴ Cf. Tadataka Maruyama, The Ecclesiology of Theodore Beza: The Reform of the True Church, Geneva 1978, p. 23. In contrast to John Calvin, who distinguished between marks of the Church and marks of Christians and considered discipline a mark of Christian life, Beza speaks of discipline as a mark of the Church.

⁶⁵ Ibid. p. 220.

the presbyterial order had been appointed *de iure divino*. In comparison with Calvin's thought the significance of the sacraments receded in importance. Baptism and the Lord's Supper were subordinated to the Word. While Calvin also concentrated on questions of liturgical practice, Beza regarded the sacraments exclusively from the point of view of the true doctrine:

In Beza's understanding of the church, sacramental or eucharistic piety plays a minor role in comparison to the piety of the Word... in his concept of the Kingdom of Christ, we rarely find his emphasis upon sacramental piety in the church's life, but on the ministers of the Word and elders to whom the administration and discipline regarding the sacraments are committed. Piety must be created and regulated in accordance with both true doctrine and order.⁶⁶

In the course of his life Beza was repeatedly engaged in conflicts about the true order of the church. Three fronts can be distinguished: the independence of the church from the authority of the state, the role of the officeholders with respect to the community, and the confrontation with the episcopal system of the Church of England.

The independence of the church from the authority of the state was stressed emphatically by Beza from the very beginning. Even more strongly than the other Reformed theologians, Beza stressed that the office holders had to be appointed by the church in free and public elections. In one of his earlier writings, the *Confession de la foi* of 1559, Beza allowed that the election needed the approval of the magistrate. But it is characteristic that mention of this was no longer present in the Latin translation which appeared a year later.⁶⁷ Theodor Beza's position was the antipode of Thomas Erastus'. Erastus argued that in a Christian state discipline had to be exercised by the magistrate and not by the church. Beza contested

66 *Ibid.* p. 215.

67 *Ibid.* p. 17.

this view.⁶⁸ The church denied its very essence if it gave up the spiritual order appointed by God himself, he argued; from this point of view, the exercise of discipline by the magistrate was a sign of anarchy.⁶⁹ Erastus took offence at the Calvinist doctrine that there were two different kinds of elders, those who served in Word and doctrine and those who participated as laymen in the guidance of the church. For Erastus, this represented the usurpation of state authority by the church. Beza emphasized on the contrary the necessity of a spiritual jurisdiction. By exercising discipline within the church, the elders fulfilled a spiritual mission that was ordered by Christ himself.⁷⁰

What authority, however, did the communities hold? Much as Beza supported the independence of the church against the authority of the state, he remained cautious with regard to the role of the community. Officeholders were distinguished from the community on account of the mission they had received. Beza did stress that the presbyterium served the community and was in need of permanent control by the pastors as well as by the community as a whole, but he vehemently rejected the opinion that the church had to be guided and ordered according to democratic principles.⁷¹ Jean Morély had argued this point in his treatise "Traicté de la discipline et police Chrestienne" (1562), thus beginning a controversy which lasted several years.⁷² Morély called the church the holy Christian republic; although he did not deny the necessity of officeholders, he consistently argued that all final authority lay with the community as a whole. The community had to elect the officeholders in a democratic way. It was a brotherly community, in which every

68 Cf. above: the confrontation with Erastus began in 1569. Beza wrote an extensive answer to the 75 theses of Erastus. This answer was not published, but was circulated as a manuscript. In 1589 a work which Erastus had written in 1583 before his death was published in England. Beza now provided his treatise of 1569 with a new introduction and published it under the title "Tractatus pius et moderatus" (1590). Cf. Maruyama, *op. cit.* pp. 112ff.

69 *Ibid.* p. 113.

70 *Ibid.* pp. 121ff.

71 *Ibid.* p. 121.

72 *Ibid.* pp. 80ff.

member cared about the salvation of the other. In contrast to Calvin, he held the opinion that the discipline based on Matthew 18:15-18 should be exercised by the community as a whole. Beza contested these views. He saw in them the danger of confusion. The officeholders were not the representatives of the community; instead they had the task of representing the Word of God and His will to, and if necessary, against the community. Much as Beza struggled against the tyranny of Rome, he nevertheless distanced himself no less clearly from the "Morellian Democracy."⁷³

The third conflict of Beza's era was with the episcopal system of the Church of England. Beza left no doubt but that there was no place for an episcopal office in the true order of the church. He distinguished between three forms of the episcopate: the first was appointed and willed by God, the second created by human beings and the third introduced into the church by the devil. The first form was the government through elders who were all on equal footing with each other. The second form was the precedence of one elder over the others which remained limited and did not overwhelm the authority of the other elders. The third form was the tyranny of the Roman Church. The episcopal order of the English Church corresponded to the second form. It was not to be equated to the aberration of the Roman Church, but it diverged nevertheless from the true order. The order in the Church of England was the result of human wisdom which sought to rise above the testimony of Scripture.⁷⁴ Beza did not distinguish between the *episkopoi* and the *presbyteroi* of the New Testament, holding that the two expressions referred to the same office, the office of the elders that was exercised collegially. The *episkope* was not carried out in a personal office, but rather by the presbyterium, the collegium of all the elders.⁷⁵

73 *Ibid.* p. 113.

74 This distinction is to be found in the treatise "de triplici episcopatu," originally a letter which Beza sent to the Lord Chancellor Glamis of Scotland. The treatise was translated into English in 1580 and had a great impact on the debate in England and Scotland. Cf. Maruyama, *ibid.* pp. 177ff.

75 *Ibid.* p. 192.

Beza's view of the true order and the role of the elders in the Church is characterized by the following:

- It was held to correspond to the will of Christ that the church be governed by a collegium of elders; the true order of the church was presbyterial. The collegial government was the protective wall against any aberration into tyranny on the part of individuals. At the same time the collegial government prevented the chaos to which democracy could lead.
- All the office holders were on an equal footing with each other. The polemical debate with advocates of the episcopal system led Beza to stress this basic principle even more strongly than his predecessors and contemporaries. Beza questioned even his own chairmanship of the *compagnie des pasteurs* in Geneva. It was resolved in 1580 to appoint a new chairman every week.⁷⁶
- Beza made no clear distinction between the two different kinds of elders. The presbyterium consisted of *seniores ex sacerdotibus* (the pastor and teachers) and *seniores ex populo* (the elders appointed to govern) similar to the Jewish Sanhedrin. But the difference of their origins implied no hierarchical distinction.⁷⁷
- As the assembly of all office holders, the presbyterium was the organ of government in the church. It represented simultaneously the authority of Christ and the will of the community. The pastors and teachers represented the authority of Christ through the proclamation of the Word and the administration of the sacraments, whereas the elders represented more nearly the will of the community.⁷⁸
- Beza supported the view that synodal assemblies should take place on all levels of the church. Basing his view on the Apostolic

76 *Ibid.* p. 125.

77 *Ibid.* p. 238.

78 *Ibid.* p. 238.

Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15) Beza concluded that the church needed a system of representative assemblies. Just as apostles and elders gathered together in Jerusalem, synods in his day should also consist of the pastors and elders of the church, he held.⁷⁹

d) Presbyterianism in Scotland

With Theodor Beza the foundation for the Presbyterian system was laid. His views were adopted by Puritans in England and were further developed into an actual programme in the struggle over the reform of the Church of England. The great promoters of the Puritan movement, Thomas Cartwright (1535-1603) and Walter Travers (1548-1635) were both friends of Beza's and were influenced by his thought. The movement for a Presbyterian system did not succeed immediately in England, but from 1573 on it gained ground step by step in Scotland. The name of Andrew Melville, (1545-1622) is important in this context. Melville, who also had strong connections with Beza and Geneva - he lived there for five years before returning to Scotland in 1574 - worked tirelessly to implement the Presbyterian system.

Scotland had already experienced a first Reformation in 1559/60. Although the reorganization of the church was far-reaching, it did not go as far as the Presbyterian constitution of later years. The Scottish confession of 1560 did not explain the question of the offices of the church in great detail, but it did mention the three characteristics by which the true church could be recognized: the proclamation of the Word, the administration of the sacraments and the *ecclesiasticae disciplinae severa observatio*. The *First Book of Discipline*, which was approved in the following year, distinguished three offices - the *pastores*, who were charged with the proclamation of the Word, the *seniores*, who participated in the governance of the community and were to ensure that the fruits of the proclamation might be

⁷⁹ *Ibid.* pp. 229ff.

harvested, and the deacons, who were responsible for the finances of the church. The elders were laymen, elected for one year.⁸⁰ In a way similar to a Lasco's church ordinance, the *Book of Discipline* also introduced the office of superintendent. Superintendents had the duty of monitoring the pastors and communities and supervising education and the welfare system; they served as a link between the communities and the General Assembly.⁸¹

The *Second Book of Discipline*, approved by the General Assembly in 1578, far exceeded this order.⁸² Andrew Melville's programme had by then matured, and the Presbyterian order made its entry into Scotland. The *Second Book of Discipline* made clear that in Scripture the terms bishop, shepherd and elder (presbyter) all referred to the same office and that on the basis of the Bible there was no room for a bishop in the sense of a "shepherd of the shepherds." All elders - the teaching elders as well as the ruling elders - were elected for life and were inducted into their office in the same way. The officeholders formed the kirk session, the elders of several communities formed the presbytery; the presbyteries sent their representatives to the provincial synods and finally to the National Assembly.

The Presbyterian system did not remain unchallenged. More than a century passed before it finally succeeded in Scotland, but in this eventful period the conviction that only this order truly corresponded to the essence of Christ's church was firmly established. Presbyterian piety is marked by a high respect for the demands of the constitution of the church.

Through migrations and missionary movements, the Presbyterian order spread throughout the world.

80 Gordon Donaldson, *The Scottish Reformation*, Cambridge 1960, p. 84.

81 *Ibid.* p. 111.

82 *Ibid.* p.

7. Elders in the Congregationalist Church

Thus far the variations in Reformed ecclesiology we have considered have all arisen out of its adaptation to different national or cultural settings, but with the introduction of Congregationalism into the discussion we are dealing with a new dimension, because it appears to present us with an alternative form of church order with its own distinctive polity.

1. The history of the Congregationalist churches owes its distinctive character to two related but distinct influences. Even Congregationalist historians themselves often appear to be undecided whether the movement inherited its traits mainly from Geneva and from writers such as the English Puritans Henry Jacob (1563-1624) and William Ames (1576-1633) or whether it had its origin in the Separatist views of Robert Browne (1560?-1633?). Although the debate has not been fully resolved, the most recent scholarship suggests that there was considerable interplay between the two strands and neither can be wholly ignored in determining the development of Congregationalism. It is important to keep this in mind when evaluating the ecclesiastical contribution of the movement.
2. We should correct any impression that congregational independency (i.e. the autonomy of the local congregation) was originally a democratic policy. Undoubtedly it tended to become that in the social and political context of the nineteenth century, but in earlier Congregational ecclesiology, the intention of church government was theocratic, not democratic. The source and authority of all church government was its purpose of discovering the "mind of Christ" under the guidance of the Holy Spirit speaking through all God's people in the Church.

The Congregationalists' emphasis on the primacy of the Holy Spirit in church government also affects our understanding of "covenant" and "covenanting" in relation to their Reformed churchmanship. Too

often those who have written about Congregationalism have suggested that it represents the Church as a "voluntary society" or as a voluntary association of Christians. Again it has opened itself to that interpretation through the influence of voluntarist and democratising ideas in the Anglo-Saxon societies of the past century; but the church covenant was not primarily undertaken with one's fellow members but with God and in response to his call: as even the Separatist Robert Browne expressed it in describing the individual church: "The church planted or gathered, is a company or number of Christians or beleueers, *which by a willing couenant made with their God, are under the gouernment of God and Christ, and kepe his lawes in one holie communion...*"⁸³

A further characteristic for us to note is that Congregationalists for the last hundred years or so have recognized only two ministries - the pastors and the deacons. Originally this was different. They distinguished between the ministry of proclamation and teaching (pastors and "doctors") and the ministry of governance (ruling elders). Indeed, in light of the way in which much subsequent Congregationalist history has been written it is something of a shock to discover that the Congregationalists sided vigorously with the Scottish Presbyterians in the Westminster Assembly in insisting that both doctors (teachers) and ruling elders should be recognised within any Reformed Church of England.

The congregational movement of the seventeenth century brought important new perspectives for the understanding of the church. The movement proceeded consistently from the presence of Christ in the individual church communities. Because Christ is present in the assembled ("gathered") and covenanted congregation, all authority rests in the individual community. The congregational movement was convinced that "every particular Church hath like and full

⁸³ Robert Browne: A Booke which seweth the Life and Manners of all true Christians, Middleburgh 1582, in: The Writings of Robert Harrison and Robert Browne [English Nonconformist Texts vol. 2], edited by Albert Peel and Leland H. Carlson, publ. George Allen & Unwin, London 1953, p. 253.

interest and power to enjoy and practice all the ordinances of Christ given by him to his Church to be observed therein perpetually."⁸⁴ This emphasis on the authority of the individual congregation led unavoidably to a new conception of the offices of the Church.

In doctrine the Congregationalists agreed basically with the Presbyterians. The essential statements of the Reformed confessions, in particular the Westminster Confession, are shared by Presbyterians and Congregationalists. The difference between the two groups lies in their understanding of the Church and its order. The Savoy Declaration (1658), in which the Congregationalists set down their points of difference with the Westminster Confession, bore the telling title "On the institution of the Churches and the order appointed in them by Jesus Christ." On the full authority of the individual congregation they stated:

IV. To each of these churches thus gathered, according unto his mind declared in his Word, he has given all that power and authority which is in any way needful for their carrying on that order in worship and discipline which he has instituted for them to observe with commands and rules, for the due and right exerting and executing of that power.

V. These particular churches thus appointed by the authority of Christ and entrusted with power from him for the ends before expressed, are each of them as unto these ends, the seat of that power which he is pleased to communicate to his saints or subjects in this world, so that as such they receive it immediately from himself.⁸⁵

How then did Congregationalism view the congregation? The following points are important in the context of this question.⁸⁶

84 "Points Of Difference" (1603), in E.F. Müller (ed.), Bekenntnisschriften der reformierten Kirche, Leipzig 1903, p. 540.

85 "The Savoy Declaration, Points IV and V", in Müller, p. 563.

86 Cf. the general description by Henry M. Dexter, Congregationalism: What it is, Whence it is, How it Works, Why it is Better Than Any Other Form of Church Government and its Consequent Demands, Boston 1868; and R.W. Dale, Congregational Church Polity, London 1885.

- The congregation was formed through the voluntary (covenanted) association of persons who believe in Jesus Christ and confess him. The presence of Christ became effective in the faith and in the common prayer of the congregation. The congregation therefore could not include "unbelievers." It also had to be free from all state interference and supervision.
- All members of the congregation had the same rights and privileges and shared the same responsibility. All members of the congregation together had decision-making power - they exercised the discipline of the community, appointed its officers and monitored their performance in office. They decided on all matters which affected the life and witness of the congregation.
- Whenever possible, consensus was sought. Decisions could, however, be reached by majority vote.
- Under the common authority of Christ, each congregation was independent. It was responsible to Christ alone and stood under no control from any superior authority. For the Congregationalists, the indication that even the apostles left the decision in disciplinary matters to the community was important (I Cor. 5:4). Robert Browne could thus say: "The voice of the whole people, guided by the elders and the forwardest, is said to be the voice of God... Therefore, the meeting together of many churches, also of every whole church, and of the elders therein, is above the apostle, and above the prophet, the evangelist, the pastor, and every particular elder ... so that the apostle is inferior to the church."⁸⁷
- The individual communities did, however, seek out association and exchange with each other. Assemblies of several congregations were called to clarify salient questions and provide mutual advice. They made no binding decisions but the

⁸⁷ Cited in Dale, *op. cit.*, p. 75.

individual congregations were expected to listen to the shared wisdom of their delegates.

What consequences arise from this view of the congregation for the understanding of office within the church? What significance did the office of the elders have in Congregationalism?

- Even when all power lay in the congregation, the necessity for special offices was not eliminated. The officers were chosen by the congregation for the fulfillment of certain ministries. They were to be members of the congregation, and they were placed in office through ordination. Ordination was understood as an act of blessing, carried out by those already ordained.⁸⁸
- The Congregationalists came to recognize two offices: the pastors (also called presbyters or elders) and the deacons. The pastors carried out the task of preaching, the deacons were responsible for all worldly matters (temporalities) of the church.
- The office of the elders, as introduced by Calvin, disappeared in the Congregationalist movement. In a few Congregationalist churches it remained in place for a short time. The Pilgrim Fathers in New England knew the office of the ruling elder as we have encountered it in the Presbyterian tradition. On the whole, however, the number of ministries in the Congregationalist church was reduced to two: pastors and deacons. The reason for this development is clear. When discipline is exercised through the community as a whole, a special office for it is no longer required. The only two responsibilities which must be carried out through offices are those of preaching, and of administration and welfare.
- The reduction of the offices to two had the consequence that certain functions carried out in the Presbyterian Church by elders

⁸⁸ Dexter, *op. cit.*, p. 140.

were transferred to the pastors or deacons. In more than one respect deacons took the place of the elders in the Congregationalist congregations.

- The collegial exercise of the office was maintained in the Congregationalist congregations. Pastors and deacons together formed a council in which they bore shared responsibility for the direction of the church.

- In comparison with other Reformed groups, Congregationalist congregations allowed women to hold office relatively early. Until late in the nineteenth century, even into the twentieth century, Congregationalists assumed on the basis of the New Testament, and on the basis of "reason," that women did not have the same rights within the church as men. However, the strong emphasis on the equal position of all members of the congregation led to a revision of this judgement relatively early in comparison with other Reformed churches.

The Congregationalist movement was distinguished by a strong determination to establish the congregation in complete agreement with the witness of the New Testament. Congregationalism put great emphasis on obedience and the active contribution of each member of the congregation. The congregation was understood as a community of active Christians, who under Jesus Christ joined together in a covenant or "voluntary compact."⁸⁹ The strong emphasis on the voluntary nature of the church could lead to an obscuring of the importance of God's initiative. The shift in the meaning of the word "covenant" is perhaps characteristic of this development. Although in Scripture the word "covenant" stands for God's merciful promise and invitation, in Congregationalism it is used in the sense of "joining together"; it can even be used as a verb.

⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 29.

Congregationalism had an influence far beyond its own borders. The scriptural insights it represented and lived in its practice found welcome in other Protestant churches. The strong emphasis on "democratic participation" also functioned as a catalyst in the society at large. In particular, the Reformed churches became more and more open to Congregationalist ideas. At the same time, the Congregationalist movement began to incorporate perspectives of other churches, especially the Presbyterian churches. In light of the complexity of modern society, the radical denial of all superior authority became more and more difficult to maintain. The common witness on the regional and national level became increasingly important.

The rapprochement of the two churches made such rapid progress that, in the twentieth century, some individual Reformed and Congregationalist churches could unite. In 1970 the International Congregational Council and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches joined together.

8. The Elders in the Churches of Christ (Disciples)

A new variant of the office of the elders is found in the Disciples of Christ, an American revival movement of the nineteenth century. Alexander Campbell (1788-1866), one of its founders, described the essence and goal of the movement as follows:

To the cooperation of a few friends, under the divine government, is to be ascribed the success which accompanied this first effort to restore pure speech to the people of God, to re-establish the ancient order of things in the Christian kingdom, to emancipate the conscience from the dominion of human authority in matters of religion, and to lay a foundation, an imperishable foundation, for the union of all Christians,

and for their co-operation in spreading the glorious Gospel throughout the world.⁹⁰

The Disciples of Christ belong to the Reformed tradition in the broadest sense of the word. Their founders Barton Warren Stone (1772-1844) and Alexander Campbell, had broken away from the Presbyterian Church, or rather from a form of Presbyterianism distinguished, in questions of doctrine as in its constitution, by a narrow orthodoxy. Stone and Campbell laid great weight on freedom and denounced with vehemence every claim to superior religious authority. They remained indebted to the Reformed tradition in many respects. Their understanding of the church was on the whole congregational. Alexander Campbell pressed for the realization of the priesthood of all believers and stressed the autonomy of the local congregation. The Disciples of Christ hoped for the unification of all Christians through the renewal of the church from its origins. "A restoration of the ancient order of things is all that is necessary to the happiness and usefulness of Christians."⁹¹ The movement was driven by a strong missionary impulse.

According to Alexander Campbell, in each local congregation there were to be two offices - bishops and deacons. The holders of these offices were to be chosen from each congregation and placed in office by the congregation. The bishops had the duties of preaching, leadership and discipline; the deacons were "public servants of the church in all things pertaining to its internal and external relations."⁹² According to Campbell the New Testament terms bishop (*episkopoi*), elder (*presbyteroi*), and shepherd all referred to the same office. Campbell did not speak of a differentiation of function within the office: all officers bear the same responsibility. "The Apostles, at the command of the King, ordained a senate, a presbytery, an eldership - three names for the same thing - in every

⁹⁰ D. Ray Lindley, Apostle of Freedom, St. Louis 1957, pp. 12ff.

⁹¹ Ibid., p. 30.

⁹² D. Newell Williams, Ministry among the Disciples, Past, Present, Future, St. Louis 1985, p. 13.

church which they set in order."⁹³ In principle there were to be several bishops, who together with the deacons would form a collegium.⁹⁴ In practice in the earliest period of the movement this could not be realized everywhere. In some congregations there was only a single bishop who could dedicate himself to the service of the Gospel and the congregation. He held *de facto* a superior position.

The Disciples of Christ introduced a new office: the evangelist. Its necessity arose from the missionary purpose of the church. "The public interests of the aggregate Christian community in every one nation, province or empire, as much require public agents, whether called evangelists, messengers, delegates or classified under one all-comprehending designation and denomination, missionaries or messengers of the churches, as do the private interests of every particular community require its own special and particular agents or officers."⁹⁵ Evangelists should be sent out from a congregation, or from several congregations, with the task of proclaiming the Gospel and building congregations.

The creation of this office represents a new development in the history of the Reformed tradition. Alexander Campbell differs in this respect from John Calvin, who held the opinion that the missionary duty and with it the office of the evangelist were reserved for the early period of the church. Alexander Campbell also held that a distinction had to be made between the period of the founding of the church and the later centuries. He spoke of "officers plenipotentiary," who were called by Jesus Christ himself for the period of the founding of the church. The apostles, prophets, and evangelists belonged to this category.⁹⁶ He distinguished these from the "officers ordinary," which were necessary at all times for the life and witness of the church. In the course of his life, however, Campbell came more and more to the conclusion that the evangelist belonged

93 Lindley, *op. cit.* p. 139.

94 *Ibid.*, p. 138 and Williams, p. 13.

95 Lindley, *op. cit.* p. 205.

96 *Ibid.*, p. 135.

to both categories. Although he had a special task to carry out in the earliest days of the church, the office of the evangelist was also necessary to the church at all times. The missionary duty was part of the essence of the church.

This picture of the early period of the Disciples of Christ, as seen in the thought of Alexander Campbell, becomes more complicated in its later developments. Three points need to be mentioned:

- The Congregationalist view that the bishops or presbyters should be chosen for their office from among the congregation did not hold up in the long run. Soon the need to entrust the preaching of the Gospel to trained ministers arose. More and more congregations decided to call preachers from outside their ranks. How then was this office of a "resident preacher" to be understood? Was he one of the elders of the congregation, perhaps first among the elders? Or was he to be seen as an "evangelist" who came from outside the congregation with a special purpose? In the course of heated debate, the opinion that the preacher was to be considered an elder of the congregation eventually came to prevail. *De facto* there arose a three-fold office - preachers, elders and deacons.
- As the Disciples began to train and educate their preachers, a shift in the practice of ordination also arose. The preachers were no longer ordained by the congregation; instead they were ordained on the regional level and sent to the congregations.
- With this the role of the elders changed as well. Elders became an advisory organ for the preacher and the question was raised whether the elders, like the preachers, should receive ordination. More and more the ordination of the elders was dispensed with. The original role of the elders survived only in the fact that, as before, they presided over the celebration of the Lord's Supper. Preachers and elders together formed a collegium in which all members fulfilled essentially the same functions.

9. The Office of the Elders in United Churches

The ecumenical movement of the twentieth century brought with it new questions and perspectives. The call for unity required the Reformed churches to examine their understanding of the church and of church offices and ordination. Is it possible to find ways to express appropriately the insights of the Reformed tradition in a United Church? This question became especially explosive in the discussion with episcopal churches. From the historical standpoint, an understanding between Reformed and episcopal churches was scarcely to be expected. The Presbyterian order had formed itself to a large extent in opposition to an episcopal order and had thus borne a strong anti-episcopal ethos. Is it nevertheless possible to find a common order which does not do violence to the fundamental convictions of the Reformed tradition?

Numerous Reformed Churches have joined United Churches in the course of the last decades. Today, about fifteen United Churches belong to the World Alliance of Reformed Churches. They consider their affirmation of union not as a betrayal, but as a fulfilment of their Reformed inheritance. Most United Churches arose from union with other non-episcopal Reformed Churches, such as the Congregationalists, the Disciples of Christ, or Methodists. In a few cases there has also been union with churches of the episcopal Anglican tradition. The churches of North and South India are examples of such unions. In the negotiations which led to the formation of the Uniting Church of Australia, the discussion with the episcopal order also played an important role. Although the Uniting Church does not include the Anglican Church, an attempt was made to consider the challenges posed by the prospect of such a union.

The Anglican Church order is based on the threefold ministry of bishop, presbyter and deacon, as it was formed and increasingly accepted in the ancient church. The bishop is the governor of the diocese and the presbyter directs the individual congregations. Both exercise on their respective levels the offices of preaching,

administration of the sacraments, and direction, and in both cases the office has a personal character. The deacons are subordinated to the bishops and presbyters. Deacons perform general, subordinate duties in the liturgy and in the life of the church in general. The ordination to the diaconate is a prerequisite for the ordination to the presbyterate, just as the ordination to the presbyterate is required for ordination to the office of the bishop.

For the Reformed churches, the question of the collegial exercise of the government of the church is raised in the dialogue with this episcopal order. Does the episcopal order lead unavoidably to an overemphasis on the personal dimension of the ministry? Or can this order be so structured that the collegial dimension is given appropriate emphasis? How would such an order function, in particular with regard to the exercise of discipline in the church? Does the disciplinary authority lie exclusively with the bishop and presbyter?

The unions which have been formed in the course of the past few decades are based on the assumption that the congregational, presbyterian and episcopal orders do not exclude, but rather enhance, each other. Each of the three traditions has preserved important aspects of the apostolic tradition, which must find their place in the United Church. How are they linked with one another?

The various unification plans put great weight on the ministry of the laity. The whole church is God's chosen people. The sense and purpose of specific offices can be correctly understood only on this basis. The *Constitution of the Church of South India* speaks thus:

To the whole Church and to every member of it belongs the duty and the privilege of spreading the good news of the kingdom of God and the message of salvation through Jesus Christ. The Church of South India therefore welcomes and will as far as possible provide for the exercise by lay persons, both men and women, of such gifts of prophecy, evangelization, teaching, healing

and administration as God bestows upon them. In particular the laity are called upon to exercise important functions in the church as members of its governing bodies, both local and central, and of its disciplinary courts... (Chapter VI, 1)⁹⁷

The Church of North India goes a step further.⁹⁸ While the Church of South India first lists the offices and then proceeds to discussing the role of the laity, in the *Constitution of the Church of North India* the order is reversed. The Uniting Church of Australia also emphasizes that in principle every member of the Church shares in its mission.⁹⁹

The distinguishing element of the Presbyterian order, collegial judgement, decision-making, and governance, is realized in the United churches by making provision for representative councils alongside the personal offices, on the local as well as the regional level.

The *Constitution of the Church of South India* describes the council at the congregational level in the following words:

Every pastorate shall have a Pastorate Committee, which shall consist of the presbyter in charge as chairman, the ordained ministers who are appointed to work as assistants to the presbyter in charge, and lay communicant members of the church to be elected by the communicants of the pastorate... The Pastorate Committee shall have, in conjunction with the pastor, the general oversight of the pastorate and of its religious activities (Chapter VII, 1, 4).

In the *Constitution of the Church of North India* this council and its members are discussed under the heading "The Elders." "They are to be chosen after prayer and careful thought and shall be set apart

97 The Constitution of the Church of South India together with the Basis of Union as adopted by the Governing Bodies of the Uniting Churches in India and Elsewhere, 1951.

98 W.J. Marshall, A United Church, Faith and Order in the North India/Pakistan Unity Plan: A Theological Assessment, Delhi 1987.

99 Andrew Fergus Dutney, The Development of the Understanding of Ministry in the Australian Church Union Negotiations 1957-1971, diss. St. Andrews 1982.

either for a term or for life in a solemn public service of the Church (Chapter VIII, 5)." They can have different designations: ruling elders, lay elders, lay deacons, lay deaconesses or other appropriate names. The *Basis of Union* of the Uniting Church of Australia puts even more weight on the council of elders. This council carries the common responsibility "for building up the congregation in faith and love, sustaining its members in hope, and leading them to a fuller participation in Christ's mission in the world (§ 15 b)." The elders are installed in office in a worship service. They must answer the following question: "Will you accept this responsibility, committing yourself to follow Christ, to love your neighbors, and to work for the reconciling of the world; will you serve the people, using your energy, intelligence, imagination and love, relying on God's grace and rejoicing in his promises?" After they have answered "yes" the congregation is asked: "Will you encourage them in love and support them in their ministry, serving with them the one Lord Jesus Christ, the head of the Church?" Thus a relationship of mutual responsibility is established between the council of elders and the congregation.¹⁰⁰

Provision is also made in the Church of South India for a representative council at the diocesan level analogous to the council on the local level. This council is made up of the bishop, presbyters of the diocese, and laity who are to number at least as many, but not more than twice as many, as the clergy.¹⁰¹ The highest authority in the Church is the synod, comprised of bishops and presbyters on the one hand and lay people on the other.

The ordination of presbyters is carried out by the bishop and other presbyters together. For the selection of candidates the agreement of the bishop and various councils is necessary.¹⁰²

100 *Ibid.* p. 319.

101 Constitution of the Church of South India, *op. cit.* chapter VIII, 1 d.

102 Constitution of the Church of South India, *Ibid.* chapter V, 3-9.

The councils at the various levels exercise the discipline of the Church. The *Constitution of the Church of South India* devotes an entire chapter to this topic. The introductory paragraph shows the spirit in which the question of discipline is approached:

The ends of Church discipline are the good of the offender and the purity of the Church... All members, ministers and bishops of the Church of South India, by their acceptance of membership therein and, in the case of ministers and bishops, by making a formal declaration of acceptance of this Constitution, shall be deemed to have entered into a mutual compact to be bound by the rules of this church and to accept and submit to any sentence which may be passed upon them, after due examination, by any Court acting under the authority of this Constitution, saving all rights of appeal allowed by this Constitution (Chapter 7, 1-2).

The Pastorate Committee as well as the council on the diocesan level have the responsibility of exercising discipline. The Pastorate Committee is not to make decisions in extremely serious matters; the bishop alone can suspend members from participation in the Eucharist.

The ordinances of the Churches of South and North India show that the office of the elders, as it has developed in the Reformed tradition, is modified in its form and content but not simply superseded by the recognition of the three offices of the church. The essential concerns of the Reformed tradition are not merely taken into account in the United Churches: they are expressed with emphasis.

10. Summary: Changing Understandings of the Office of the Elders

This brief overview of the various stages of the Reformed tradition makes clear how substantially the office of the elders, as it was introduced at the time of the Reformation, has changed in the

course of the centuries. From generation to generation new stimuli and insights have become important. Different approaches have led to a variety of models. It would be an illusion to proceed as if there were a uniform understanding. The office of the elders exists today in the various Reformed churches in different forms.

If we want to understand what form the office of the elders should have in the Reformed churches today, we must recognize that the situation has changed fundamentally since the sixteenth century. The assumptions current when the office was established no longer exist today. The following points are of particular importance:

- a) *Church and State.* The new order of the Reformation was established in a society in which church and state were not separated from one another as they are today. The Reformers saw themselves confronted with the task of establishing the role of the church in a Christian society. The structure of the office of the elders was also influenced by this circumstance. To what extent must ecclesiastical and public functions be distinguished from one another? To what extent can they be connected? These questions are no longer valid. The division or clear distinction between church and state has become a general assumption. The idea that state officials can carry out certain clerical functions can no longer be maintained. Today, the office of the elders is seen clearly as an office of the church.
- b) *The role of the congregation as a whole.* What authority do local congregations have? What relation do they have to the authority of those to whom special responsibility for the government of the church has been given? The Reformers had reservations in this regard. As we have seen, pastors, elders and deacons were not chosen by the congregation. Instead these officers were seen as the authority in the church to whom the congregation owed obedience. This view belongs to the past. It is recognized more and more clearly that the congregation as a whole is the actual bearer of authority. The concept of the priesthood of all believers

and its consequences are being taken more and more seriously. The responsibility of the ordained ministries is to encourage the congregation and to enhance its various ministries. The convictions of Congregationalism have, in more than one respect, become indispensable parts of the Reformed tradition. At the same time, there is an increased consciousness that the congregations must be able to make decisions and act through synods on the regional and national levels.

- c) *The exercise of discipline.* The central responsibility of the elders in the time of the Reformation was the exercise of discipline. The office was conceived for this task. The conviction that discipline is a distinctive element of the life of the church has been shaken today. Discipline is no longer exercised regularly in most Reformed churches today; instead it is left to the spontaneous interaction of the faithful. Only those who hold office in the church are as before subject to the discipline of the church. This shift brings with it a change in the range of responsibilities of the elders. They are no longer guardians of the way of life of the congregation; their task lies more in voluntary spiritual counseling.
- d) *The missionary task.* The suggestion that the missionary task of the church has been completed has today proved untenable. The message of Christ is valid for all generations. The congregation that recognizes Christ and serves him is by definition a missionary congregation: it testifies to his Kingdom in the world. Among the duties of the elders, therefore, is leading the congregation in its missionary witness.
- e) *The confessional fronts have shifted.* In the course of centuries the particular form given to the office of elders often was the result of conflicts with other churches and church structures. The opposition to episcopal order - first in the Roman Catholic and later in the Anglican form - played an especially important role. For two reasons, these polemical fronts have lost much of their

weight and urgency. First, many of the concerns which the Reformed church represented and does represent have since been adopted, considered and in their way realized by other churches. Second, it has been shown that polemical debates can easily lead to a narrowing of a church's own position; aspects of teaching affirmed by Holy Scripture which seem to agree with an opposing confessional position are for that reason ignored. Thus, the Reformed churches are today confronted with the positive task of developing their understanding of the church and its offices in light of Scripture and the challenges of today.

C. THE BASIS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Calvin and the Reformed tradition he inspired held the conviction that God had given the church a definite order. It corresponded to God's will that in the church the special ministries of the pastors, teachers, elders and deacons had to and did exist. That order was clearly witnessed to by Scripture. The church would commit an act of disobedience if it were to erect another order in the place of the original one. The error of the papal church was shown by the arbitrary abolition and alteration of the ministries ordained by God.

Quiconque donc veut abolir un tel ordre et telle espece de regime ou bien le meprise comme s'il n'estoit necessaire, machine de dissiper l'Eglise ou mesme de la ruiner du tout. Car il n'y a ne la clarté de soleil, ne viande, ne breuvage qui soit tant necessaire pour conserver la vie present, qu'est l'office d'Apostres et de Pasteurs pour conserver l'Eglise.¹⁰³

Quant est de la vraye Eglise, nous croyons qu'elle doit estre gouvernée selon la police que notre Seigneur a establee.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰³ Calvin, *Institutio* IV, 3, 1.

¹⁰⁴ *Confession of La Rochelle* 29, *op. cit.* Niesel, p. 73.

The assumption of an order established by God and unambiguously attested to in Scripture has proven untenable. No order, including the Reformed order, can be conclusively derived from the New Testament. Every attempt to mold together the statements of the New Testament into a clear and consistent image free of contradictions, is doomed to failure from the start. The discrepancies and differences which have arisen in the Reformed tradition can for the most part be explained by the fact that when open questions are answered faithfully, on the basis of Scripture, they can still be answered differently.

The following considerations may make this point clearer:

- The Holy Scripture contains no verse which justifies the claim that God or Jesus Christ gave the church a specific order. Individual verses give a list of offices and create the impression of giving normative information on the ordering of the church. The scope of these verses is in actuality quite different: I Corinthians 12 speaks of the cooperation of all in the body of Christ, and Ephesians 4:1ff. is an incitement to "make fast with bonds of peace the unity which the Spirit gives (v. 3)." In this context the author relates that the glorified Christ sends and has always sent servants to his community. His concern is not to describe an order of the church which is valid for all times, but rather to show that the glorified Christ himself builds and raises his church through messengers he has chosen and sent.
- The statements of the New Testament on the special ministries reflect specific moments in the history of the early church. They provide information on which ministries arose at a certain time and place. In most cases the information is given only in passing. Some questions which we would very much like to have clarified are not even addressed. Above all, the statements show that in the developing church there was no uniform order. The writings of the New Testament allow us to look into the process of a

varied development. A uniform order prevailed only in the ancient church after the Apostolic era.

- The period reflected in the writings of the New Testament is the first period of the Christian church. Solutions and answers belonging to this first period cannot simply be carried over to the conditions of later times. The apostles and their immediate circle play a leading role in the New Testament. This leading role is presupposed when the special ministries in the communities are mentioned. But sooner or later the question had to be raised: which order should hold for the church after this first generation has disappeared? It would be unreasonable to derive the order which should hold in today's church from the scattered references found in the New Testament. They represent a time which could not last. The order for the post-Apostolic era could be developed only after the determining role of the apostles had ended.

- The ministry of the elders occurs frequently in the New Testament. The Acts of the Apostles mentions elders repeatedly. The community in Jerusalem was apparently led by a council of elders; they took part with the apostles in the Council of Jerusalem and participated authoritatively in its decisions (Acts 15;16:4;21:17). Paul and Barnabas made certain that the communities which they founded in Asia Minor and Syria established elders (Acts 14:23). Paul calls the elders of Ephesus to Miletus to bid farewell to them (Acts 20:17). From his speech to them we can conclude that they bear responsibility for the community: "Keep watch over yourselves and over all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has given you charge, as shepherds of the church of the Lord" (Acts 20:28). In particular, they have the responsibility to "preserve" the community "from the savage wolves" (Acts 20:29-31). Elders are also mentioned in the pastoral letters (I Tim. 5:17-19; Titus 1:5), and in the Letter of James (5:14). The authentic Pauline letters never speak directly of elders, unless in the Letter to the Philippians (1:1) Paul is

using the term "overseer" (*episkopoi*) to refer to a council of elders. Although we cannot say that the ministry of the elders existed in every part of the church, the frequent references show that it was widespread. As a rule, the direction of the communities in the early church apparently had a collegial character.

- How did the ministry of the elders develop after the time of the apostles? Could the apostles' role be taken over by the elders? Could the government of the church from then on have an exclusively collegial character? Or was the apostles' office to continue in the life of the church in other ways? Certainly the office of the apostle was in many respects unique. They were witnesses of the Resurrection. They proclaimed "how it was in the beginning, what they heard, what they had seen with their own eyes, what they had looked at and touched with their own hands (I John 1:1)." Their testimony was the foundation of the church. This does not mean that the ministry of the apostle could not continue in the life of the church. The initiative for proclamation, mission and direction could not simply cease. Care for the community had to remain alive within the church. It is therefore not surprising that in the post-Apostolic age the office of the bishop developed. This office is characteristic of the period of the early church; we see it in its purest form in Ignatius of Antioch. Here the office of the bishop and the office of the elders are organically bound together.

- The Reformers held the opinion that the elders were to fulfill above all the duty of discipline. They were to work with and alongside the pastor in pastoral care, exercise church discipline and assume responsibility for the direction of the church. The Reformers were convinced that with this outline of the elder's duties they were following the model of the New Testament. Is this truly so? Is there not a considerable difference between the description of the Reformers and the duties of the elders as they are described in the New Testament? The difference is

especially marked in that the elders as referred to in the New Testament bore the *entire* responsibility for the community. They were shepherds with the mission to guide the community (Acts 20:28). They held the responsibility of preaching (I Tim. 5:17). They were to watch over the teaching of the church and participated in important decisions (Acts 15). They had the duty to admonish and console. They were called to pray for the sick (James 5:14). They were recognized by their communities as representative leaders and received financial compensation. In short: the collegium was the leadership of the community. When the Reformers distinguished between the offices of the *pasteurs* and the *anciens*, they also divided the functions of the elders. They fell back on the structure that had developed in the ancient church. The range of responsibilities of the elders had to be reduced, if they were to be de facto subordinated to the ministry of the *pasteurs*. The question then became how the two ministries should relate to each other.

Calvin did not argue solely on the grounds of direct scriptural statements concerning the structure of the offices within the church. In the *Institutio* he chose another, and in the wider view more promising, starting point. He was guided by the question: which duties must be maintained in the church at all times and under all conditions? He came to the conclusion that three responsibilities must never be lost from sight: preaching and the administration of the sacraments, spiritual care and leadership, and the administration and care for the poor. On the basis of these reflections he came to the conclusion that the church must in any case have three offices. Their necessity arises not so much from specific passages as from the whole testimony of the New Testament. It is apparent here that Calvin accorded too little importance to the missionary duty of the church.

From this perspective we can conclude that a certain freedom with the structures of the church is available. As long as the essence of

the church is demonstrated and its central duties are looked after, the offices of the church can in specific Cases be ordered differently.

D. THE OFFICE OF THE ELDERS TODAY

What more can we say concerning the office of the elders today in light of the reflections made so far? What is its meaning for the life and witness of the church? How must it be ordered and structured?

Two things may be said in advance:

- It is impossible to expect a unified order for the offices of the church which would be valid for all situations. Just as historical developments led to different models, so the order of the church today has to differ according to its circumstances. Each church has to face the question as to how and through which structures it wants to give expression to the essence and mission of the church in its own specific situation. Differences are not simply to be evaluated as a lack of agreement. They can also be an expression of obedience.
- The insight that no order can claim to be the only valid order must bring with it the readiness for a dialogue with other denominational traditions. The Reformed Churches have to be open to solutions which support the unity and the common witness of the churches.

But this twofold openness does not mean that the question of the order of the church and of its offices is of minor importance for the Reformed Churches. The discussion of this topic is guided by several convictions which cannot be surrendered. Concrete solutions can be found only by working out these convictions.

1. Christ is the *head of the community*. He is the "seul chef, seul souverain, et universel evesque." Through his Word, Christ makes himself present in the community. Those who occupy an

office within the community do not take his place, but testify to his presence. The mission of the specific ministries in the church is to clear the way for the life-giving Word.

2. Christ calls and builds his community in the power of the Holy Spirit. Each member is called on to testify to his name. The community is a priesthood in which each person - female or male - counts. The specific ministries have to be shaped in such a way that the *priesthood of all believers* unfolds. The ministries and the community are bound to each other. For the sake of the Word, the community submits to the ministries. But the ministries are answerable to the community. Christ is present in the community as a whole.
3. Certain basic tasks have to be fulfilled in order to develop the life and witness of the community. The proclamation of the Word and the administration of the sacraments are first in this context; then follow pastoral care and the governance of the church; and finally the tasks of welfare and administration. *Special persons have to be appointed to fulfill* these tasks to ensure that the community remains true to its mission and does not lose itself in peripheral concerns.

The "classical" Reformed order calls for the offices of pastors and teachers as well as deacons and elders. But it is not imperative that exactly these offices exist within the church. It *is* imperative, however, that the basic tasks be fulfilled.

These offices are in no way to be understood as exclusive. According to different circumstances, further offices can be created - or the tasks of an existing office can be expanded.

4. How do the offices of the *pastor* and of the elders relate to each other? Each of the offices has to be seen in its own role. The pastors are responsible for the proclamation of the apostolic message. They perform the sacrament of baptism and preside in

the celebration of the Eucharist. They seek to insure that the community lives in unity and bears witness. They are, through their personal life and testimony, as the convergence texts of the World Council of Churches state it (§ 8), the focus of the unity within the diverse gifts of the community. But they do not exercise these tasks alone; they share them with the elders. The council of the elders is necessary in order to make the cooperative character of all ordained services visible. Even though the apostles had to fulfill a special role, they could also be called "co-elders" (I Peter 5:1). A good expression of the relationship between pastors and elders can be found in the *Second Book of Discipline* of the Church of Scotland (1582): "As the pastors and doctors should be diligent in teaching and sowing the seed of the Word, so the elders should be careful in seeking the fruit of the same in the people."¹⁰⁵ The relationship between pastors and elders can be characterized neither by the word equality nor by the word subordination. If the emphasis lies too heavily on equality, the unique character of each ministry is underrated. To put the office of the pastors before or even to place it above the office of the elders leads to the danger that the office of the elder might become secondary or even dispensable. Pastors and elders are rather in a relationship of being assigned to one another. In the differences between their duties they are linked to each other in a cooperative community.

5. And how is *the relationship between elders and deacons* to be viewed? The two ministries have to be distinguished from one another. Calvin made their tasks clear: the elders are responsible for pastoral care, discipline and guidance; the deacons are responsible for welfare and administration. This distinction has not been so clear-cut in all Reformed Churches. In many churches the elders do not primarily carry out the original duties of the office, but have developed into a body that advises the pastors in their task. They thus assume several

¹⁰⁵ James Kirk, ed., The Second Book of Discipline, Edinburgh 1980, p. 193.

tasks of administration which could or even should be fulfilled by the deacons. It is therefore no surprise that in many churches the specific ministry of the deacon has *de facto* disappeared. The ministries of the elders and the deacons have become one.

The office of the elders can only be restored to its original intention if at the same time the special ministry of the deacons is renewed. The elders can only become aware of their actual responsibilities if the tasks of administration and welfare can be fulfilled by others. They then have to confront again the question of building up the community through mission and pastoral care.

To be sure, the boundaries between the two services are fluid. Pastoral care and the diaconate cannot be sharply separated from each other. But it is important for the sake of the clarity of Christ's mandate that the diaconal presence is preserved as a special ministry.

6. *The relationship of the elders to the community* is to be viewed under two aspects. The body of the elders represents the insights, interests and concerns of different groups and integrates them into the community's decision-making. The elders are closer to the experiences of community members than the pastors, since the elders do not usually exercise their office full-time, but also have a secular profession. The voice of the community can be heard in the body of the elders. But at the same time, the elders are also distinct from the community. They exercise an office. They are more than just a body which gives advice to the pastors. They are called upon to care for the community spiritually, and guide it in its missionary task, together with the pastors.
7. The government of the community forms a *collegium*. The pastors have a specific task to fulfill. In fulfilling the mandate of preaching and administering the sacraments they hold a special position within the collegium of elders. Although, through their

function, they provide in a special way the focus of the unity of the congregation, they are at the same time part of the collegium of elders which guides the community. Christ is not represented by individuals; instead he is witnessed to by the cooperation of the collegium. According to the Reformed interpretation, cooperation belongs to the essence of the church by the evidence of the New Testament. Whenever persons with leadership functions are mentioned, they appear not as individuals, but as a group. Cooperation is a basic structure of the *communio*.

Why is government through a collegium so important? The following points have to be considered in this context:

- The collegium can reflect something of the variety of the gifts of the Holy Spirit.
- The collegium provides access to a wide spectrum of people and can thus protect the leadership of the community from a possible narrowing of its horizons.
- The collegium makes possible the representation of several groups, classes and interests in the government of the community. It can thus have an integrating effect in ethnic and social conflicts and tensions.
- The collegium limits the power of the individual. "Car le Saint Esprit a voulu obvier que quand il est question du gouvernement de l'Eglise, nul n'imaginast principauté ou domination." (John Calvin, *Institutio* 4.4.4)
- The collegium compels individuals to understand government as dialogue.
- The collegium gives an opportunity for common study of Scripture and for common prayer. Governance takes place

according to the promise: "If two of you on earth agree on any request you have to make, that request will be granted by my heavenly Father. For where two or three have met together in my name, I am there among them" (Mt. 18:19-20).

All these grounds make the cooperative ministry of the elders more than merely a desirable structure for the Reformed Churches. It is and remains essential for the church.

8. All offices - not only the pastors, but also the elders and the deacons - have a function within the *worship of the community*. The vocation which is the basis for the individual offices must be expressed in worship as well. The fact that the church is governed cooperatively can be made evident and apparent through the participation of elders at the worship service. Certain parts of the service such as announcements, intercession, etc. can be performed by them regularly. In particular, they have a fixed place in the distribution of the Eucharist.
9. *Should elders be ordained?* The answer depends on the understanding of ordination that is implied in the question. The answer has to be negative if the question implies that elders occupy an ordained office in the same way that the pastors do. Just as the ministries of pastors and elders are distinct, so also their ordinations have to be distinguished. A difference also exists in the fact that pastors are elected and ordained for the church as a whole, while the elders are elected and inducted into their ministry for and by the congregation. But these differences must not be overemphasized. The office of the elders is not simply a non-ordained office. The elders are also introduced into their office through prayers in front of the assembled community. If ordination is understood as a blessing by which a vocation to a special ministry is confirmed in front of the community, then elders are also ordained.

When elders are introduced into their ministry, the community asks that they may be granted the gifts necessary for their special mission. It places them before God, trusting that he will bless them in their task as members of the presbytery. The community also declares itself ready to acknowledge and support them in the work of their ministry.

Is this ordination valid for the elder's whole life? In a sense, yes. Elders will usually only exercise their task for a certain amount of time. But the fact that the community has given them its blessing will also determine their future life. The entrance into the service of the elders is an act which cannot be undone, and even when they no longer exercise their ministry, their life remains shaped by the ministry. In this sense, they remain elders from the time of their "ordination" on.

10. The service of the elders can be exercised in the same way by *men and women*. The exclusion of women from the ministries of the church contradicts the essence of the church as the body of Christ. The collegium of the elders can only reflect the variety of the gifts of the Spirit if men and women are represented in suitable proportions.
11. If the office of the elders is of such consequence, then offering an adequate *education* to those who accept the ministry should be a matter of course. This is not the case in all Reformed Churches. Pastors are educated for several years before they are ordained. In some churches, deacons also receive an education over several years. With the elders, however, a natural aptitude is assumed. They are expected to carry out their functions with the knowledge that they bring with them.

This practice can be defended as long as the role of elders is primarily seen as representing the interests of the community. But elders have a higher vocation: they exercise a ministry in the community, and if they are to fulfill this role they will be in

need of a certain education. The tasks of pastoral and spiritual care make demands in no way less than those of the ministry of the deacons.

12. The Reformed tradition has stressed at all times that the guidance of the church is to be observed on the local and the national level through *synods*. Just as in the individual communities, the government on the national level has a collegial character. Synods are composed of delegates from the congregations. The elders have always had a fixed place in the synods of the church. As a rule, congregations should not be represented by one individual delegate only; in particular, the representation should not be left solely to the pastors. The representation of the community in the synods should reflect the collegial character of all leadership in the church.

Executive bodies have always been necessary on the local and on the national level. They have gained more importance today. The constant presence and witness of the church on the local, national, and even on the worldwide level has become necessary in light of the increasingly complex structures of society. Only executive bodies can provide this presence. According to the Reformed understanding, these committees must have a collegial character, although, inevitably, the leadership of individuals acquires particular importance at this level. The service of presidents and bishops who guide the collegium is of great importance. A collegium runs the risk of becoming distant and anonymous; presidents or bishops help to personalize it. They give it a recognizable face. At the same time they can exercise an important spiritual role both inside and outside the church. But it is important that they remain members of the collegium. They have to direct their influence so that the collegium becomes visible as the maker of decisions. The nature of the church as body and as *communio* has to be expressed on this level with especial clarity.

APPENDIX:

A Critical Examination of the Texts of the World Council of Churches on "Baptism, the Eucharist and the Ministry"

1. Elders

The office of the elders is scarcely mentioned in the convergence texts of the World Council of Churches. A historical statement recalls that according to early documents "the bishop was surrounded by a collegium of presbyters and deacons (§ 20)." But as soon as the text turns to the structure of offices recommended for the church today, this collegium is no longer discussed. The text represents rather the opinion that the separated churches should adopt the threefold structure of bishop, presbyter and deacon.

This omission in the convergence texts is the more startling, because the reflections of the former chapter could or should have led to a different conclusion.

Let us recall the sequence of arguments in the convergence texts. The text on the ministry begins with a chapter on the "vocation of all the people of God." It shows the church as a community called on to announce the Kingdom of God and to represent it before it comes. The church is characterized as endowed with a variety of gifts, all of which serve to build the church and its ministries in the world. The chapter concludes with the question of how the life of the church is to be understood and organized in order to preach the Gospel and to build the community of love. The text then inquires about the meaning and the position of the ordained office in the church (Chapter 2). Ministries are necessary for the church. In order to fulfill its mission it needs persons who are permanently and publicly responsible for reminding it of its dependence on Christ and in

whom the unity of the church within its various gifts thus comes to a focus. The service of these persons is constitutive for the life and witness of the church.

After this foundation is laid, the text proceeds to the question of the forms of ministry (Chapter 3). It shows that the threefold ministry of bishop, presbyter and deacon developed as the structure of the ordained office in the whole church in the second and third centuries (§ 19). A little later (§ 22) it suggests that the separated churches adopt this structure as an expression of the unity that they seek and also as a device to reach it. The affirmation immediately follows that this threefold ministry stands in need of reform in all churches (§ 24). In some churches the collegial dimension of the governance in the Eucharistic community has been obscured; in other churches the function of the deacons has been reduced to the role of an assistant in the celebration of the liturgy. These hints can hardly be understood as anything other than an attempt to restore the collegial character of the ordained office in the local community. Our impression is strengthened by the following paragraph. It contains the thesis that the ordained office has to be exercised in a personal, collegial and communal way (§ 26). In reference to the key word "collegial" it states: "A collegium of ordained office holders who share the task of representing the concerns of the community is necessary." The following passage confirms the expectation that collegiality is here sought: "On the level of the local Eucharistic community, an ordained ministry holder who functions in a collegial body is necessary (§ 27)."

But an unexpected development of this statement takes the reader by surprise in the following passages. The functions of the three ministries of bishop, presbyter and deacon are now suddenly described as if the necessity of a collegium of ordained ministers had never been mentioned. The bishops, the text now reads, preach the Word, preside over the Eucharist and exercise ecclesiastical discipline; they have pastoral supervision over the

district into which they are called (§ 29). The presbyters serve as pastoral ministers of the Word and of the sacraments (typically, ecclesiastical discipline is no longer mentioned) in the local Eucharistic communities (§ 30). The bishop is thus represented as the leader of the diocese, whereas the presbyter-priest presides over the local community under the supervision of the bishop. A collegium of presbyters is simply no longer mentioned.

What has happened here? How is it possible that after all that has been said before, the collegial character of the ministries is not maintained? § 20 and § 26 provide an explanation. The first of these passages recalls that the earliest documents which mention the threefold ministry refer to the local Eucharistic community. But this reference apparently only serves as a historical statement. The following statement, i.e. that the functions were soon changed, carries more weight with the authors. The bishops took on the supervision of several local communities, the presbyters became the leaders of the local Eucharistic communities and the deacons, as episcopal assistants, received a wider scope of duties. The convergence texts assume that this later form of the threefold ministry has to be the example for all churches today. The Commission for Faith and Order thus overlooks the fact that this shift of the functions fundamentally changed the character of the threefold ministry. Whereas the presbyters in the original form were still a collegium, they now became individual presbyter-priests. The collegial character of the threefold ministry and of the ministry in general was thus not only limited, but *de facto* abolished.

The Reformed Churches cannot follow the texts of the World Council of the Churches on this point. They are convinced that the office of the elders is in its very essence a collegial ministry. Presbyters who do not exercise their service as members of a council are in reality no longer presbyters. They have assumed the role of the bishop and for clarity's sake should be called bishops.

The Reformed Churches are of the opinion that in their order they have maintained the threefold ministry in its original intention and form. The later version of the threefold ministry as it is found in the majority of the churches today is in reality a degeneration. The ministry of an individual person replaces the ministry of the collegium. This shift lays the ground for a version of the ministry which lacks the collegial character.

In its first chapter, the text of the World Council of Churches on the ministry in the church awakens the hope that the original form of the threefold ministry will be restored. It talks about the necessity of "a collegium of ordained ministers who share in the common task of representing the concerns of the community" (§ 25). But when it comes to the point, this idea is dismissed and the text falls back on the well-known structure of the later ancient church with all its contradictions. It is now only admitted that the presbyter-priest has to be surrounded by a committee in the local community (§ 27); this committee is not an ordained ministry, but a precaution on the constitutional level or on the level of canon law.

The marked concentration on the bishop and on the presbyter who *de facto* developed into a bishop becomes clearer in the chapter on ordination. The collegial dimension of the ministry in the church is not mentioned in the context of the ordination. Even though it is explicitly stated that the "ordination can have different orientations with regard to the tasks of the bishop, presbyter or deacon" (§ 39), the following reflections about the ordination are directed mainly towards the ordination of the presbyter-priest, who is the minister in relation to the local Christian community. The question of what it could mean for an elder to become a member of a collegium through his or her ordination is not even addressed.

The text of the World Council of Churches is thus unsatisfactory in this respect. Even if the Reformed Churches can adopt most

of the suggested convergences, they must protest with regard to the ministry of the elder.

2. The Ministry of Teachers and Theologians

The convergence texts of the World Council of Churches show another startling omission: nowhere do they mention the ministry of the teacher or theologian. The section on the "variety of gifts of the Spirit" in the church (§ 32) lists various ministries which contribute to the life and witness of the church but passes over the ministry of the theologian in silence. The Reformed churches must consider this a serious deficiency.

Calvin held the opinion, as we have seen, that four offices are necessary for the life of the church. Alongside the *pasteurs*, the shepherds, stand the *docteurs*, the teachers. Even if the evidence in the New Testament which Calvin offered for this ministry is by today's exegetical standards no longer conclusive, his suggestion remains relevant. The church does indeed need people whose principle duty is to reflect on the message of Scripture and train a new generation who will find access to Scripture. The teachers must be free. They must dedicate themselves entirely to Scripture. They must not lose themselves in a variety of activities, but must be able to devote themselves impartially to the sources of the faith. The church needs this independent witness in order to continue in the purity of doctrine.

Calvin understood the ministry of the teacher as an ordained ministry, and this viewpoint was also maintained later in the Reformed tradition. The theologians perform a critical function, but they do not stand outside the church. The freedom of theology as well as the connection to the community of the church are expressed in the ordination.

Calvin's proposal was not actually put into practice. The ministry of the theologian is understood in the Reformed churches today as a non-ordained ministry. Already at the beginning of the seventeenth century, the Reformed theologian Wilhelm Bucan raised the following question: can those who have reached the degree of doctor in academic schools properly be called teachers of the church (*anne qui quem vocant gradum doctoratus in academiis adepti sunt, iure doctores ecclesiae dici debent*)? He gave the answer: No, because the right of selection belongs to the whole church and he who does not enter through this door is, as Jesus says, a thief and robber. This right of selection is not transferred from the church to the professors or academic schools (*Non, quia ius electionis quod est totius ecclesiae et quo aditu quisquis in ecclesiam non ingreditur est fur et latro, inquit Christus, non est ab ecclesia academarum magistro collatum*).¹⁰⁶ Bucan's criticism, however, did not effect a change in the understanding of the office: the doctor of theology in the Reformed churches today is not a church ministry, but rather an academic title.

The present arrangement, however, does not remove the question. If we seek an understanding of the ordained ministries of the church, the role of the theologian must be clarified. Even if the Reformed churches will not insist that teachers be considered an ordained office, they would nonetheless stress strongly that the theologians have a special task to fulfill in the church. Through their intellectual and educational activity they must work to break away from worn-out perspectives and help to insure that the Gospel can be heard in the churches. These responsibilities cannot be carried out by the pastors, or by the elders and deacons. Special persons must be appointed to them.

The convergence texts would have had more than usual cause to discuss the ministry of the theologian today where the role of

¹⁰⁶ Heinrich Heppe, Die Dogmatik der evangelisch-reformierten Kirchen, Neukirchen 1935, p. 547.

theology in the contemporary church is no longer clearly answered. How should the function of the theologian be understood? What authority in the church do theologians hold? How much independence must they enjoy? Through whom and in what way can they be called to responsibility? These questions are disputed in the churches.

Reference to the role of the theologian would also be useful in the work of the Commission on Faith and Order. Isn't the commission based on the independence which the church grants to its theologians? It consists principally of theologians commissioned by the separate churches to find a common path to unity. They should stand before this task in critical debate with their tradition and at the same time in loyalty to their churches. The commission will only be able to make an effective contribution to the ecumenical movement if the theologians take seriously the task assigned to them, and if the churches open themselves to the voices of the theologians. The *doctores ecclesiae* hold a special meaning for the ecumenical movement.

B

ELDERSHIP

IN BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE

THE BIBLICAL WITNESS

Marsha M. Wilfong

What does the Bible say about the office of elder? To what extent is there a Scriptural basis for the role and function of elders in our churches today? Since our concern is with elders as leaders within the Christian community, it is tempting to turn immediately to the New Testament. There we find glimpses, at least, of the role and function of elders within the earliest Christian communities. Yet if we ignore the Old Testament witness regarding elders, we may miss some important theological - and perhaps also practical - insights.

ELDERS IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Throughout the Old Testament, elders appear as a constant feature in the life of the people of Israel. However, the place and function of elders vary in relation to the changing social and political realities.

Moses and the Elders

We first hear of elders in connection with Moses. They appear collectively as representatives of the whole people of Israel. Through them Moses relays God's words to the people (Ex. 3:13-22; 4:27-31; 12:21-28; 19:1-8). When Moses carries out God's instructions, they accompany him (Ex. 3:13-22; 17:1-7; 24:1-18; Num. 16:1-35).

The basic assumption is that these elders were the acknowledged leaders of their various tribes - chosen in some way by the group they represented (see Dt. 1:13). The leadership of elders was not unique to the people of Israel, but was common practice throughout

the ancient world.¹ Some of the elders of Israel, however, acquired a particular role *vis-à-vis* Moses. Numbers 11 speaks of Moses appointing seventy of the elders to help him bear the burden of responsibility for the people. Moses did so at the instruction of God. When the seventy elders were gathered around the tent of meeting, God "came down in a cloud..., and took some of the spirit that was upon [Moses] and put it upon the seventy elders..." (Num. 11:25). This is as close as the Old Testament comes to an "ordination" of elders.² Here, these seventy elders are set apart from the people (and indeed, from the rest of the elders!) for a particular task - bearing the burden of the people - and are empowered for that task through receipt of a share of the spirit which rested upon Moses.

In Numbers 11, it appears that the "burden" which must be borne is the dealing with the people's complaints and responding to their (physical) needs. A similar, though not strictly parallel, passage in Exodus 18:13-27 (cf. Dt. 1:13) is more specific about the task and organization of those appointed by Moses to share the burden of the people. In Exodus 18, the term "elder" does not appear, but, at Jethro's suggestion, Moses chooses able men from among the people and sets them over groups of people to act as judges in matters of dispute. The small matters they decide themselves; the hard cases they still bring to Moses.

In both texts (Num. 11 and Ex. 18), the group appointed by Moses gains authority over the people through that appointment, and takes on responsibilities (administrative and judicial) previously carried out by Moses himself. They remain, however, under Moses' authority and supervision.

¹ Note biblical references to elders of other nations: Gen. 50:7; Num. 22:4, 7; Jdg. 8:14, 16; Ps. 105:22.

² In this paper, the term "ordination" refers to the setting apart, commissioning, and empowering of people for a particular task of leadership. Although the term itself does not appear in Scripture, and its use and practice varies in contemporary churches, nevertheless, "ordination" provides a convenient shorthand for this cluster of actions.

When the leadership of the people of Israel is transferred from Moses to Joshua, the elders of Israel continue to function in a similar way - as representatives of the whole people, to whom and through whom Joshua communicates and leads the people.

Elders in the Land

Once Israel settles in the land, however, the situation changes. Now elders appear with local responsibilities to decide legal matters (Dt. 19:1-13; 21:1-9, 18-21; 22:13-21; 25:5-10; Josh. 20:1-6; Ruth 4:1-12). The instructions in Deuteronomy do not relate these "elders of the cities" to any higher or wider authority. Perhaps the assumption is that they remain the subordinate bearers of Moses' authority, through their administration of the Law.

Elders and Kings

With the rise of the monarchy, the "elders of Israel" (or "Judah") again appear prominent. Although local elders also continue to exist (I Sam. 11:1-15; 16:1-13; I Kings 21:1-14; II Kings 10:1-11), the elders of Israel/Judah collectively make military and political decisions and negotiations on behalf of the people. It is the elders of Israel who come to Samuel to request a king (I Sam. 8:1-22). David's rule as king is dependent on the support of the elders of Judah and of Israel (I Sam. 30:26-31; II Sam. 19:11-15; II Sam. 3:12-21; 5:1-5; 17:1-4). The later kings of Israel and Judah continue to seek the advice of the elders (I Kings 12:1-20; 20:1-12; II Kings 19:1-7).

Thus the relationship of the king to the "elders of Israel/Judah" is different from that of Moses/Joshua to their elders. The elders are not under the authority of the king. (If anything, the king rules at their pleasure!)³ They are, rather, political and military advisors to the king, keeping him in touch with the mood/will of the whole people

³ In the two texts in which elders carry out royal instructions, I Kings 21:1-14 and II Kings 10:1-11, the elders in question are local.

(cf. I Kings 12:1-15;20:1-12); and, in a sense, sharing with the King responsibility for the people before God (see I Kings 8:1-11; II Kings 23:1-3).

Elders and Prophets - The Exile

That the elders share responsibility for the faithfulness of the people is evident from the prophetic judgment leveled against them. The elders are condemned, along with other types of leaders (princes, prophets, priests), for leading the people astray (Is. 3:13-15; 9:8-17; Ezek. 7:23b-27; 8:7-13; 9:1-11). However, even in exile, the elders continued to bear some kind of leadership role for the exilic community. Jeremiah addressed his letter to the exiles to "the elders of the exiles, and to the priests, the prophets, and all the people..." (Jer. 29:1). On the other hand, when the elders in exile sought advice from Ezekiel, he refused to speak to them, except to announce God's judgment against them (Ezek. 8:1-4;14:1-11;20:1-44).

Nevertheless, God's judgment against the elders is not the final prophetic word. Isaiah 24 envisions an ultimate, universal judgment which culminates in the restoration of God's rule "on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem" (Is. 24:23b). There and then, God's glory will be manifest before the elders (Is. 24:23c) - a fulfilling and restoring echo of the seventy elders' encounter with God at Mount Sinai (Ex. 24:9-11).

Elders in the Restoration Period

After the return from exile, some semblance of the old system of elders was restored. According to Ezra 10:1-15, there were "officials (*sarim*) and elders" who had the authority to call an assembly of all the people, and "elders and judges" in every city who were responsible for seeing that the decisions of the assembly were carried out by the people. In Nehemiah, the term "elder" (*zaken*) does not appear, giving way instead to the term "noble" (*hor*). The

functions described as being undertaken by the nobles are, however, similar to those previously carried out by the elders.

Women as Leaders in Israel

Whenever the elders of Israel are mentioned in the Old Testament, the implication is that they were men. That was consonant with the mores of Israelite society. There are, however, a few examples of women providing leadership and guidance for the people of Israel. In particular, three women are described as "prophetesses:" Miriam (Ex. 15:20), Huldah (II Kings 22:14-20), and Deborah (Jdg. 4:4). The designation "prophetess" would suggest that these women were chosen by God for their particular tasks, and were not necessarily among the already accepted leadership of the people. (Few male prophets were the obvious choices for leadership either!) Yet the prophetic leadership of these three women, in as much as they had been called by God, was, at least to some degree, acknowledged by the people.

We find in the case of Deborah that she functioned as a judge, to whom the people of Israel came to have their cases heard (Jdg. 4:4-5). She also functioned as military strategist and advisor, directing the campaign against the Canaanites through Barak, the commander whom she appointed. Both functions, judicial and military, are elsewhere in the Old Testament the responsibility of elders (see, e.g., Dt. 21:18-21; 22:13-21; 25:5-10; Josh. 20:1-6; Jdg. 10:17-11:11; I Sam. 4:1b-22; I Kings 12:1-15; 20:1-12; II Kings 19:1-7).

Deborah's leadership may not have been as unique as it appears to us in Scripture. There may well have been other women whose stories are not recorded, but who nevertheless functioned as leaders of the people of Israel. Yet even if women like Deborah, Miriam, and Huldah were exceptions to the male rule, the theological affirmation of their stories is important: whatever the traditional, obvious choices for leadership may be among the people

of God, God is free to call and empower whomever God chooses to provide the leadership needed by God's people.

Summary

In the Old Testament, the elders are recognized leaders of the people, chosen in some way from amid their ranks. However they were chosen, it was important that the people themselves respected the elders and accepted their leadership. Even when Moses appointed and set apart a group of elders, he made his choice from among the already acknowledged leaders of the people.

The responsibilities of the elders, though they vary with time and circumstances, remain within the sphere of bearing the Mosaic burden of responsibility for the people. They administer justice in matters of dispute and conflict among the people. They have disciplinary oversight in relation to the people's faithfulness to God's law. They represent the people in dealings with other leaders - whether Moses and Joshua, priest or prophet, king or foreign governor. They also convey the instructions of such leaders to the people. They are not, however, passive conduits of information or instruction. They possess advisory authority even in relation to kings; and God holds them responsible for the faithful behavior of the whole people.

Both during the wilderness period and after settlement in the land, there are elders whose responsibilities are limited to a certain group of the people - specified by numbers (see Ex. 18) or by locale ("elders of the city"). At the same time, there are always elders who, collectively, represent and have responsibility for the whole people. What the relationship is between these two groups is not clear - only that elders function both at the local level and in relation to the whole people, or nation, of Israel.

At both the local and the "national" level, the elders are distinct from certain other leaders and officials: priests, kings, prophets. From

time to time, however, they appear to share responsibilities with other groups: judges, princes, heads of families, nobles. To some extent these terms overlap, or are even synonymous with, the term "elder."

One final point. To the extent that Israel was both a religious and a political/national entity, the elders functioned in both spheres. In the cities of the land, they had civil and religious responsibilities. In the nation, they were advisors to the king. Nevertheless, theirs was not a secular office. Their basic "vocation", their fundamental responsibility, was leadership of the people of *God*. The "ordination" story of Numbers 11 and the judgment of the prophets, as well as the eschatological vision in Isaiah 24, make that abundantly clear.

ELDERS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

In the New Testament, references to elders - both Jewish and Christian - are sparse, and do not offer a complete or well-rounded picture of their role and function. Particularly in regard to Christian elders, we find only glimpses, presented by various authors, at different times and places, and for different reasons. Within the New Testament period, the organization of the young church (and churches) was still "in process" - a process which was not planned out in advance, but which evolved and changed in response to the rapidly changing circumstances of the church itself. The New Testament ends long before any settling of church offices and organization occurred.

Jewish Elders

In the Gospels and in Acts, the Jewish elders are mentioned in connection with the chief priests and scribes as comprising the Sanhedrin, the authoritative Jewish Council in Jerusalem. The elders are usually listed last in this grouping - an indication that their leadership role had diminished greatly, perhaps due to the nation's

loss of political autonomy. Since the function of the Sanhedrin was now limited primarily to the religious sphere, the priests and the theologically-trained scribes played a greater role than the lay elders.⁴

There is one mention in the Gospels of Jewish elders outside of Jerusalem. According to Luke 7:3, the centurion in Capernaum sent "elders of the Jews" to Jesus, with the request that Jesus heal his slave. Perhaps outside of Jerusalem and apart from the Temple, elders still retained local authority and responsibility within the community.

Christian Elders in Jerusalem

According to Acts, Christian elders first appeared in Jerusalem. There is no record of how they were chosen or what their qualifications were. They first appear as those who receive the offering sent from the Christians in Antioch to the Judean Christians for famine relief (Acts 11:29-30). They appear again in Acts 15, where, along with the apostles, they hear the case of Paul and Barnabas concerning the circumcision of Gentile Christians. Finally, along with James, they receive the report of Paul's missionary activity among the Gentiles (Acts 21:17-26).

These texts indicate that the council of elders in Jerusalem had administrative (and pastoral) oversight of the Christians in all of Judea, and also had supervisory authority over Paul and the Gentile churches of the diaspora. In particular, they functioned as a court of law-making decisions apparently binding regarding the interpretation of Mosaic legal requirements in light of the Christian expansion of the people of God to include non-Jews.

⁴ The one passage in which elders are listed first is worth noting: Mt. 16:21 (Mk. 8:31; Lk. 9:22), Jesus' prediction of his passion to the disciples. It seems that, while the chief priests and scribes took the lead in opposing Jesus, the elders must bear the larger burden of responsibility for his death. (Cf. Ezekiel, where God's judgment against Israel begins with the elders.)

According to Acts 15, the elders did not make such decisions alone, but in concert with the apostles themselves. There is no indication in the text of a hierarchical relationship (except that the apostles are mentioned first). The decision was apparently made jointly and collegially (see v. 22).

However, it was James who pronounced the judgment to which the apostles and elders, "with the whole church" (v. 22) agreed (15:19-21). It was James also to whom Paul made the report of his missionary activity in Acts 21:17-26 - "and all the elders were present" (21:18). But who was this James? And what was his role vis-à-vis the apostles and elders? In Galatians 1:19, Paul refers to him as "the Lord's brother," and appears to include him among the apostles. But for Luke, the term "apostles" refers only to the Twelve, among whom James the Lord's brother is not to be numbered. Was his role in the Jerusalem Council perhaps that of "moderator" or spokesman for the Jerusalem elders? If so, did he acquire that role through election or appointment, because of his gifts of discernment and persuasiveness, or because of his unique relationship to Jesus? Unfortunately the New Testament does not provide answers to these questions.

Pauline Churches in Acts

According to Acts 14:21-23, Paul and Barnabas appointed elders in every church which they established. The service of prayer and fasting held in connection with those appointments appears similar to the commissioning of Paul and Barnabas in Antioch (Acts 13:3) - although the laying on of hands is not mentioned in 14:21-23.

In addition to this report, Acts also records a "farewell address" of Paul to the elders from Ephesus (Acts 20:17-38). In that address Paul charges the elders to be diligent in their responsibilities to support, care for, and protect the "flock," the church of God. In particular, he warns against the dangers of false teaching and of financial greed - calling the elders to self-discipline as well as vigilant

concern for those in their charge. Paul refers to the elders as "overseers" (*episkopoi*), appointed to that task by the Holy Spirit (v. 28). Furthermore, he presents himself as a model for their ministry, charging them - in effect - to follow his example. Thus, what is described here is a charismatic office of oversight (that is, one created/endowed/commissioned by the Holy Spirit), under the authority of (the apostle) Paul, but also succeeding to responsibilities once borne by him.

Church Leadership in the Letters of Paul

When we turn to Paul's own letters, however, we find not a single mention of elders. In Philippians 1:1 Paul does single out "bishops and deacons" (*episkopoi, diakonoi*) in his greeting to the Philippian Christians; and in Romans 16:1 he refers to Phoebe as a "deaconess" (*diakonos*) in the church at Kenchreae. But are these terms understood by Paul as titles of church offices?

Elsewhere in Paul's letters, he consistently speaks of the leadership of churches in terms of the Holy Spirit and its gifts (see Rom. 12:6-8; I Cor. 12:28). It is the theological organization of the church which is of interest to Paul, not titles of office and job descriptions. The Holy Spirit creates the church, calls people into it, and endows them with various gifts for its upbuilding. In Romans 12:6-8; I Corinthians 12:28; and I Thessalonians 5:12-13, Paul describes church "leaders" in terms of the gifts they have received and the work which they do. One might conclude, therefore, that Paul also uses the terms "bishop" and "deacon" not as titles of office-holders, but as descriptions of functions within the church - i.e., "overseer" and "server."

Church Leadership in the Pastorals

By the time of the Pastorals, the situation has changed. There, elders, bishops, and deacons appear as holders of offices in the church for which they must meet certain personal qualifications.

I Timothy 3:1-7 - The Office of Bishop. Both here and in Titus 1:7, the bishop is referred to in the singular. He (so the text says) must be "above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, sensible, dignified, hospitable, an apt teacher, no drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, and no lover of money" (I Tim. 3:2-3). From these personal and moral qualifications, one can infer that a bishop, in order to fulfill his task, must have people's respect (both within the church and without), must be a good, responsible manager (both of people and of finances), and must know the faith and be able to communicate it, through his teaching, to others.

I Timothy 3:8-13 - Deacons (male and female?). Like the bishop, deacons also needed to be persons of honesty, integrity, and high moral standard, trusted and respected by others - in order that people might, through their ministry of service, gain confidence in the Christian faith.

Apparently, the assumption of this text is that both men and women worked in serving ministries - for while the text primarily refers to male deacons, in the midst of it appears this sentence: "The women likewise must be serious, no slanderers, but temperate, faithful in all things" (v. 11). It is unlikely that the reference is simply to wives of deacons, since the requirement that a deacon be the "husband of one wife" does not appear until v. 12. Rather, the implication is that women in serving ministries must, like men, possess good character, integrity, and self-control.

I Timothy 5:17-22 - Elders. The discussion of elders in this letter is separate and different from that of the bishop and the deacons. Personal qualifications for office are not at issue. Instead, the discussion turns to material support and discipline of elders. Timothy is instructed that "elders who rule well" (*proistemi* - cf. I Tim. 3:4-5, 12) should receive double honor, "especially those who labor in preaching and teaching" (v. 17). The scriptural quotations in v. 18 refer to physical or financial support of laborers.

Verses 19-20, on the other hand, give instructions regarding the discipline of elders charged with sinful behavior. The charges must be corroborated by the evidence of two or three witnesses; and if proved true, and the sin persists, they should be rebuked in the presence of the whole congregation (cf. I Cor. 5; Mt. 18:15-17; Dt. 19:15).

The passage concludes (vv. 21-22) with an exhortation to Timothy to follow these guidelines without partiality, and to keep himself pure by being - so to speak - slow to "ordain" (i.e., lay on hands), and quick to discipline. Only here, in relation to elders, is the laying on of hands mentioned. It did not enter into the discussion of the bishop or deacons at all.

I Timothy 4:11-16 - The "ordination" of Timothy by the council of elders. There is, however, another reference in this letter to the laying on of hands. I Tim. 4:14 indicates that Timothy was "ordained" by the laying on of hands of the "council of elders" (*presbuterion*) - at which time he received his "gift" (*charisma*) for ministry. This "gift" apparently enabled Timothy to serve as preacher and teacher (vv. 13, 16). What is of significance for our discussion is that the "council of elders" (along with Paul, according to II Tim. 1:6) participated in this "ordination," which both empowered and commissioned Timothy for his task of ministry - a ministry which, according to I Timothy 5:22, included the responsibility of his "ordaining" others. (Cf. Acts 13:1-3; 14:21-23, regarding Paul and Barnabas.)

Titus 1:5-9 - Elders and a Bishop. Titus is also charged with the responsibility of appointing elders - "in every town as I directed you" (v. 5). Those appointed must possess unquestioned integrity and good judgment, as evidenced (again!) in their marriage and family life, and in their reputation in the community (v. 6).

At this point (v. 7), the discussion appears to shift to the qualifications of a "bishop" (*episkopos*, again, in the singular). However, the description in verses 7-9 is more nearly a "job

description" of one who serves as "overseer": "As God's steward," he must be able to manage himself and relate well to others (vv. 7-8). As a teacher of God's word, he must possess both integrity and authority (v. 9).

What seems clear is that this text does not contain a description of two separate offices. At most, "bishop" is a functional description of the task for which elders were to be appointed. At least, "bishop" refers to a person within and among the circle of elders who had particular responsibilities of oversight for the whole group.

Elders in I Peter and James

I Peter 5:1-5 - Elders. In this letter, "Peter," as a "fellow elder" (*sumpresbuteros*), exhorts the elders among the Christians in northern Asia Minor regarding their responsibilities. The language and imagery is similar to that of Paul's address to the elders of Ephesus in Acts 20:17-35. Peter charges the elders to "tend the flock of God that is in your charge" (v. 2; cf. Acts 20:28). They are to exercise oversight (*episkopeo*, v. 2; cf. Acts 20:28) willingly, eagerly, and by example - following the example and under the authority of the "chief Shepherd," Jesus Christ (v. 4).

James 5:14-15 - Elders and the sick. This text suggests that one responsibility of the elders of a congregation was to pray over the sick, anointing them with oil. However, the emphasis of the passage is not on the duty of the elders, but on the power of the faithful prayers of the righteous to effect salvation and forgiveness.

Elders in the Book of Revelation

In John's eschatological vision of heaven (Rev. 4-5), God is seated upon a throne, surrounded by twenty-four elders, clad in white garments, wearing golden crowns. Most scholars suggest that these twenty-four elders symbolize the twelve patriarchs of the tribes of Israel and the twelve apostles, and represent, before the throne of

God, the whole company of the redeemed in Israel and in the church. These elders fall down before the throne of God (4:10-11) and before the Lamb (5:8-10, 14) in worship and praise, carrying with them harps and "golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints" (5:8). Like Isaiah 24:23, this vision represents the restoration and fulfilment of the intended relationship between God and the elders of the people, as first experienced at Mount Sinai (Ex. 24:9-11).

Women as Leaders in the Church

The witness of the New Testament regarding women as church leaders is mixed - one might even say, contradictory. The qualifications spelled out in I Timothy and Titus specify that the office of bishop or elder could be held only by a married man (I Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:6). Only with regard to the office of deacon are women mentioned as well (I Tim. 3:11) - possibly the widows "enrolled" for Christian service according to I Tim. 5:9-10.

The situation is different, however, in Paul's letters to the churches. As noted earlier, Paul describes church leaders in terms of the gifts they have received and the work which they do (Rom. 12:6-8; I Cor. 12:28; and I Thess. 5:12-13). When mentioning fellow workers by name in Romans 16, he includes women as well as men, using the same terminology to describe their work.⁵ In I Corinthians 11:2-16, Paul does not question or reject the leadership of women in worship in Corinth, but simply requires that their heads be covered.⁶

⁵ Phoebe, v. 1, is a "deaconess/server" (*diakonos*). Prisca, v. 3, is a "fellow worker" (*sunergos*), as are Aquila, v. 3; Urbanus, v. 9; and Timothy, v. 21. Mary, v. 6, and Persis, v. 12, are described as having "worked hard" (*kopiaio*), a description also used of church leaders in I Thess. 5:12; I Cor. 16:16; and I Tim 5:17.

⁶ Since, in that society, only prostitutes appeared in public without a veil, this was a necessary restriction of Christian freedom. Otherwise, those outside the church might draw the wrong conclusions about the nature of Christian worship.

Perhaps because of his own unlikely calling on the road to Damascus, Paul was insistent upon the prerogative of the Holy Spirit to appoint and empower whomever it wills as leader in the church: Gentile as well as Jew, slave as well as free, female as well as male (cf. Gal. 3:27-28). To reject those whom the Spirit had called would have been, for Paul, unthinkable - no matter what the customs and traditions of his culture dictated.

Summary

What can we conclude from this New Testament evidence? We can assume that, in the earliest years of the Christian Church, there existed a body of elders in Jerusalem who, with the apostles, shared administrative, judicial, and supervisory responsibility for the whole church - even after missionary expansion among the Gentiles began. However, this pattern of leadership did not hold for long. Soon there were elders appointed among the churches of the diaspora whose responsibilities were primarily local. Nevertheless, these groups of local elders were not entirely isolated or autonomous. They were appointed, ordained/commissioned, and supervised by "apostles" like Paul and Barnabas, Peter, James, and their successors (e.g., Timothy and Titus).

Yet the relationship between these two groups was not strictly hierarchical. Rather, there was some degree of mutual accountability and collegiality. Apparently Paul had to answer for his ministry to the Jerusalem Council of apostles and elders. A council of elders participated with Paul in the ordination/commissioning of Timothy. In I Peter, the apostle Peter is referred to as a "fellow elder."

It is no surprise that the judicial responsibilities of the Old Testament elders of Israel recedes for the Christian elders of the New Testament. For one thing, Christian elders never functioned as civil authorities during the New Testament period. For another, the Jewish emphasis on Mosaic Law was transformed by the Gospel - and was not, in any event, a part of the natural religious heritage of

Gentile Christians. Only in the accounts of the Jerusalem Council of apostles and elders is interpretation and oversight in regard to Mosaic Law attested as a prime responsibility of Christian elders.

Instead, Christian elders are more usually characterized as shepherds and overseers - with responsibilities for protection, nurture, teaching, and discipline of the congregation in their charge. While this shepherding and oversight is primarily described as spiritual, it did also include practical matters such as financial administration and judicial responsibilities in the course of discipline and the settling of disputes.

There is a tension within the New Testament as to how elders were chosen. On the one hand, there is the conviction that they were (ultimately) appointed by the Spirit (Acts 20:28). In Paul's view, the spiritual appointment of *all* church leaders and laborers was revealed through the presence of spiritual gifts needed for the upbuilding of the church. On the other hand, on a human plane, elders were appointed by other Christian leaders such as Paul and Barnabas, Timothy and Titus. In the case of Timothy and Titus, the criteria for appointment were not spiritual gifts necessary to perform certain functions within the church, but rather personal and moral qualifications which revealed a fitness to be examples for other Christians and credible representatives of Christ and the church in the non-Christian world around them.

Similar personal and moral qualifications are set forth as requirements for deacons and bishops. The difference in such qualifications for each of these "offices" is negligible. All who provided leadership for the church, who labored in the service of Christ, were expected to bear responsible and faithful witness in their own personal lives.

If personal and moral qualifications for the "offices" of elder, deacon, and bishop are basically the same, is it possible - on the basis of the New Testament evidence - to determine the specific functions or

duties of each of these offices within the church? Only with great difficulty and by inference. Nevertheless, the attempt may well be instructive.

Deacons. In the three texts where "deacons" (*diakono*) are mentioned (Phil. 1:1; Rom. 16:1; and I Tim. 3:8-12), no description of their function or duties is given. We must infer their responsibilities from other texts where the terms *diakonia*, *diakoneo*, and *diakonos* appear.⁷ What we discover is that the function of deacons is inherent in their name. Deacons (*diakono*) render service (*diakoneo/diakonia*). Within the Christian community, that service includes distributing food to the needy, collecting and administering offerings used to meet such needs, ministering to fellow Christians in prison. However, in many texts, the term "ministry/service" (*diakonia*) is simply presented as self-explanatory (e.g., Rom. 12:7 - those whose gift is "service," should "serve"). This ministry of service is attributed to Paul and Timothy, and to Christians in general, as well as to those persons specifically designated as "deacons/servers." The focus of this ministry of service is primarily the welfare of fellow Christians - their physical and material welfare in particular, but also their spiritual welfare.

Bishops. Similarly, the function of a bishop (*episkopos*) is to exercise oversight (*episkopeo*). This task obviously involves some kind of administrative or supervisory responsibilities *over* another group of people. The function of oversight is attributed to elders *as a group* vis-à-vis the congregation in Acts 20:28 and I Peter 5:2. In Titus 1:5-9 (and possibly I Tim. 3:1-7), the task of oversight is apparently attributed to one individual within and in relation to the body of elders. In addition, the initial responsibility for oversight of the church fell on the shoulders of the twelve apostles (see Acts 1:20); and the ultimate oversight of the church remained with Jesus Christ (see I Pet. 2:25).

⁷ See, for example, Acts 1:17, 25; 6:1-6; 12:25; Rom. 12:7; II Cor. 8:19-20; Eph. 3:7; II Tim. 4:5; Philemon 13; I Pet. 4:10-11.

Elders. No such function is inherent in the term "elder" (*presbuteros*). One cannot render or perform "eldership." According to the New Testament evidence, the responsibilities of those persons who were elders included ministry to the needs (both physical and spiritual) of their fellow Christians, and administrative and disciplinary oversight within the Christian community. In the case of some elders, their responsibilities also included the tasks of preaching and teaching. In other words, New Testament elders functioned, in various situations, as bishops, deacons, and even apostles.

In light of the New Testament evidence, many scholars have concluded that, within the New Testament period at least, all bishops were elders, but not all elders functioned as bishops. It may be equally plausible to say that all deacons were elders, but not all elders functioned as deacons - and further, that the apostles themselves were considered to be elders (though not all elders functioned as apostles, either!).⁸

That may not be a very helpful (or comfortable) conclusion for a "Presbyterian" to draw. But it may do the most justice to the Biblical evidence.

But if the New Testament elders *functioned* as bishops, deacons, and even apostles, does the term "elder" merely refer to a status of honor and wisdom within the Christian community, or can we discern some overarching role common to all elders regardless of their particular function or task? One very small clue may be found in the related verb *presbeuo*, which occurs only twice in the New Testament - 2 Corinthians 5:20 and Ephesians 6:20. The verb means "to be an ambassador," and in both texts it refers to Paul as

⁸ Raymond E. Brown, "Episkope and Episkopos: The New Testament Evidence" (in Theological Studies vol. 41 (June 1980), pp. 322-338), has suggested that the so-called "deacons" of Acts 6 were really administrators of the Hellenistic Christian community in Jerusalem in a way that paralleled the administration of the Jewish-Christian community in Jerusalem by James and the Jerusalem elders. The duties of both groups included, but were not limited to, ministries of service. (See Brown's discussion, pp. 325-328.)

an "ambassador" for Christ. Nowhere in the New Testament are Christian elders described in precisely those terms. However, the personal and moral criteria set forth for elders (as well as bishops and deacons) - respect and credibility both within and outside of the church - point to such a role.

Moreover, the role of "ambassador" (which is itself a function) is consistent with the role of elders in the Old Testament - acknowledged and respected leaders who served as mediating representatives of one group or individual vis-à-vis another. The Old Testament elders represented Moses (and hence God) in relation to the people of Israel. They also represented the people of Israel in relation both to the political and cultic leadership of Israel and of other nations, and in relation to God. They were ambassadors, intercessors, go-betweens, with responsibilities and commitments on both sides of the "negotiating table." They were of the people, and yet set apart from the people. They performed what sometimes appeared to be secular tasks; yet they were called by God and ultimately answerable to God.

In practical terms, their function changed and diminished as both the political and the religious leadership of the people of Israel became more "specialized." Kings, judges, and prophets, Pharisees and Sadducees took over various aspects of their responsibilities, until, by the New Testament period, the "elders" became merely a token group of lay representatives with very little status or authority.

As the Christian Church developed within, and especially beyond, the New Testament period, a "specialization" of church leadership also occurred. An organizational structure developed in which the term "elder" eventually gave way to more functional terms like "pastor," "bishop," "deacon" - until revived during the Reformation as the name for a lay office with particular responsibilities.

Perhaps what we can and should gain from the Biblical witness is not so much a warrant and job description for the "office of elder," but a renewed sense of vocation for all church leaders and offices, whatever their titles and functions today. For however church leaders are chosen, by whatever name they are called, whether they are clergy or laity, whatever the scope of their responsibilities or the sphere of their work, they all serve as Christ's ambassadors - representing Christ and His Church to the world, and representing the Church, the Body of Christ, before God.

C

**MODELS OF ELDERSHIP IN
THE REFORMED TRADITION**

THE LASTING CONTRIBUTION OF JOHN CALVIN TO THE OFFICE OF ELDERS

Elsie Anne McKee

John Calvin's doctrine of the Church, especially his teaching on the offices of ecclesiastical ministry, has often and probably rightly been recognized as one of his most creative and influential contributions to Christian theology. The office of elders is perhaps the most distinctive and certainly among the most controversial parts of Calvin's doctrine of the Christian ministry.

The following discussion is divided into three unequal parts. The first is a brief listing of some of the key arguments about Calvin's eldership which may focus the presentation by pointing out caricatures to be corrected. The second and longest section treats Calvin's work in its sixteenth-century context, organizing the material in such a way as to cast light on the truth behind the caricatures. The first point concerns similarities and differences between Calvin and his contemporaries on church governance or discipline; the second, Calvin's teaching on lay ministries in general and the eldership in particular; and the third, the practice of ecclesiastical oversight in Geneva. The conclusion of the paper suggests what is still applicable or adaptable from Calvin's eldership for Reformed Christians in the late twentieth century.

I. SOME CARICATURES AND CONTROVERSIES

It is not accidental that Calvin's office of elders has been a topic of much controversy. The primary task of the eldership, the "episcopal" function of ecclesiastical discipline, is itself a sensitive issue, and the

Calvinist insistence on having "lay ecclesiastical" ministers share this duty with pastors has appeared to many to complicate an already difficult matter.

- 1) One focus of argument is centered on questions of political power and ecclesiastical-civil relationships. In a context in which church and state were not separated, the control of moral oversight was a significant power. The legend says that Calvin was a theocratic tyrant, carrying out an intolerant ecclesiastical discipline through the eldership. Thus his insistence on an autonomous church governance by pastors and elders is sometimes interpreted as a power struggle for political control of Geneva.¹

Other arguments are more theological; one is related to the defining of the office of elders, the other to its theoretical bases.

- 2) Calvin's eldership is a lay ecclesiastical ministry - something which seems a curious hybrid to many people. The Calvinist theory of a plurality of ministries, "clerical" and "lay", has been a matter of great puzzlement to non-Calvinists, while the definitions of and interrelationships between various offices, especially elders and deacons, have confused even some Calvinists. The number and precise definitions of Calvin's four offices appear too neat, somewhat forced, or even invented.²
- 3) This matter of delineating a certain number of set offices is closely related to the third controversy, that of the grounds on which Calvinists established their teaching on elders. Although it is clearly recognized that Calvin and others claimed scripture as the primary basis for the number and nature of church offices,

¹ E.g. Höpfl, The Christian Polity of John Calvin, Cambridge 1982.

² Cf. A. Ganoczy, Calvin: théologien de l'église et du ministère, Paris 1964, pp. 372ff. Also G. Hammann, Entre la secte et la cité: Le projet d'Eglise du Reformateur Martin Bucer (1491-1551), Genève 1984, pp. 282ff.

especially the eldership, many modern scholars question this. One contemporary critic suggests, for example, that Calvin adopted an early church practice from North Africa and attributed it to the New Testament.³ For obvious reasons, this argument is also often intertwined with that about Calvin's political ambitions, with the claim that the reformer read into Scripture what he wished to find there in order to gain control of Geneva.

II. THE CALVINIST ELDERSHIP IN THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY

The Administration of Church Order

The primary function of elders is to oversee, guide, direct, or "govern" the church. Thus to explain Calvin's doctrine and practice of the eldership it is important to sketch first how spiritual and moral oversight was understood and exercised in the early sixteenth century.

Some kind of religious discipline or governance has almost always been recognized as an important part of church order, and usually in Christian history the foundation for this function has been Matthew 18:15-18.⁴ This pericope teaches that when a sinner refuses to listen to the private warning of one and then several fellow Christians, he or she is to be brought before the "church" for public admonition. The difficulty is to determine who represents the "church" in verse 17, though from early times, it was assumed that the "church" which rules or disciplines is the clergy.

³ T.F. Torrance, "The Eldership in the Reformed Church," Scottish Journal of Theology (1984), pp. 502-518.

⁴ For exegetical history of Mt. 18:17, see E.A. McKee, Elders and the Plural Ministry: The Role of Exegetical History in Illuminating John Calvin's Theology, Genève 1988, pp. 34ff. This volume is the source of most of the present paper.

Naturally, Protestants objected to this idea in view of their teaching on the priesthood of believers, and they insisted that laity are also a part of the church and should rightly share in directing the life of the community. However, most non-Roman reformers did not read "church" in Matthew 18:17 as the whole congregation, but believed that older lay men (in the sixteenth century it is always men) should represent the church for its governance. (Usually, of course, ministers of Word and sacraments shared this "episcopal" responsibility with these laity.)

Which laymen should be elected to administer church order? In a context where church and state were not separated, and civil rulers supported the reform, it was natural that many Protestants should regard Christian princes, or magistrates as the proper agents of church discipline. This of course suited civil rulers very well, because control of moral oversight was a significant political power and long had been a source of tension with Rome.

Only Calvinists among the major reformers rejected the identification of lay elders with Christian rulers in theory, if not necessarily in practice. John Calvin built on the work of Johannes Oecolampadius and that of Martin Bucer. However, this paper is focused on Calvin's development of their themes.⁵ The reasons for Calvin's refusal to identify elders and princes can be noted quickly. First is the conviction that Scripture, specifically the New Testament, is the model of right church order. Nowhere in the New Testament are magistrates ministers of the church, and therefore princely ministers cannot be necessary for the best order of the church. (This contrasts with the Zwinglian Reformed appeal to the Old Testament as well as the New for matters of church order; for example, Zwinglians considered the activity of King Jehoshaphat in II Chronicles 19 the pattern for Christian magistrates in church discipline.) Secondly, Calvin argued that in Matthew 18, since the Christian church was

⁵ A. Demura, Church Discipline according to Johannes Oecolampadius in the Setting of His Life and Thought, diss. Princeton Theological Seminary, 1964. Hammann, op. cit.

not yet separate from the Jewish church, Christ was referring to the "custom of his people," the Sanhedrin. Calvin understood the Sanhedrin to be an elected body of laymen and priests which had religious and moral oversight of the Jewish people from the time of the return from the Babylonian exile, and he believed Christ preferred this to the older system of the Israelite nation.⁶

Thus, according to Calvin, although church governance is *clearly* not solely a clerical prerogative, and it can never be administered by one person alone, it is equally clear that a proper ecclesiastical discipline must be distinct, if not separate, from civil control of morals. There is no objection to electing a magistrate as an elder, but the latter does not hold the office by virtue of his civil rank. Calvin spent his life struggling to convince Geneva to accept an autonomous ecclesiastical discipline based on his understanding of Biblical teaching. (Since for most of his life Calvin was not even a voting citizen of Geneva, what has been called his "tyranny" was never political; his power was founded only on moral and intellectual force, by which he gradually persuaded a significant number of citizens of the truth of his ideas.)

Calvin's views regarding church governance thus fell between and were often misunderstood by both Roman Catholic and Protestant contemporaries. Like other Protestants, Calvin insisted on including laity in the ruling functions of the church, an idea incomprehensible in Rome. However, like Rome, Calvin insisted that this episcopal function was distinctively ecclesiastical, and not the automatic prerogative of Christian rulers, an idea which seemed wrong, foolish, or inefficient to most Protestants.

⁶ McKee, *op. cit.*, pp. 49ff. for II Chron. 19. Discussion of Sanhedrin in Gospel Harmony on Matt. 18:17 (*Calvini Opera... Omnia*, 45, 514-515); in *Institutes* 4.11.4 and 4.11.1. *Institutio Christianae Religionis in Opera Selecta* (Monachii in Aedibus, 1936) vol. 5, pp. 199f., 195. See McKee, *op. cit.*, pp. 35f.

A Plurality of Ministries and "Lay Ecclesiastical Offices"

The general Protestant view of lay involvement in the leadership of the church implies a plurality of church ministries, but only among Calvinist Reformed did this develop into an articulate theory and practice which could survive the separation of church and state. A plurality of sacramental ministries had long been known, but only with the Protestant revision of the sacred-secular dichotomy was it possible to envision ecclesiastical ministries charged primarily with temporal affairs and exercised by laity. The key functions understood to be specific Christian duties were care for the poor, sick, and afflicted, and moral oversight of the community, though education was also usually included here.

Because they did not distinguish between ecclesiastical and civil societies in theory, Lutherans, Zwinglians, and most in the Church of England generally assigned all of these responsibilities to Christian rulers, God's chief lay lieutenants. One result was that these Protestants did not distinguish the lay church offices from civil offices, and thus had no clear theory of a plurality of ministries. When separation of church and state came, frequently the only properly ecclesiastical office left to the church was the ministry of Word and sacraments.

Calvinists, on the other hand, distinguished in theory between ecclesiastical and civil societies, and insisted that each must have its own structure, distinct in theory if not in practice.⁷ This structure should provide leadership for all the functions necessary for the society to be rightly ordered and fulfill its purposes. Thus, Calvinists shaped the common Protestant conviction about a plurality of ministries, clerical and lay, into a clear theory. The ministries of Word and sacraments, teaching, rule, and *diakonia*, are necessary for right church order in any congregation, whether "established" or "disestablished," because these are the New Testament functions or

⁷ See McKee, op. cit., part 2, especially chap. 6.

offices permanently necessary for a rightly ordered church. Of these four Calvinist church offices, pastors, teachers, elders, and deacons, it was the last two, the "lay ecclesiastical" ministries, which were the most difficult for non-Calvinists to accept. In Calvin's theory and Genevan practice, elders and deacons were distinguished, but outside Geneva the functions of the two offices tended to slide into each other, even when both names were retained, which was not in fact the case everywhere. In theory, deacons were charged with ecclesiastical charity; elders were to share with pastors the guidance of Christian life, watching over the spiritual health of the community, checking and preventing idolatry as well as immorality, rebuking in order to reconcile.

(It may be noted here that while the clear articulation of theory served positively to preserve the functions and structure of the church distinct from the state, it also had the more negative consequence of fixing the number of offices in a rigid pattern. A plurality of ecclesiastical ministries, "lay" and "clerical," was preserved at the cost of a loss of flexibility and vision. Calvin's development of Oecolampadius' and Bucer's thought had thus both strengths and weaknesses.)

Calvin's Teaching on Church Governance and the Eldership

Calvin's teaching on the eldership developed through time, in the context of his understanding of ecclesiastical discipline.⁸ The latter is clearly though briefly set out in the first edition of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1536), where a clerical monopoly is rejected and ecclesiastical rule is assigned to "the church," according to Matthew 18:17 (*Inst.* chap. 5.30 [1536]= 4.11.2 [1559]). The first articulation of some form of official agency for discipline is found in 1539, in a passing comment on Romans 12:8 and I Corinthians 12:28, which Calvin considered to be Pauline references to a

⁸ See McKee, *op. cit.*, pp. 25ff.

"council of elders" (4.20.4). A fuller development of a practical eldership appeared in the Genevan church constitution *The Ecclesiastical Ordinances* in 1541. (Calvin maintained that this document supported the ecclesiastical autonomy of discipline, although the latter was not finally acknowledged by the magistracy until the 1561 revision of the law.) In the 1543 *Institutes* the doctrine of the Church was greatly expanded, and it is then that Calvin set out the full teaching on the eldership (4.3.8, 4.11.1), adding only a few final details in 1559.⁹

Most simply put, Calvin understood the function of ecclesiastical governance to be biblically commanded and permanently necessary, and therefore its practice and agents must be seen at various points in the records of the New Testament church available to us. Calvin believed that at certain points in Paul's letters, specifically in Romans 12:8, I Corinthians 12:28, and I Timothy 5:17, the apostle makes reference to the "council of elders" which served the early church as the Jewish Sanhedrin had served Christ's people before His church was established separately. This council of lay and clerical elders who carry out the episcopal functions of the church is thus biblically based and permanently necessary for the right ordering of the church.¹⁰

It is helpful to sketch in a bit more detail Calvin's understanding of church discipline and the eldership. The early church, following Christ's command in Matthew 18, established structures for the oversight of Christian life. This ruling or directing function, which includes attention to religious knowledge as well as moral behavior, extends only to what is visible in the lives of Christians. It is concerned with the matters by which "charitable judgment" assesses that Christians show that they are members of the church (chap.

⁹ See *Institutes* 4.3.8 and 4.11.1 *Opera Selecta* vol. 5, pp. 50, 195. English in *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Philadelphia 1960, pp. 1061, 1211-1212.

¹⁰ See McKee, *op. cit.*, chap. 2-4 for exegetical histories of Rom. 12:8, I Cor. 12:28, and I Tim. 5:17.

2.26 [1536] = 4.1.8 [1559]). It should be remembered here that discipline for Calvin is not a mark of the Church; it is a necessary sinew holding together the church visible on earth, and a means of keeping members of the church in the fellowship.¹¹ Ecclesiastical governance (including correction) serves to prevent dishonor to God, to protect the community, and to encourage the sinner to repent; it is not primarily punitive and should be administered with moderation. For the Calvinist Reformed tradition, excommunication is not synonymous with reprobation, since the church's judgment is made on the basis of what is visible on earth and not on a sure perception about election (chap. 2.26ff. [1536] for parts; 4.12.1-13). Some form of tribunal is necessary to investigate the public life of Christians, and thus a council of elders serves the church by rebuking and bringing to reconciliation those who do not appear to behave as regenerate people (4.11.1).

By following the development of different ideas through time, it is possible to infer the probable course of Calvin's reasoning as he worked out the teaching on the eldership as a biblically ordained office of the church. Calvin moves from function to office, and thus from the necessary function of discipline (1536) to the elders who administer it (1539ff.). Calvin was convinced that the early church depicted in the New Testament was not only the model for right church order but also fundamentally unified. Thus, he believed that scattered Pauline lists of gifts or offices (Eph. 4:11, I Cor. 12:28, Rom. 12:6-8) must all be related to one coherent pattern. Calvin reduced the number of offices in these passages to four on the grounds that some of these gifts were necessary only for the

¹¹ For some Reformed Christians, "discipline" became a mark of the church alongside Word and sacraments. This is not true for Calvin, but his teaching is not always clearly understood. The marks of the church (how one identifies the church) are the pure preaching of the Word and the right administration of the sacraments (*Inst.* 4.1.9). Each individual knows her or his own election, the relationship of faith to Christ, but can judge others only from the outside and therefore not certainly. Since God recognized that it is useful for us to be able to distinguish (provisionally) those who are members of the church, God gives several marks by which with "charitable judgment" we recognize members of the church. Outward behavior, both religious and moral, serves this purpose as "marks of Christians" (4.1.8).

founding of the church or times of special distress; other offices are permanent because those functions are always needed in a rightly ordered church. Calvin believed that Paul's references to gifts of ruling must designate the agents of church governance. Therefore, although such gifts as speaking in tongues are not permanent offices, the eldership is so because ruling or direction is permanently necessary for right church order.

Although Calvin's use of particular biblical texts has been sharply criticized, it is helpful to remember that some of the criticisms are anachronistic, based on modern post-Enlightenment historical-critical methods of interpretation.¹² In fact, the majority of Calvin's most striking instances of eisegesis are borrowed from the exegetical tradition he inherited, and represented the current state of scholarship in his day. Calvin's conviction that Scripture is essentially unified was also shared with almost all pre-Enlightenment Christians. It is not so much invention, as the coherence and comprehensiveness with which Calvin wove exegetical ideas into a unified pattern, which gives his theology the impression of novelty.

The one major difference between Calvin's ecclesiology and that of others is owed to the fact that Reformed Christians carried the idea of Biblical authority further than did many Protestants. For the Reformed tradition, the Bible provides the pattern not only of true teaching but also, secondarily, of right church order. The logical corollary of this conviction is that the contemporary church should seek out and practice this Biblical order.

Zwinglians and Calvinists differed, however, in their use of the two testaments. For the former, the Old Testament was a valid source of church order; for Calvinists, the right ordering of Christ's new Israel is found in the New Testament. (It is important to remember in this

¹² See McKee, *op. cit.*, part 2, especially chap. 7-8 for exegetical histories of Eph. 4:11, Rom. 12:8, and I Cor. 12:28.

context that Calvin did not regard agreement on church order as fundamental to the faith. Scripture gives guidance on the right ordering, the *bene esse*, of the church, but the essence, *esse*, of the church is in the two necessary marks of Word and sacraments.)

The Practice of Discipline in Calvin's Geneva

The actual practice of ecclesiastical oversight in Calvin's church presents a picture both familiar and surprising.¹³ The common notion of Genevan discipline is punitive, but that is not an adequate summary of Calvin's practice any more than of his teaching. Ecclesiastical rule was intended to shape people's lives to honor God, edify their neighbors, and serve as an external aid in their own salvation. Accordingly, elders and pastors investigated not only questions of morality but also matters of religious knowledge.

One of the unexpected discoveries in the early records of Consistory business is the effort made by this church court to educate people so that they could act intelligently in their faith.¹⁴ For example, often the charge is that the people brought before the Consistory do not know the elements of the faith, and they are instructed to learn the Lord's Prayer and/or the Apostles' Creed in a language they understand rather than parroting the Latin. A person might be restrained from taking the Lord's Supper until he or she could give some idea of what participating in Communion means.

The Consistory was also concerned with matters of behavior, as might be anticipated, but even here there are surprises. Serious

¹³ See E.M. Monter, "The consistory of Geneva, 1559-1569," Renaissance, Reformation, Resurgence, ed. P. de Klerk (Calvin Theological Seminary), pp. 63-84. R.M. Kingdon, "The Control of Morals by the Earliest Calvinists," Renaissance, Reformation, Resurgence, pp. 95-106.

¹⁴ R.M. Kingdon, "How the Consistory Helped to Convert Geneva to Calvinism," presented at the Sixteenth Century Studies Conference, October 1988, reports on discoveries in the hitherto unpublished Consistory records he is editing.

matters such as theft or adultery were only a relatively small part of the disciplinary work. Since the task of the elders and pastors was to guide communal life in a Christian way, a considerable amount of time was spent on what might be called counseling in interpersonal relationships. Matters such as gossiping or family quarrels or wife-beating or breach of promise are common topics in the records, and the objective of repentance and reconciliation was often achieved by rebuke or what might be called in modern terms "vigorous directive counseling." Most cases did not actually lead to excommunication, and normally exclusion from the sacraments was temporary, dependent on the person's behavior, whether it was progress in learning the Lord's Prayer or catechism, or ceasing to quarrel with family or neighbors. Calvin's discipline would appear intrusive and harsh by modern standards of privacy and individualism, but its negative reputation is owed more to its success than to any uniqueness in the ideals it espoused.

III. SOME TWENTIETH-CENTURY CONTRIBUTIONS

In assessing the lasting contributions of Calvin to the eldership it is necessary first to note briefly a number of changes in context between the early sixteenth and the late twentieth centuries. One is the separation of church and state, and the development of a secular, pluralistic culture. Another is a new approach to the interpretation of scripture and a general questioning of religious values. A third point is the individualistic, non-communal character of much of modern society. Although these changes are strongest in the industrialized West, they have also affected more traditional cultures to a greater or lesser extent, and must be taken into account in any effort to deal with the contemporary world.

Some of Calvin's contributions are common to most Protestants, although developed in characteristically Reformed ways. First,

Calvin affirmed that no one earns salvation by changed behavior, and earthly rebuke, even including excommunication, is not a final judgment on a person's election. Nonetheless, the shape of the regenerate life is not a matter of human choice or individual initiative. Clear guidance for Christian life is taught in scripture and it is the shared responsibility of the members of the Church, Christ's Body, to help each one live faithfully. No one is a Christian in a vacuum. The person justified by faith in Christ, through grace, comes to know both that gift of grace, and what a reborn sinner should do to glorify God and serve his neighbor, by participation in the church. Church members encourage, instruct, and correct, nurture, cultivate, and prune each other, because the church is the external means used by the Holy Spirit to hold us in fellowship with Christ. Ecclesiastical oversight is not primarily punitive but is aimed at shaping Christian life for the honor of God and the good and salvation of all. It is concerned with religious as well as moral questions, with faith as well as life.

Moving from the necessity of the function of governance to the agents of this ecclesiastical care follows Calvin's own procedure, but also leads to some lesser degree of clarity. The importance of laity in the leadership of the church is another key Protestant contribution. The Calvinist tradition strengthened this lay emphasis structurally by its insistence on lay ecclesiastical offices clearly established and distinct from the ministers of Word and sacraments, the congregation as a whole, and civil rulers. Ecclesiastical rule can never be the sole prerogative of any individual - it is a community activity - nor can it be restricted to the clergy in the narrow sense of that word. For practical purposes it cannot be handled by the congregation as a whole, though the whole remains responsible for the work of those whom God and they themselves have called to have oversight. Ecclesiastical cooperation with the work of the Holy Spirit in the world, which in our day is perhaps better represented by psychology than magistrates, is right and good, but a function such as "pastoral" governance ("shepherding") which is necessary to the right ordering of the church may never simply be handed over to

another authority. The work of the eldership is also distinct from that of the diaconate, a Calvinist insight which must not be lost or the functions of both offices will suffer as they have so often in the past.¹⁵

Thus far it seems clear that Calvin's teaching is both biblical and applicable today. That is, (self-)rule is a necessary function of the church visible on earth, and this task of mutual edification and correction is exercised by laity as well as clergy. Direction and oversight are always a function of and within the Body as a Body; they are never an individualistic matter, and never given over to an agency outside the Body, though cooperation with other manifestations of the Spirit's activity are appropriate. "Pastoral" discipline is both corrective and educational. While discipline is related to matters of temporal welfare, the two functions of mutual care and practical *diakonia* must be recognized as distinct, even when they appropriately work together.

Since according to scripture, God is a God of order, it is logical to conclude with Calvin that governance is not only biblical but should be ordered in appropriate ways. One of the important insights of the Reformed tradition is the realization that structures are not matters of indifference, even if the precise nature of any structure is not dictated by God.

This leads naturally to the discussion of some points at which Calvin's teaching and practice might need to be modified for use in the twentieth century.

- 1) The idea that the agents of ecclesiastical discipline are set out in the biblical texts Calvin cites, in precisely the ways he believed, is no longer tenable. However, if one gives up the notion of a uniform and permanent New Testament church order, it is still appropriate to see the eldership as a good and practical and

¹⁵ See McKee, Diakonia in the Classical Reformed Tradition and Today, Grand Rapids 1989.

probably biblical way to handle "episcopal" functions of the church. (It is appropriate to note here that the strict four-fold office pattern, without being abandoned in theory, may well yield to a more flexible listing based on necessary functions.)

- 2) In modern times the conviction that women and men are equal in God's sight has spread from a purely spiritual interpretation of the priesthood of believers to a much more global context. Perceptions of the appropriateness of women's leadership in church life have altered in significant ways - alterations which might not be as far from what Calvin would allow as many people think - and thus it is right that women as well as men should be admitted to the eldership (and other offices) in the contemporary church.¹⁶
- 3) There may be important insights in Calvin's view of the church in the world which can be adapted to a twentieth-century context in which separation has been carried to an extreme. Elders can contribute their understanding of the contemporary "real world" to a sometimes deaf church, while also acting in their "secular" workplaces to bring a spiritual and pastoral presence.
- 4) It is also appropriate to adapt the ways Calvin's Consistory functioned. Certainly the degree of intrusiveness exercised by Calvin's Consistory would need modification. At the same time, though, religiously grounded, communal interpersonal counseling on matters of faith and practice may have some useful insights to offer in an age where "non-directive" psychology or psychiatry has replaced the idea of mutual responsibility and accountability. Individual Christians who feel religiously rootless or confused, or who consider their Christian lives - whether private relationships, professional ethics, or

¹⁶ See Calvin's comments on I Cor. 14:34 in commentary (OC 49, 532-533) and Institutes 4.10.29-31. Also J.D. Douglass, Women, Freedom, and Calvin, Philadelphia 1985 and M. Potter, "Gender Equality and Gender Hierarchy in Calvin's Theology," Signs (1986), pp. 720ff.

anything else - "no one else's business," may well need to be reminded that we are members of Christ's Body. One of the deepest human needs is to live in community, "to belong," and to have "a place." Perhaps the biblical images of I Corinthians 12 and Hebrews 12 may remind us that living together, while difficult at times, is worth the effort of being molded and transformed into the Body of Christ.

THE ELDER IN CONGREGATIONAL CHURCHMANSHIP

Robert S. Paul

The ambiguity of the place of the elder in Congregational ecclesiology arises out of the distinctive history of Congregationalism, and in particular out of the ambiguity about the Puritan or Separatist origins of the Congregational movement. It perhaps also owes something to the politics of the nineteenth century which caused both Presbyterians and Congregationalists to perpetuate a flagrant misreading of their common history in the seventeenth century. By a strange coincidence also, in both Britain and America, Presbyterianism and Congregationalism represented themselves as rival denominational *politiques* rather than as alternative but closely related interpretations of the Reformed doctrine of the Church and its ministry.

Evidently, there are peculiarities in Congregational history which must be admitted to have roots both in the English Puritan and Reformed doctrine of the Church and also in the modification of that position by the English Separatists of Elizabeth I's reign and the early days of James I (VI of Scotland). However, we must insist that since both these ecclesiological positions, and also that of Presbyterians at that time, made their appeal to what they regarded as strict and literal applications of the ecclesiastical provisions to be extrapolated from the New Testament, they were often much closer in their understanding of the Church than any side was prepared to admit in the heat of debate. Perhaps this appeal to the same biblical authority with its implicit expectation of a scripturally based consensus also explains why the discussion between the parties generated so much heat; but the important point for us to note is that in what we know later as Congregationalism the Puritan *and* the

Separatist positions were fused together.¹⁷ Furthermore, through the peculiarities of both British and American history, this meant that as social conditions changed in Anglo-Saxon countries, Congregationalists tended to emphasise whichever element in their history - Puritan or Separatist - appeared to be most in tune with the mood of society.¹⁸

This recognition of the fusion of Puritan and Separatist roots, is given, I would insist, by way of necessary introduction, because it explains why there have often seemed to be irresolvable paradoxes in the Congregational understanding of the Church; and also it should be said that as denominational distancing became more acute it appeared to be in the interest of both Presbyterians and Congregationalists to emphasise the differences, both real or

¹⁷ After the Restoration of the monarchy in 1660 both kinds of Congregational churches (i.e. the Separatists who already rejected state establishment, and the Puritans who had co-operated in the church establishments of the Commonwealth and Protectorate) were forced into Nonconformity, and rapidly the distinctions between them became blurred and ultimately irrelevant. Something similar affected the churches in New England, for in 1681 the Plymouth Bay Colony, with the roots of its churches in Separatism or something very close to it, joined with the Massachusetts Bay colony with its Puritan establishment, and hence the distinction between the two forms of Congregational polity became confused and did not reappear until the Great Awakening.

¹⁸ In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries on both sides of the Atlantic, under the influence of political ideas derived from Enlightenment Liberalism or post-Jeffersonian democracy, Congregational historians represented their polity as a prophetic expression of the democratic future, and writers like Henry Martyn Dexter and Williston Walker in the U.S.A. and R.W. Dale, J.B. Marsden and Albert Peel in England emphasised the Separatist and Brownist origins of Congregationalism and discounted the evidence of its Puritan roots. But similarly in our own twentieth century, inspired by the new ecumenical imperatives, church leaders wanted help in recognising the authority of churches acting in council, and we have seen a decided attempt to dislodge the argument for a Separatist origin and a determined attempt to rehabilitate the Puritans. Following upon the new insights of historians like Champlin Burrage and Perry Miller, Verne D. Morey wrote an important article "History Corrects Itself; Robert Browne and Congregational Beginning" [Congregational Library Bulletin vol. 5, No. 2, January 1952] which led Dr. Douglas Horton to declare, "This important monograph might have been entitled *Goodby, Mr. Browne*, for it definitively and finally bows Robert Browne out of Congregationalism. He has been regarded as the first Congregationalist for a long time," [*ibid.*]. See also Horton's own Congregationalism: a Study in Church Polity, 1952. The debate was still lively in 1956, and in the course of it I was moved to ask the question, "Shall we re-write our history?" [Congregational Quarterly, vol. XXXII, No. 3, July 1954].

imagined, rather than their unity in a common Reformed understanding of the Church.

The question of the eldership is a prime example of the way in which an original point of unity was misrepresented apparently in reaction to denominational distinctiveness.

Certainly, there are grounds for representing basic differences between *Presbyterian* Reformed and Separatism, although the point at issue was not the office of eldership, but how far the church should be identified with civil society and what ecclesiastical powers could be held by a civil magistrate. But I do not find that English Separatist writers differ radically from the Reformed on the necessity of an eldership in the church, although they had a tendency to limit the powers of elders to pastors. There is certainly a tendency in Robert Browne to identify elders with pastors in his understanding of the New Testament church,¹⁹ although in his more complete ecclesiology, as in his *A Booke which sheweth the life and manners of all true Christians*, he has a distinct place for elders, whom he defined in this way:- "An Elder or more forward in gifte, is a person hauing office and message of God, for ouersight and counsaile, and redressing thinges amisse, for which he is tried [to be meete, & therefore is duellie chosen by the church which calleth him, or receyved by obedience where he planteth the church]."²⁰ Presumably this definition was intended to cover all classes of eldership.

¹⁹ E.g. in his "Aunswer to M. Flowers Letter" (1588/9) he declared, "That the Church of Christ can not be without a pastorship is euident, because the Church is that most graue & ancient whereof Christ is the elder & pastor..." *The Writings of Robert Harrison and Robert Browne*, ed. Albert Peel and Leland Carlson, London, George Allen & Unwin, 1953, p. 520.

²⁰ *Ibid.* p. 275. At the point where the [] occur above, there is "&c." by which the reader is presumably to insert the words that follow in what he has already said at this point about Pastors and Teachers in the church; this parallellism indicates that Browne did not differ from the Reformed churches generally in regarding pastors, teachers and elders of the same ministerial order.

Also in representing the Separatist position we may cite the testimony of William Bradford, one of the original Pilgrim Fathers of the Separatist Plymouth Colony, who in describing the church the Separatists had set up in Amsterdam says "they had for their pastor and teacher those two eminent men before named [Francis Johnson and Henry Ainsworth], and in our time four grave men for ruling elders, and three able and godly men for deacons, [also] one ancient widow for a deaconess..."²¹

The position was even more precisely addressed by the English or early American Puritans. They had no intention in those early days of distancing themselves from the rest of the Reformed family. They were the first to use the word "Congregational", but they employed it to distinguish their polity from that of the Reformed who put the presbytery, consistory or *classis* at the heart of church government. So John Cotton, the leading theologian in New England, protested against the terms "Independent" or "Independency" with which they had been saddled by their opponents: "Why then should Independency be appropriated to us as a character of our way, which neither truly describeth us, nor faithfully distinguisheth us from many others? Wherefore if there must be some note of difference to decypher our estate and to distinguish our way from a national Church-way, I know none fitter than to denominate theirs Classical, and ours Congregational."²² It should be noted here that Cotton's distinction is drawn between two forms of presbytery - one based on the eldership within several associated congregations in a *classis*, and the other based on the eldership in individual congregations. It should also be noted that the distinction he draws seems to be between a church organised to meet national or parochial needs and those of a church organised on a local or "gathered" church principle.

²¹ From Bradford's Dialogue, quoted by R.W. Dale, A Manual of Congregational Principles, London, C.U.E.W., [1884] 1920, p. 113 note.

²² The Way of Congregational Churches Cleared, London 1648, p. 11.

The same position is represented in England by the seven or eight Puritans who represented the Congregational position in the Westminster Assembly and whose disagreement from the rest of the Assembly has caused them to be known to history as the "Dissenting Brethren". They too in their *Apologeticall Narration* of 1643/4 were at pains to deny "Independency": "That proud and insolent title of *independencie* was affixed to us, as our claime; the very sound of which conveys to all mens apprehensions the challenge of all Churches from all subjection or dependance, or rather a trumpet of defiance against whatever Power, spirituall or Civill, which we doe abhor and detest..."²³

They were even more specific in asserting their identity with the rest of the Reformed churches on the nature of the eldership: "For *officers* and publique Rulers in the Church, we set up no other but the very same which the reformed Churches judge necessary and sufficient, and as instituted by Christ and his Apostles for the perpetuall government of his Church, that is, *Pastors, Teachers, Ruling Elders*, (with us not lay but Ecclesiastique persons separated to that service) and *Deacons*."²⁴

Reference to the actual debates in the Assembly shows that the Congregationalists or Independents of that time shared with the Scots Presbyterians the distinction between Teaching and Ruling Elders, and held both to be necessary within the divinely instituted pattern of the New Testament church.²⁵ It appears clear from these that the later misunderstanding with its resulting denominational division about the Ruling Elder originated in the unfortunate way in

²³ *An Apologeticall Narration*, p. 23. See also "The Cambridge Platform," chap. VI, para. 4; chap. VII, paras. 1-2, in *The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism*, ed. Williston Walker, Boston [1893] 1960, pp. 213ff.

²⁴ *An Apologeticall Narration*, p. 8.

²⁵ I have dealt with this in some detail in my book, *The Assembly of the Lord: Politics and Religion in the Westminster Assembly and the 'Grand Debate.'* Edinburgh, T & T Clark, 1985, pp. 163ff.

which Robert Baillie, the Scots Commissioner, punctuated his account of the debate, making it appear as if the Independents in the Assembly led the opposition against this office; some later Presbyterian historians have recognised that this misunderstanding arose through the distorted representation of Baillie's account.²⁶

Since subsequent denominational histories have only perpetuated this misreading of the Assembly's debates and emphasised that the Presbyterian polity has Ruling Elders whereas the Congregational polity does not, one can only assume that the later church leaders of both denominations found it desirable to maintain this fictitious understanding of earlier history as under the pressures of later centuries the apparent division hardened into rigid denominational distinctions.

Let me end simply by insisting on these points:

- 1) First, that although Congregational history contains a Separatist element in which the Reformed doctrine of the church was modified in a biblicist way, there is nothing that separates that ecclesiology fundamentally from the rest of the Reformed family in its original interpretation of the eldership.
- 2) Secondly, that if ruling elders disappeared from Congregational churchmanship in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the causes are to be sought more within the social and political pressures of the liberal and Enlightenment societies in which Congregational churches found themselves than in any essential differences with the Reformed family at large.
- 3) Having said that, let me admit that the newer ways of viewing and exegeting the scriptural evidence did probably have an

²⁶ E.g. A.F. Mitchell, The Westminster Assembly, [Baird Lecture for 1882] London, Nisbet, 1883, p. 187; J.R. De Witt, Jus Divinum: the Westminster Assembly and the Divine Right of Church Government, Kampen, J.H. Kok, N.V., 1969, pp. 81f. Cf. also The Assembly of the Lord, pp. 163-174.

earlier effect upon them than upon some of their Presbyterian colleagues, in causing them to move away from the *jure divino* ecclesiology that had governed their original polity and churchmanship.

- 4) It is clear that in both England and America the distinctive office of ruling elders did disappear in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries,²⁷ and the governing and pastoral concerns of the office tend to become more and more subsumed under the office of the deacons.²⁸ It seems that the course of Congregational development would indicate the apostolic importance of eldership in the pastoral and governmental functioning of churchmanship in obedience to Christ rather than the necessity of the term itself; and, in their early recognition of the place of "widows" as a necessary part of the New Testament pattern of churchmanship, there is the tacit recognition that our Lord calls members of both sexes into the ministries of His church.²⁹

27 Although official statements of Consociated churches in New England often spoke of "ministers and elders," it is clear that the churches had only ministers and deacons. Cf. The Constitution of the Associated Churches in the Southern District of the County of Litchfield, in the State of Connecticut, Litchfield 1829, particularly the "Statistical View of the Churches," pp. 18-24. It is also clear that by the time of Dr. R.W. Dale's A Manual of Congregational Principles (1884), the functions of ruling elder had been incorporated into the diaconate, which was regarded as a permanent apostolic institution of the church; ibid., especially pp. 109ff., 226.

28 The English declaration of 1833 declares that "the only officers placed by the apostles over individual churches, are bishops or pastors, and deacons; the number of them being dependent on the numbers of the church; and that to these, as to the officers of the church is committed respectively the administration of its spiritual and temporal concerns..." Williston Walker, Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism, p. 551.

29 See their strong advocacy of the office of "widows" in the Westminster Assembly, [cf. Paul, The Assembly of the Lord, pp. 140, 172, 201 note, and 281,] and especially their unsuccessful attempt to get this office included within that of "deacon," ibid. pp. 172f.

ELDERSHIP IN THE REFORMED CHURCHES TODAY

Edited by Lukas Vischer

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**Report of an International
Consultation held at
John Knox Centre in Geneva
from August 26 – 31, 1990**

Edited by Lukas Vischer

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PREFACE

Since the Reformation, the ministry of elders has always played an important role in the life and witness of the Reformed churches. The ministers of Word and Sacrament stand never alone. They are always surrounded by a collegium of elders who share in the governance of the Church. John Calvin considered this ministry to be essential for the Church. "Now experience itself makes clear that this sort of order was not confined to one age, ... it is necessary for all ages (Institutio Christianae Religionis IV, 3, 8)."

But how is this ministry to be understood today? As much as the Reformed churches continue to emphasize the significance of the ministry, there is no self-evident agreement on its nature. In the course of the centuries different patterns have developed and as Reformed churches seek to determine the appropriate order of the church they are facing many open questions.

The first two General Councils of the Alliance, Edinburgh 1877 and Philadelphia 1880, considered the office of elders as a distinctive characteristic of Presbyterianism, and a commission was appointed to produce a report. The report was adopted at the Third General Council, Belfast 1884. The subject was discussed again in the 1920s, 1950s and 1960s. The report by Robert W. Henderson *Profile of the Eldership: 1974* represents an attempt to summarise the latest discussions, and shows the diversity of the office as it was exercised in the member churches of the Alliance.

The new situation we face as a Christian community today encourages us to make further study of this important ministry in the Church. Since 1974, several new members from Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Pacific have joined

the Alliance. Some of these churches are struggling to evaluate the tradition they have received as Reformed Christians, and trying to relate it to the situation in which they are placed. This will inevitably further diversify the understanding of the function and forms of ministry, and it is important to promote a dialogue of such understandings for mutual edification and enrichment. Both the bilateral dialogues in which the Alliance is involved, and the on-going discussion on ministry taking place in many churches as a result of the Faith and Order Commission's convergence statement *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, call for further clarification of the office of elders.

In the light of all these, and following on the proposals made by the Seoul General Council (1989) of the Alliance, the Swiss Federation of Protestant Churches organized, under the leadership of Professor Lukas Vischer, a consultation on the "Significance of Eldership in the Reformed Tradition" which took place in John Knox Centre, Geneva, August 26-31, 1990. The participants came from different parts of the world and represented a variety of backgrounds and contexts.¹

Presented in this booklet are the findings of this consultation. We hope that they will be of use to the churches in their on-going discussion on the ministry. The Alliance will be grateful to receive responses to this report and any other relevant material on the office of elders the churches may want to share.

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1) The papers presented at the consultation will be published later this year in a separate volume "The Ministry of Elders"; it can be ordered either from the secretariat of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, 150 route de Ferney, 1211 Geneva 2, or from the Arbeitsstelle Oekumene Schwelz, Sulgenauweg 26, 3000 Bern 23

ELDERSHIP IN THE REFORMED CHURCHES TODAY

At the invitation of the Federation of Protestant Churches in Switzerland a group of twenty pastors, elders and theologians met at the John Knox Centre in Geneva from August 26 - 31, 1990 to consider the meaning of the ministry of elders as it is practiced today in the Reformed churches. The participants came from different parts of the world (Hungary, India, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, Netherlands, Nigeria, South Africa, Switzerland, United Kingdom, United States) and represented a variety of backgrounds and contexts. The findings which resulted from the exchange are summarized in the following report. The group decided to submit this report to the Federation of Protestant Churches in Switzerland and to the World Alliance of Reformed Churches in the hope that it will be shared with the Reformed churches with a request for study and reaction.

Introduction

The ministry of elders is characteristic of Reformed churches and has also been accepted by a large number of other Protestant churches. Many Reformed Christians regard eldership as a self-evident necessity for the Church's life and therefore take it for granted that eldership belongs to the essential structures of the church. In the course of centuries, the ministry of elders has been a source of blessing; and there can be no doubt that it also carries a potential for the future. At the same time, however, the ministry of elders raises many questions both in theory and in practice. There is therefore much need to explore and explain it afresh today. How is this ministry to be understood? What shape should it be given in the various

contexts in which Reformed churches are called to witness to the Gospel today?

This report is an attempt to deal with these questions. It is addressed to the Reformed churches in the hope that it may stimulate study and discussion among them and contribute to more clarity on the nature and purpose of eldership. In particular, it is hoped that the report may serve as an occasion to discuss the ministry of elders in congregations.

A fresh study of eldership may at the same time provide a response to the inquiry of the World Council of Churches on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry (1982). The replies of the Reformed churches to its section on Ministry were far from unanimous. Several churches criticised the text for its lack of attention to eldership. However, the Reformed answers did not provide a common understanding of this ministry. The World Council of Churches in its evaluation of the responses recognized the validity of the Reformed criticism but at the same time challenged the Reformed churches to be clearer in their explanation of the nature of this ministry and of its Biblical basis (Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry, 1982–1990, Report on the Process and Responses, Geneva 1990, p. 125s.).

1. Eldership Over the Centuries

Examining anew the evidence of the Bible, the Reformers, especially Oekolampad, Bucer and Calvin, came to the conviction that "each church had from its beginning, a senate, chosen of godly, grave, and holy men, which had jurisdiction over the correcting of faults" (*Institutio Christianae Religionis* IV, 3, 8). Though in agreement on the importance of a collegial body of elders in the ministry of the Church, the various Reformers did not adopt a uniform pattern of eldership to

be copied everywhere. On the contrary, in the different churches a variety of approaches was chosen and in the course of time new perspectives emerged. In the centuries following the Reformation, as the Reformed churches spread geographically around the world, they continued to regard the office of elder as essential to the well-being of the Church, but allowed for a remarkable flexibility in developing new patterns appropriate to new contexts.

As we approach the end of the twentieth century, Reformed churches in many places are sensing the necessity to re-examine their patterns of eldership in light of the rapidly changing contexts in which they are living, as well as in the face of the different models which have developed in over the centuries. More and more the Reformed churches in various lands recognize the need to consult with one another in order to avoid unnecessary proliferation of patterns and at the same time to benefit from each other's insights. They also recognize the ecumenical responsibility to articulate for churches in other Christian traditions what it is about the office of elder which is so crucial to the life and ministry of the Church.

Most Reformed churches today, unlike those of the sixteenth century, are no longer "established" as national or regional churches. Many work in a context in which the civil authority is officially religiously neutral, and in some cases opposed to or barely tolerant of the presence of the Christian faith, or even militantly atheist. In the presence of a rising tide of materialism and secularism, Reformed churches in every land now recognize that they are in a "missionary situation". Increasing national, racial, ethnic, and linguistic diversity within the Reformed community is resulting in new divergencies from earlier models. Worldwide changes in attitudes about the nature

of authority, freedom, and community, hold serious implications for traditional patterns of teaching and discipline. An increasing economic gap between the rich and the poor in church and society, along with other forms of societal marginalization and oppression of persons and groups, is raising new questions about just structures and patterns of ministry within as well as outside the church. The increasing complexity of society, with its vast information, communication, transportation, commercial, and other networks, places a heavy strain on older, simpler forms of Reformed ministry, polity, and community life.

Moreover, simultaneously with all these changes, many Reformed churches have been adopting modern techniques of management and bureaucratic services, with their almost unconsciously accepted modification of traditional Reformed doctrines such as ministerial calling and diaconal service.

2. Evidence for a Reformed Order in Scripture

Reformed churches, like the Reformers, have always affirmed the need to ground the order of the church in the testimony of the Scripture. Many of our forebears in the Reformed tradition attempted to derive from Scripture a clear and full blueprint for the ordering of the church and its offices of leadership. On the basis of our knowledge of the Bible today, we believe that Scripture does not point to one single church order, and that the effort to impose such an order on Scripture should be abandoned.

That does not mean that Scripture offers no guidance for us as to the faithful ordering of the church and its

offices of leadership. On the subject of elders, for example, there is solid evidence for the continued existence of collegial bodies of elders both in the Old and New Testaments (e.g., Ex. 24:1–18; Dt. 19:1–13; Acts 15:19–21; Acts 20:17–38; I Tim. 5:17–22). However, as soon as we begin to inquire about the specific responsibilities of elders and their relation to other offices of the church, we have to recognize that much of the Biblical evidence used in the past can no longer be definitively maintained. One clearly defined church order will be discerned only through selective reading and weighing of some Biblical passages over others.

We must, therefore, find another approach if we are to be guided by the whole witness of God's Word in Scripture in the ordering of the Church and its leadership. A more faithful and productive starting point will be God's great message of salvation for the world, and the divine calling of the Church for mission. Within that context, we may then inquire: What tasks of ministry are necessary if the Church is to fulfil that calling? What leadership is required to guide the whole Church in faithfulness to that calling? How is that leadership to be chosen and to work together – with the whole Church – to the glory of God, for the building up of the Church and the salvation of the world?

3. Jesus Christ, the Gospel, and the Calling of the Whole Community

The will of God, revealed in Jesus Christ, is to reconcile all creation to God: liberating captives and the oppressed, healing the blind and brokenhearted, redeeming sinners, overcoming death with the gift of new life, proclaiming the good news, bringing justice and shalom to all people (2 Cor. 5:19; Lk 4:18–20; Gal.

3:28). Through the power of the Holy Spirit, God calls women and men to become the people of God, the body of Christ in the world (John 15:26, Rom. 12; 1 Cor. 12; 1 Peter 2:9–10).

According to the witness of Scripture, God's call not only transforms those who were "no-people" into "God's people", but it also gives that people a particular character and mission. The fundamental purpose of God for all people is to live in community with God, to worship, love, and serve God with all their being (liturgia). From this communion with God flows the life of God's people. As children of God, we are called to live in community with each other and to work for the extension of this community of reconciliation to all God's creation through witness to the grace, mercy, and righteousness of God manifest in Christ (marturia), mutual care (koinonia) and service (diaconia), within the Christian community and in the world.

The call to worship and thus to proclamation, tending, and serving God's people is given to each and every believer in the context of the one Body of Christ. The mission of the Church is entrusted to every Christian as a member of the Body, the priesthood of believers. By the power of the Holy Spirit every Christian is made an ambassador, gifted for all the tasks of the mission to reconcile the world to God through Christ.

4. To Fulfil the Basic Calling of the Church Requires Ministries

Scripture also bears witness that the gifts of the one Spirit are richly diverse, ordered according to the will of God and the needs of the Body so that all members may serve and honour each other, suffering together

and rejoicing together (1 Cor. 12:4 ff.). To build up the Body, to enable its individual members better to fulfil their mission, God has made some members richer in one gift, while other members excel in another gift. So we, like Christians before us, recognize that the work of God's people in God's world is enriched by a harmony of activities in which some men and women serve in special ways to guide and encourage, to stand behind or represent, to go ahead and report back, to carry in tender arms, to plant and prune, to lead in song or story or vision (Eph. 4:11; 1 Cor. 12; 1–11 and 28–30).

Within the diversity of gifts there are certain fundamental tasks which need to be carried out at all times and under all circumstances. In order to make sure that they will be fulfilled permanent ministries are required. The Reformed tradition has recognized four aspects of the Church's vocation calling for specially focused ministries: proclamation of the Word and the administration of the sacraments; teaching and education; pastoral care and guidance in mission; and diaconal service. Four ministries correspond to these dimensions of the Church's life: pastors, teachers, elders and deacons. Though each of these ministries has a distinct mandate to fulfil they are not mutually exclusive. Traditionally, in Reformed churches pastors have borne responsibility for the proclamation of Word and of the administration of the Sacraments. Teachers and pastors have shared educational responsibilities. Elders and pastors have shared pastoral and prophetic responsibilities. The ministry of deacons has sometimes included liturgical activities such as offering the cup in the Lord's Supper, and prophetic elements as well as concerns of charity and justice. While recognizing that the ministries named here are not necessarily complete, and that the Holy Spirit may provide for other ministries according to the

needs of the Church and the world, Reformed Christians nonetheless affirm that these four fundamental tasks need to be met at all times and under all circumstances and that, therefore, it is necessary to give these traditional ministries their appropriate content in the light of God's calling today. Though all four ministries need careful consideration, the specific task of this report is an exploration of what renewal may mean for the office of elders.

Jesus Christ, the crucified and risen Lord, dwells among God's whole people. The authority flowing from his presence is primarily exercised by the whole body. The ministries of the priesthood of all believers are not derived from or subservient to the offices given by Christ for the service of the whole body. Equally, the ministerial offices of the Church are not derived from or subservient to the priesthood of all believers. All ministries receive their authority from Jesus Christ for the service and the building up of the whole body. Their authority is to be exercised therefore within the authority of the whole body. In the course of history, this authority given to the whole community of believers has often been neglected. The conviction that all members of Christ's body share in a universal, mutual and common royal priesthood leads to a persistent emphasis among the Reformed churches that the Holy Spirit gives primary authority to the gathered community of the Church in all aspects of Church governance.

5. The Nature of the Eldership

What is the significance of eldership today? What is the character of the office, and what tasks are of its essence? Among the Reformed churches today there is

a wide variety of both terminology and practice regarding eldership, as well as other offices of ministry.

- In many churches "elders" refers to a lay body of leadership drawn from the membership of the local congregation, distinct from the "pastor(s)" (who are clergy called from outside the congregation) and distinct from "deacons" (who in some cases are also lay persons from within the congregation and in other cases are clergy or professionally trained lay persons called from outside the congregation).
- In other churches, the pastor is referred to as a "teaching elder", while the lay body of elders are called "ruling elders".
- In other churches, there is no separate office of deacons; the duties of deacons are taken up by the lay body of elders.
- In still other churches, it is the office of elder which has disappeared; in which case, the duties of elders are carried out by the deacons and/or the pastor, or have simply been neglected.

Furthermore, there is great diversity of practice regarding the way in which these various offices of ministry are related and interact, and regarding the tasks assigned to each office. Practices also differ from church to church concerning selection, ordination, term of service, and training of lay elders (and deacons). While some churches are content with their current practices, other churches are struggling to discover more faithful and effective ways to organize and carry out church leadership. There are also differences of opinion and practice on the issue of women serving as elders (and in other ministries).

What follows is an attempt to describe an understanding of eldership, and a way of organizing its practice, which in our understanding is faithful both to the witness and intention of Scripture and to the heritage of the Reformation, and which takes into account the needs and concerns arising from the world today. This picture of eldership may not exist precisely this way in the practice of any given Reformed church. Nevertheless, it is offered in the hope that it may stimulate reflection and discussion, and may provide insight, encouragement, and/or correction for future practice.

a) Who Are the Elders? Elders are a collective body of lay persons (both men and women) who, in partnership with other church leaders and office holders, bear overall responsibility for the life and mission of a particular community of Christians. That particular community might be one or more local congregations, or perhaps some other type of fellowship (e.g., a house church, a "Christian base community").

Elders are called to this office of ministry from within their particular community. Elders are called individually, but are called into a collective body of leadership.

Elders bring to the leadership of their community the voice of the membership as a whole. At the same time, they are called to be examples and guides for the community in regard to the life of faith, and to lead the community in its mission and service in and to the world. Thus, the responsibilities of elders include:

- participating in the leadership of worship (including leading intercessory prayer, reading

Scripture, making announcements concerning the community's life and work, or participating in the liturgy of the sacraments):

- building up the Christian fellowship of the community;
- nurturing the living of faith through both education and corrective discipline (including leadership in conflict-resolution in matters of faith, life, and ministry); and
- enabling the community to work for justice, reconciliation and renewal of humanity, and the integrity of creation.

b) Women and Men as Elders. Since both practice and theology differ so widely among Reformed churches on the issue of women serving as elders (and in other ministries), it seems important to address this issue in particular.

We affirm that women, as well as men, are called and should be received by the church to participate in its leadership, through the offices of elder, pastor, teacher, and deacon. This affirmation is grounded in the witness of Scripture, and is upheld by the spirit (if not always the practice) of the Reformation.

Scripture reveals that women did serve as leaders of God's people, both within Israel and within the early Christian community. The fact that most of these women are not designated in Scripture as holding the "offices" of elder, pastor, teacher, or deacon is no reason to exclude women from such offices today. As we now recognize, Scripture does not set forth a specific, definitive structure of offices of mi-

nistry, but rather points us toward certain tasks of ministry given to the whole Church and to its leaders. Therefore, what is important as a guide to our practice today is the witness in Scripture that women *functioned* within and for the community of faith to provide leadership, in such areas as communicating God's word and will to the people, guiding and nurturing the faithful life of the people, and ministering to both the physical and spiritual needs of the people.

Particularly in terms of the Christian community, Scripture reveals God's intention in Christ to include all people. Entering into the fellowship of the body of Christ, all persons become one in Christ. The Reformed tradition has always affirmed that each member (male and female) of Christ's body is endowed by the Holy Spirit with gifts for the use and upbuilding of the whole body. Although the implications of this affirmation have not always been fully practiced, this affirmation calls for full participation of women and men within the life and mission of the whole Christian community. It also drives toward full participation of women and men in the leadership of that community, through *all* offices of ministry (elder, pastor, teacher, deacon), in accordance with the spiritual gifts which each woman or man has received.

- c) **Elders as a Collective Body?** Just as individual Christians are called into the fellowship of the whole church community, becoming together the Body of Christ, so elders function collectively (with other church leaders) to provide leadership for a particular Christian community.

- Elders as a collective body bring to their office of ministry a variety of gifts for leadership. While within that body individual elders may take on specific tasks, collectively they can offer a greater fullness of leadership.
- Since individual elders may represent the experience and perspective of different parts of the community, they can together work more effectively at the tasks of reconciliation and unity within the community as a whole. In particular, they can and should enable the community to face conflict or controversy when it arises, and guide the community through the conflict to a constructive and faithful resolution.
- Elders can offer more faithful and effective leadership as they seek collectively to discern the will of God regarding the life and mission of the community, joining together in prayer and relying on the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The collegial body provides an opportunity for leadership in dialogue.
- The collegial body limits the power of the individual. "For the Holy Spirit willed men to beware of dreaming of a principality of lordship as far as the government of the Church is concerned (John Calvin, *Institutio* 4,4,4)."
- Collective leadership in the Church points to the nature and quality of the corporate leadership that the Church as a community of faith offers to the whole human community.

6. Elders in Relation to Other Offices and Ministries

All offices of ministry share in common the calling of all Christians. Yet certain tasks are especially (though not exclusively) the responsibility of those persons who hold a particular office. For example,

- Pastors have particular responsibility for the proclamation of the Gospel and the administration of Sacraments.
- Elders have particular responsibility for oversight in relation to the whole life, mission, and service of the Christian community.
- Deacons have particular responsibility for the ministry of service both within and beyond the Christian community.

Yet these areas of responsibility are not mutually exclusive, and can be performed most faithfully and effectively when there is a collegial partnership of all the leadership in and for the Church. This partnership also provides an opportunity for mutual support and a context for mutual accountability and discipline.

Partnership between elders and pastor allows the elders to surround and support the pastor in his/her specific responsibilities for preaching and administration of sacraments, providing both encouragement and critical guidance. In turn, the pastor is called to serve the elders through the proclamation of the Word, and to enhance their corporate witness by pointing to the very basis of their ministry.

Partnership between elders and deacons must also be mutual and collegial. Elders should recognize, support, and nurture the ministry of service. In turn, deacons should understand and carry out their specific ministry as part of, and in relation to, the whole life and mission of the Christian community.

Partnership between elders and members of the Christian community which they serve is equally a matter of mutual respect and support. Elders have a responsibility to guide and encourage the ministry of all individuals and groups and to care for the unity of Christian community. In turn, members of that community need to recognize and respect the guidance of elders, as well as support elders in their special tasks of ministry.

The particular responsibility of elders to guide and nurture the life and ministry of the entire community does not entail control over the ministries of pastors or deacons (or of the community members). It does mean, however, that in situations where there is no pastor, or no diaconal office of service, it becomes incumbent upon the elders to ensure that the ministries of preaching and sacraments and/or of service are carried out in and for the congregation. In some cases, this may entail elders taking upon themselves the leadership of ministry normally assigned to pastors and/or deacons, including, when necessary and authorized by the appropriate governing body of the church, administration of the Lord's Supper.

In order for the collective body of elders, (and/or the collective partnership of elders, pastors, and deacons) to function effectively, some individual needs to provide moderatorial and administrative guidance for the whole body of leadership. In many churches, that function is

ordinarily assigned to the pastor. However, there may well be situations or circumstances when an elder (or deacon) would need to take on that role, or when members of the collective body of leadership might be elected to serve as presiding officer on a periodic, rotating basis.

7. Choosing Elders

Elders are chosen with the consent and the approval of the whole congregation or community, through some process of election. No one definitive process can be described for all Christian communities in all times and places. However, certain things must be taken into account, whatever the process may be in a given situation. In regard to candidates for the office of elder, attention should be paid to:

- evidence of spiritual gifts for leading and building up the church
- evidence of maturity in faith
- respect within and outside the community of faith
- sensitivity to socio-cultural practices regarding community leadership (but not blind, strict conformity to such practices)

It is important to note that these criteria do not make reference to the age or gender of a candidate for elder. Greater age may bring greater maturity in faith and greater respect; but such qualities may also be present in younger persons. Spiritual gifts for leadership and the building up of the Church may be present in persons of various ages and status. For the Holy Spirit endows

each individual Christian with gifts, as the Spirit wills; and when women and men, single or married, rich or poor, of one race or another, have received spiritual gifts for the use of the Church, the Church dare not refuse to acknowledge and utilize them. Thus, even if a particular society or culture does not recognize certain persons as qualified for leadership, the Christian community in that situation may be called to choose those very persons to share in the leadership of the Church.

In regard to the process of election out of the congregation, it must be remembered that the character of such election ought not to be "political" or "democratic" in a divisive or factional way, but rather, again, a collective discerning, through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, of those persons whom God has called and equipped to serve in the leadership of the Christian community. It must also be remembered that individual elders serve not primarily as representatives of particular constituencies or interest groups within the community, but rather in such a way that, collectively, they reflect the diversity of the community and so may provide leadership for the whole community according to the will of God, under the rule and by the example of Christ, and through the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

8. Ordination

Even among Reformed churches which have a lay office of elder similar to that described above, there is diversity of practice and terminology concerning the setting apart of persons to that office. In various churches, the act of setting apart persons for this ministry is called "ordination," "commissioning," or "installation." Moreover, the act itself has different forms

significance in different churches. Varied also is the length of an elder's term of service. What follows is a proposal for the consideration of Reformed churches.

a) Should Elders Be Ordained? Ordination is an act of consecration to service through a particular office of ministry. It is an acknowledgement by the Church that the person ordained has been empowered and equipped for that ministry by the Holy Spirit and has been recognized and called to that ministry by the church. The recognition and calling of a person to a ministry (and so the ordination of that person) usually takes place within the context of a single Christian community, or a specified group of communities. Nevertheless, the person is set apart for that ministry on behalf of and for the whole Church. Persons entering into all offices of ministry – pastor, elder, or deacon – should be ordained to the particular ministry to which they have been called.

Such ordination to any office of ministry would occur only once. But if the person were called at a later time to service through a different office, he/she would then be ordained to that new ministry.

The liturgy of ordination within the worship service of the Christian community would differ to some extent depending on the office of ministry. In each case, however, the act of ordination would include three aspects:

- *prayer*, that is invocation of the Holy Spirit that the persons may be empowered for their new ministry, and intercession for them in the carrying out of that ministry;

- *the laying on of hands* by other ordained church leaders as a sign of faith that the prayers for the presence and guidance of the Holy Spirit are granted;
- *acknowledgement by the community of faith* of the persons ordained and of their new role of leadership within the community.

When members of a particular Christian community are ordained to serve as elders (or deacons), the laying on of hands would be performed by other ordained church leaders (pastors, elders, deacons) whose service is within that community. However, since ordination is for the ministry of the whole Church, ordained persons serving in other parts of the Church might also be invited to participate. Moreover, since all offices of ministry are equally essential to the leadership of the Church, and provide that leadership as collegial partners, ordained elders (and deacons) would also participate in ordaining pastors.

b) Service for Life or for a Term? For many reasons the election of elders should be for a limited term of service rather than for life. The length of each term should be fixed in advance. (In some Reformed churches, it is three, four, or five years, with the possibility of serving two terms consecutively). To ensure continuity within the collective body of elders, the periods of service for individual elders should overlap in time. When previously ordained elders are reelected, either for a second consecutive term or after a break in active service, ordination would not be repeated. However, some act of installation or induction for this new term of service would be appropriate. The same would apply to an elder

previously ordained in one congregation, but at a later time elected to serve in a different congregation.

There are many benefits of a fixed and rotating term of service for elders. The responsibility of eldership is demanding, and a fixed period of service allows individuals relief from the duties of leadership at regular intervals. Fixed terms of service also make possible the participation in leadership of more persons, with a greater variety of gifts and experiences. In this way, too, elders can be chosen whose particular gifts match the particular needs of the community at a given time. Finally, the rotation of elders in and out of active service means that within both the body of elders in service and the community as a whole, there is greater mutual understanding (and hence partnership in ministry).

- c) **Should Elders Be Paid?** The essence of the church's offices of ministry does not depend on whether the office holders are paid or unpaid. There are churches which have introduced a non-salaried ministry of pastors under particular circumstances. Likewise, there may be circumstances arising when an elder should receive some financial compensation for carrying out certain duties.

9. Education

As in other matters related to the eldership, Reformed churches vary with regard to the training offered for elders in preparation for their ministry. It seems wise that some training be given to equip elders for their ministry – indeed, that such training be required as preparation for service as elders.

- a) **Who is responsible for the training?** The pastor and the elders already serving the community or congregation share primary responsibility for the training of new elders, and should see to it that this is provided. The organization of this training (where? when? how? by whom?) may vary from situation to situation. Here are suggested two possible models, which could be used separately or in combination:

– **Training for elders within one local Christian community.** The pastor, along with one or more already trained elders, would provide training for newly-elected elders. Other people from within the congregation, from other congregations or church institutions (e.g., theological seminaries), or even from the society at large, might also be utilized as resources or teachers for various aspects of the training. This would be especially important where the pastor himself/herself is not well-equipped for this task. The advantages of training within one community would be the opportunity to apply what is learned to the particular needs and mission of that local community, as well as (in some cases) considerations of time and/or travel.

- **Joint training for elders of several Christian communities.** Newly elected elders from several congregations in a particular area might come together for training. This could be organized jointly by the various congregations themselves, through an already existing association of congregations or of elders, or at the initiative of the Church's regional body. The advantages of such an approach would be a greater pool of knowledgeable and gifted leaders for that training, as well as the opportunity for mutual fellowship and

education among elders from various congregations.

b) What would be the content of the training? There are several aspects which should be included:

- general instruction in the areas of the Bible and theology (in particular, regarding any confessional standards of the church). The depth of this general instruction would, of course, depend on the degree of previous Christian education received by the newly elected elders;
- general overview of the organization, history, and present situation of the Church of which the congregation is a part with particular emphasis on its governmental structures;
- particular instruction regarding the office of elders, and elders' responsibilities (both individually and collectively):
 - . elders as Christian leaders in and for the congregation
 - . responsibilities of elders, as well as other church leaders (e.g., pastors, deacons), and the partnership of these various offices of ministry
 - . practical training for particular tasks such as administration of finances, visitation, leadership in worship (especially where elders participate in administering the sacrament of the Lord's Supper).
- some orientation regarding the carrying out of their responsibilities within that particular Christian community. (For example, what are the needs, programmes, etc., at the present time?)

Although such training would primarily be directed toward elders, it might also be open to any interested member of the congregation.

The basic printed resources for the training of elders would include the church's book of order (setting out the organization and polity of that church's government) and the church's confessional standards, along with the Bible. In addition, some churches have published specific curricula for the training of church officers, and have found such useful both for those being trained and for those leading the training.

c) When would this training occur? Ideally, training would occur prior to (or at the beginning of) the elders' first term of service. In addition, it might also be important to offer opportunities for periodic continuing education for elders. Finally, similar educational opportunities might be offered from time to time for the whole congregation, thus enabling church members to understand better the work of the Church and of its offices of ministry.

10. Ministry and Power

All ministries are given by the Spirit for the purpose of building up the community and enabling its members to live to the glory of God. The authority of Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit conferred on those called into a ministry find their fulfilment in faithful service within the church and to the world. Yet all ministries are open to perversion through the misunderstanding or misuse of authority and power in ways which contradict the Gospel.

To live up to the true intention of the ministry is in the first place a matter of personal faith and commitment within the context of the community of faith. But there is more to be said. The exercise of ministry is affected by social, political, economic and cultural factors within each society. Thus ministries in the Church can also be perverted by the conscious or unconscious alignment with the power patterns of society. It is important to be aware of these factors and to face them consciously. Two extremes need to be avoided – on the one hand the naive assumption that faith in Jesus Christ makes us automatically free and exempt from the temptation to abuse power and, on the other hand, the cynical assessment that the Church is inevitably subject to the same patterns of power as society.

The danger of perversion by power varies from situation to situation. A careful analysis of the factors at work is required in each setting.

There is no structure providing an ultimate safeguard against perversion of power. The Church and its ministries depend on the power of the Spirit to be effectively faithful to its calling. But there are structures setting limits on the impact of power. The ministry of elders is meant to be such a structure. As a collegial ministry it should prevent domination and ruling by individuals.

Still, the ministry of elders can be corrupted and deformed in various ways:

- Elders can fall into an attitude of submissiveness leaving the responsibility of actual leadership to the pastors and the authorities of the wider Church.

- Instead of supporting the proclamation of the Gospel in partnership with the pastors, elders can seek power and control over the pastors (and over deacons).
- Elders can develop into a small ruling group not recognizing that the authority of Christ has been given primarily to the whole congregation. Instead of rallying the whole congregation and giving expression to its deepest aspirations, they can block the active participation of all members in the life of the church.
- All elders also have positions in society. Their role in society inevitably interacts with the exercise of their ministry. The experience and relationships they have in daily life offer a considerable enrichment of the ministry of the church, because they can provide an understanding of, and entry into spheres of life otherwise closed to the congregation. However, this interaction may also constitute a hindrance for the exercise of the ministry in at least two ways: a) On the basis of their daily experience, elders may be tempted to apply to the work of the church strategies which are foreign to the Spirit of the Gospel, e.g. methods of achieving efficiency and success which guide industrial production; b) Elders connected with certain interest groups or power structures in society may be tempted to prevent the congregation from speaking and acting in faithfulness to the Gospel, e.g. elders representing the classes of the rich may not favour a clear witness on the side of marginalized and oppressed people.

In each situation elders need to assess the impact of power on the exercise of their ministry. Where are the dangers of perversion which may lead to a betrayal of the Gospel, to power struggles, divisions, and eventually apostasy?

Jesus came to serve (Luke 22; 27). He resisted the temptation of power. Through his cross and resurrection he disarmed the principalities and powers. Through the Spirit, people now receive freedom and power to serve. Through the act of ordination, elders have been placed under the rule of Christ, and have received the promise that the temptation of power can be overcome.

11. The Role of Elders at Regional, National and Global Levels of the Church's Life.

Throughout the centuries, Reformed churches have stressed the need for synodal forms of church government at district, regional, and national levels.

In practice, the churches have used different terminology, when referring to these levels. The governing body at the level of several congregations has sometimes been called "presbytery" or "classis;" at the district or regional level, "synod" or "assembly;" at the national level, National or General Assembly/Synod. In different churches, these various governing bodies may meet once or several times a year, with the national assemblies of some churches meeting only every third or fourth year.

These "levels" of church government are not intended to form a hierarchy, but rather ever-widening circles of Christian fellowship, witness, mutual accountability, and care. Reformed churches have maintained that what is valid for the life of the local Christian community also applies to other levels of church life – leadership and authority need to be exercised collegially.

In principle, all these bodies (hereafter referred to as "synods") comprise both pastors and elders as delegates. "Every minister shall bring with him to the synods one or more elder and deacon from his church (Confessio Gallicana 1559)." They represent their local communities in the synods and interpret the decisions of the synod to their communities. The link between the life of the local Christian communities and the decision-making in the synods is essential. Synods are occasions for common invocation of the Holy Spirit, for seeking to discern the will of God in dialogue and exchange, and for common decision-making in accountability to the Christian communities.

Traditionally, Reformed churches have not stressed the need for permanent structures of leadership at district, regional, and national levels. They have provided leadership from assembly to assembly, with a minimum of infrastructure. However, with the growing complexity of modern society, the need for a common witness of the church at the levels of district, region, nation – and indeed the world – has also increased. Thus, there has been a need for a more regular exchange, *and* for providing the organizational structures to support the church's work and witness at all of these levels. In response to this challenge, many churches have developed new structures of administrative leadership. Commissions have multiplied and bureaucracy has increased in almost all churches, in order to cope with the need at all levels of the church's life for on-going decision-making and administration between meetings of the various synods. More and more, there are persons (most often pastors) who serve in specialized administrative ministries at levels of the church beyond the local Christian community. The increasing need for joint witness has led some churches to recognize the

positive aspects of a personal "episcopal" ministry in providing oversight and pastoral care.

At the same time, within many Reformed churches, various movements have arisen which are organized around a particular issue of concern (e.g. racial justice, human rights, ecology, peace-making). These movements attract people from various parts of the church, and seek to find their place in the life and mission of the church and to make their impact on the church's "official" governing bodies.

It is important to find ways to maintain the Reformed principles of church government within, and in light of, these new structures of administration and witness.

What is the role of elders beyond the local Christian community? In assuming their responsibilities in a particular Christian community, elders accept at the same time a wider responsibility. The ministry of elders has, inherently, a universal dimension; it is important to stress that dimension today, even more than in the past.

Elders can and should contribute to the effective interaction between the life and mission of the local Christian community, and that of the church at other levels. Moreover, the partnership of all offices of ministry needs to be maintained at all levels of church leadership.

In addition to being active participants in all official governing bodies (synods), elders may well be called to serve the wider Church. As the great issues of our time are more and more global in character, it is essential that elders be aware of and support the life and witness of the universal Church. They may be called to participate in international exchange and to contribute to the

building up of the universal communion of the Church. In any case, it is part of their responsibility to keep alive in each community the sense of the universal calling of the Church.

Within their community, it may also be necessary for certain elders to take on the responsibility of linking their own community with less formal movements and specialized, issue-oriented organizations which have arisen within the Church. In this way, the local Christian community will have access to (and input into) the work and witness of these movements, *and* can more readily help to keep such movements grounded in the Gospel and integrated into the life and mission of the whole Church.

Elders' associations beyond the boundaries of particular Christian communities. In some Reformed churches, elders have formed district, regional, or national associations. In many cases, such associations of elders have provided positive opportunities for mutual support and exchange, education and witness. In that respect, such associations should be commended and encouraged. At the same time, however, care should be taken to see that such elder associations do not take the place of elder participation in the "official" governing bodies of the church, or that such associations are misused in divisive ways which weaken the partnership of all offices of ministry.

12. Eldership in Ecumenical Discussion

"We believe in the Holy Spirit, the one holy catholic and apostolic Church." When Reformed churches join in this confession, they mean by Church not simply the

fellowship of all Reformed churches, but the people of God in all confessions and places. The Reformers' concern was to gather the Church around its Head, Jesus Christ. They did not intend to found a new Church but to renew the one Church of Jesus Christ. The division which actually ensued was contrary to their will and intention. "Far from authorizing them to remain self-contained, the confession by which the Reformed churches live constrains them to seek dialogue and unity outside their own boundaries (General Council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, Preparatory Documents on Mission and Unity, p. 59, 1989)."

As we enter into dialogue with other churches, we need to listen to their voices and, together with them, seek solutions which allow God's people to live in visible unity. The conclusion that no single structure of the Church can be derived with certainty from Scripture opens us to the possibility of envisioning, in dialogue, structures other than those familiar in the Reformed tradition. The guiding principle of such visioning should be the conviction that structures need to serve the unity of the Church in faith, life, and witness. On that basis, Reformed churches can, in principle, concur with the suggestion that the threefold ministry of bishop, presbyter and deacon – which in the course of the second and third centuries became established as the pattern of ordained ministry throughout the church – "may serve today as an expression of the unity we seek and as a means for achieving it" (WCC Faith and Order Commission, Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry, paragraph 22). We can respond positively to this proposal especially when it is recognized that this "threefold pattern stands evidently in need of reform" (paragraph 24) in all churches, and that there must be, therefore, room for common investigation.

A similar openness was also characteristic of John Calvin. He clearly asserts that the Church has always needed and will always need ministries in order to fulfil its calling. But as soon as he comes to speak of the individual ministries and their forms, he uses remarkable caution. In his reflections on elders and deacons, clauses such as "I believe" or "if my judgment does not deceive me" appear. Here Calvin leaves room for further insights and developments, and in his dealings with other churches he did not insist upon the order which he had established in Geneva. As long as the Gospel is proclaimed, unity can be attained under different ecclesiastical forms.

This flexibility does not mean, however, that questions of Church order and ministries are of minor importance for the Reformed churches, or that we have no insights to offer. In dialogue we shall insist that the following four convictions need to be taken into account if common solutions are to be found:

- Priority to the achievement of communion in Christ in each place. The Church's unity must primarily be made visible at the local level.
- The participation of the whole people of God in the worship, life, and witness of the Church. The order of the Church, and of its ministries, must be so established as to enhance the priesthood of *all* believers. Lay people are to participate in Church leadership.
- The need for a variety of permanent ministries to ensure the fulfilment of certain basic tasks of the Church – the proclamation of the Word and the administration of the sacraments, teaching and education, mutual care and discipline, diakonia.

- Collegial leadership in the congregation and at all levels of church life. This does not mean that Reformed churches are opposed in principle to the personal ministry of pastors or bishops. We can affirm the statement that the "ordained ministry should be exercised in a personal, collegial, and communal way" (Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry, paragraph 26). As long as the personal ministry of pastors and bishops serves the proclamation of the word and as long as their ministry is effectively supplemented by collegial bodies, it has its place in the order of the Church. The personal and the collegial dimensions of the ordained ministry of the Church are inseparably linked. Jesus Christ is not represented in the community by the leadership of individuals but rather by the interaction within a group. The fact that presbyters are mentioned in the Bible always in the plural is significant. It reminds us that leadership in dialogue belongs to the essence of the Church.

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