



Ecclesial elders

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THE CONCEPT of elders goes back beyond Abraham's time, even before the time of Noah. The word for elder in Hebrew is *zaqen*, and simply means an aged person, not necessarily one in a position of authority. Other Hebrew words for old age are *ziqnah* and *sebah*, and there is also the Aramaic word *sab*, which is peculiar to the Aramaic portion of the book of Ezra. They all mean basically 'grey-headed', and are distinct from the word *gadol*, meaning seniority, which can also apply to any person who is older than another.

The New Testament equivalent to *zaqen* is *presbuteros*, meaning generally an aged person, but mostly indicative of senior leaders. It is from this word that the term 'priest' is derived. Other lesser-used New Testament words, meaning old-age generally, are *gerōn*, *gēras*, and *gēraskō*.

Elders in the Old Testament

Patriarchs such as Abraham were the undisputed ruling elders of their families, and as these families grew into tribes the older men formed councils to deal with major issues. The Old Testament speaks of the elders who sat in the city gate (Lam. 5:14). They would be men of advancing years, with the ability to make wise and just decisions. When Lot was in Sodom he apparently became such a person: "And there came two angels to Sodom at even; and Lot sat in the gate of Sodom: and Lot seeing them rose up to meet them; and he bowed himself with his face toward the ground" (Gen. 19:1). Whether it was wise on Lot's part to have been so involved is not our immediate concern, but it indicates that he was by that time a valued citizen and perhaps beyond middle age. Other Old Testament references to city-gate elders can be found in Deuteronomy 16:18; 21:19,20; 25:7; Joshua 20:4 and Ruth 4:1-12.

When captives in Egypt, Israel had their own tribal elders (Ex. 3:16), and during the wilder-

ness journey seventy such elders were appointed to assist Moses to govern the people (Num. 11:16,17). The Law of Moses instructed the people to respect elders: "Thou shalt rise up before the hoary head, and honour the face of the old man, and fear thy God: I am the LORD" (Lev. 19:32). It may be recalled that the division between the ten tribes of Israel and the southern tribes of Judah and Benjamin resulted directly from Rehoboam's disregard of the advice of the elders (1 Kgs. 12:8).

Jewish elders at the time of Christ

A council of elders in each town and village was common in the time of Christ. For example, Luke 7:3 records that the centurion who sought Jesus to heal his sick servant actually made his initial approach via the local Jewish elders. From a stranger's point of view this would seem the right and proper approach, and it indicates their commonly accepted role in the community.

The phrase 'chief priests and elders' is common in the Gospels, and it sheds light on the judiciary system that prevailed at that time. We are reliably informed that the three types of courts in Judea at that time consisted of the following: **Civil courts.** One in each city, governed by three elders as judges.

Criminal courts. In some cities only, comprising a judge, elders on either side of him, and three rows of 'disciples of the sages' in front, twenty-three members in all.

The Great Sanhedrin. This was only at Jerusalem, and consisted of seventy-one members: a judge with elders on either side, forming a semicircle in order of seniority; two secretaries on each side of the judge, and three rows of 'disciples of the sages' seated in front.

In all three cases, the elders seem to be the ones who made the major judgement, and in the latter two cases the 'disciples of the sages' acted as a kind of jury.

The apostles and elders

The meetings of the apostles and elders in the early ecclesia were probably similar in structure to the latter two Jewish councils, in that the apostles, though senior in position, were still dependent on the elders for the final decision. The council of Jerusalem worked very much this way, as the following passages indicate:

“And *the apostles and elders* came together for to consider of this matter. And when there had been much disputing, Peter rose up, and said unto them, Men and brethren, ye know how that a good while ago God made choice among us, that the Gentiles by my mouth should hear the word of the gospel, and believe” (Acts 15:6,7);

“Then pleased it *the apostles and elders, with the whole church*, to send chosen men of their own company to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas; namely, Judas surnamed Barsabas, and Silas, chief men among the brethren” (v. 22).

It is worth noting that the final decision on such a weighty issue was not made by the apostles and elders alone, but required the approval of the whole ecclesia.

Most probably the elders acted alone on minor issues without involving either the apostles or the whole assembly, but the two passages in Acts 15 give insight as to how major issues were resolved in those times, and suggests that they were done in a *democratic* manner. This is in sharp contrast with the case of Diotrophes (3 Jno. vv. 9,10), who was very much an autocrat, and was severely censured by John for his high-handedness. If there were other elders in the ecclesia he completely dominated them.

Bishops and deacons

The Greek word translated ‘bishop’ in the New Testament (*episkopos*) simply means ‘overseer’ or ‘shepherd’, and the weight of evidence indicates that the office of a bishop was identical to that of an elder, since elders were also overseers (1 Pet. 5:1-4; Acts 20:17,28). A comparison of the requirements for elders and bishops in Titus 1:5-9 and 1 Timothy 3:1-7 suggests that they were one and the same, especially since 1 Timothy 3:5 compares a bishop with the father of a family.

Deacons (*diakonos*) were essentially serving brethren who did the day-to-day duties of the ecclesia rather than the main decision-making. Their qualifications are found in 1 Timothy 3:8-13, verse 10 of which states that they must first

be proven before being given office. Peter commands that their duties should be taken seriously and undertaken in God’s strength, not their own (1 Pet. 4:11).

The appointment of elders

It is reasonable to assume that the earliest believing elders were former synagogue elders, like, for instance, Crispus and Sosthenes (Acts 18:8,17; 1 Cor. 1:1,14). Such members would bring with them valuable experience and wisdom.

The appointment of elders was primarily done by the Spirit-guided apostles, and seems not to have involved the kind of election process we have today (Acts 14:23; 20:17,28). However, they were able to delegate this appointing to non-apostles, as was the case with Timothy and Titus (Tit. 1:5; 2 Tim. 2:2), and possibly other experienced disciples who travelled around, such as Epaphras and Luke.

The passage in Titus 1 suggests that some ecclesias were remiss in not having the initiative to appoint their own elders. This might have been because of lack of experience, and possibly the inability to decide between contenders with equal abilities, as was the case in the selection between Barsabas and Matthias for apostolic status (Acts 1:23-26). In such cases a visiting apostle would make the selections.

The work of elders

The work of the elders was considered a very serious responsibility, in that they had to rule “as they that must give account” (Heb. 13:17). They were to be treated with respect (1 Tim. 5:1), and considered to be worthy of double honour (v. 17). No accusation was to be received against any without two or three witnesses (v. 19). Their principal task was to rule or govern in the ecclesia (Heb. 13:7,17,24).

They were to judge in the sense of settling issues, and those “least esteemed” in the body were unsuitable for such work, as the RSV and NIV renderings of 1 Corinthians 6:4,5 indicate. Regarding this passage, it is surely not accidental that Paul’s comment, “Is it so, that there is not a wise man among you?”, follows immediately after the problem of the man who ‘had his father’s wife’ in the previous chapter. It should be noted that it was not so much the man himself whom Paul rebukes, but the ecclesia, and, by inference, the appointed elders, for not taking action. It teaches us that it is one thing to seek a position of authority, but to pursue honour

itself without the courage to act is a poor motivation.

The elders had to “[take] the oversight” of the ecclesia, and “feed the flock of God” (1 Pet. 5:2; cf. Acts 20:17,28). They were to pray over the sick when called to do so (Jas. 5:14), and be capable of preaching and teaching the Word of God (1 Tim. 5:17).

The qualifications of elders

As stated above, elders were also bishops, a word which means ‘shepherds’ in the Greek. Hence we have the words of Peter: “The elders which are among you I exhort, who am also an elder, and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that shall be revealed: Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind; neither as being lords over God’s heritage, but being ensamples to the flock” (1 Pet. 5:1-3).

It is not absolutely certain that all bishops were elders, but their qualifications are found in Titus 1:7-9 and 1 Timothy 3:1-7. They had to be “blameless” and to have “one wife”. They must have believing children, and not be dishonest, nor violent, etc. They were not to be novices. They were also to be valued as ecclesial fathers (1 Cor. 4:15), but not actually called such (Mt. 23:9). It goes without saying, therefore, that elders needed to live up to such high expectations in

order to become the “ensamples” that Peter specifies.

Conclusions

In the absence of direct Spirit guidance, our own method of electing ecclesial elders is perhaps the best possible, except that our arranging brethren combine the work of elders and deacons. As we have said, deacons and deaconesses were ministrants, who did the more common tasks in the ecclesia, leaving the elders to handle the weightier issues.

Our system of electing arranging brethren does not normally make any stipulation regarding age, although, since experience is usually the criterion, those elected are usually middle-aged and upwards. It would be nearer to the Scriptural model if the general administrative work in the ecclesia was left to an arranging committee corresponding to deacons, whilst a smaller group of older, more experienced brethren were the elected elders, taking the oversight generally, and advising on the more difficult issues. This, of course, may not always be possible in small ecclesias.

Finally, the Acts 15 model teaches us that it is a Scripturally correct and wise policy for the whole ecclesia to give their final approval on all major issues. It is a policy that has served our community well, and we should be grateful to those early brethren who instituted it.



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Iron and clay at the EU summit

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THERE IS a deep irony about the image seen by Nebuchadnezzar in his dream. It represents the kingdoms of men united against the things of God, but this unity also has an inbuilt disunity. For, although the image has a head consisting only of gold, its feet and toes are iron and clay. In interpreting this, Daniel says: “And whereas thou sawest iron mixed with miry clay, they shall mingle themselves with the seed of men: but they shall not cleave one to

another, even as iron is not mixed with clay” (2:43).

When the Roman Empire ruled, it did so with absolute authority. Today in Europe there are those who no doubt would like to see a return to this type of rule. There is, however, an ingredient present today which cannot be ignored and which prevents a return to a model of European rule that is iron through and through. This ingredient is the increased influence of the