



Elders' Training

Making a good team for a church

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Introduction

During the mid-twentieth century something of a revolution took place in Reformed evangelical churches. The Bible's teaching on elders was rediscovered.

Instead of churches being led almost exclusively by a solitary man – the minister / pastor – it dawned on congregations that the Bible teaches that churches in NT times were led by groups of godly men. Leadership was, under God, the work of a team not an individual, Acts 14.23; 1 Peter 5.1. The qualifications required of men to be appointed to the position of elder are spelled out in 1 Timothy 3.1-7 and Titus 1.5-9. This team of men, not just the pastor, oversaw the church and particularly cared for the spiritual needs of the church through prayer and the word of God. The man we call the pastor or minister was one of the elders with responsibility to preach and teach the Scriptures, 1 Timothy 5.17, but worthy of double honour.

So, churches rightly appointed elders. No longer was everything dependent on the minister. The elders were there to support him and to share the work with him as they could.

Training?

But generally speaking, having appointed elders in the churches not much more was done. The elders were left to get on with it. The result was that though some elderships flourished and did much good in the churches, others didn't.

The idea of training for leaders is recommended in Scripture. In the OT there were schools of prophets, 2 Kings 2.15; 4.38 etc. The Lord Jesus trained his disciples and sent them out, Matthew 10.5. The apostle Paul encouraged Timothy to train others to teach, 2 Timothy 2.2.

This booklet is meant to suggest some areas where training for elders might be given. It may be that an eldership has been in place for many years, got stuck in a rut and would benefit from going back to basics. It may be that a church has just appointed new elders and some training might be appropriate as they start out together. Or perhaps a church needs to appoint new elders, but the possible men would like to know a little more of what is required of them before they allow their names to be put forward.

In all these scenarios and more, I hope this booklet might be useful in providing a sketch or a framework for helping elders' teams to be the best they can be for God's churches.

1: Taking responsibility

Being a Christian is not easy. On his first missionary journey, having warned the new Christians that ‘we must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom’, Acts 14.22, the apostle Paul got elders appointed in each church, Acts 14.23. New converts are vulnerable. Mature Christians and churches always face challenges too. But elders are those prepared to take responsibility and try to help. Elders are not of the essence of the church – that’s the believers themselves – but elders are necessary for the well-being and health of the church.

The work is too much to leave to one man – the pastor. He needs others around him to support him and help care for the people. There needs to be a good team.

We live in a society now which is almost totally sold on individualism. People have become generally takers rather than givers. If they are going to attend church, then it’s about what they and their family get out of it. We love the benefits of the church, but we don’t want any responsibility. But church leaders – and elders in particular (including the pastor) – are those who under God are prepared to take responsibility.

Shepherds and fathers

There are two dominant pictures of the work of elders in the Scriptures. A shepherd is one picture. A father is another. Both images are about caring and, of course, they overlap in some ways.

Two initial points are to be made. *First*, both these jobs are for ordinary men. The first century shepherd was very much just an ordinary Joe – not a genius. And, of course, fathers are ordinary men. You don’t have to have unusual skills or dozens of certificates to be a good father. *Second*, much of what it is to be a good father or indeed a good shepherd is learned on the job. Yes, read books about those things – that’s good. But the real skills come as you are hands on.

- **Shepherds**

What is the elder’s work? It is to be a spiritual shepherd of God’s people, 1 Peter 5.1,2. What does a shepherd do? Psalm 23 gives us the key ideas: provision, guidance, protection, company, well-being.

Provision – rest and green pastures, feeding the sheep. We feed God’s people

with God's word and spell out God's love in Christ.

Guidance – elders are those to whom church folk turn for guidance as they face perplexities in life – work, marriage, children etc. They also try to bring back those who stray.

Protection – as people walk through dark places, elders come alongside and remind them of God's promises.

Company – it is so good to have someone with you to face the journey. 'You are with me', says the Psalmist.

All this is with an aim to their spiritual well-being – that they enjoy God and the gospel feast he has laid and arrive safely in heaven.

- Fathers

Look at 1 Timothy 3.4,5. Elders look after people spiritually and care for them like their own children. Elders love their people with a real affection. And what are you looking for? Just as with your own children, you are looking for people to grow to maturity – so they can stand on their own two feet. There's tenderness, 1 Thessalonians 2.7,8 – like a mother. And, also, a lot of encouragement, 1 Thessalonians 2.11,12 – like a father. Encouragement means both comforting and urging onwards.

And in both these pictures, you try to lead by example.

Who are you looking after?

What is the nature of your people? I want to point up 4 things here.

- Human

We are all made in God's image, Genesis 1.27,28, who is, in his very essence, a relational being, a God of love within the mystery of the Trinity – the Father knows the Son and the Son knows the Father, Matthew 11.27, and no-one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God, 1 Corinthians 2.11. So, made in God's image, human beings are relational beings and must be treated as such or else you will not do right by them. They are people who need to be known, personally. An elder needs to take time to be with his people. He can't spend all his time doing that – but he needs to factor it in (see chapter 5).

- Sheep

The shepherd wants his sheep to follow him. Look at John 10.1-6. It's the same with congregations and leaders. Note – here we have the other side of the coin. It's not only that the shepherd must know his sheep, 10.27, but that they know him. He is not distant. He is not a stranger; they recognise his voice. They trust him.

- *Sinners*

The gospel teaches us that in Christ we are saints, but still sinners at the same time. To pretend that we are already all we should be is hypocrisy – a blight of many churches. The church needs to keep hearing the gospel – because they are still sinners and need to be continually reminded that their standing with God is not about their godliness, or their deserving, but always about his grace in Christ. Beware legalism!

- *Family*

You are looking after God's people not just as individuals but as a community, a flock, a family. And you are seeking, under God to build them together as a house for God, a temple of the Lord.

So as an elder, your work includes building up and preserving the unity of the church. You need to find ways of getting alongside people who have fallen out and reconciling them. You need to be a peacemaker, Matthew 5.9. Often you sow the seeds of peace by appreciating people and what they've done – and telling them so. And by encouraging others to do the same.

So, an elder is someone who is called by God and the church, to take responsibility for the church as a shepherd and a father, treating them as human beings who follow Jesus and, despite their sins, are God's family.

2: Holding firmly to the trustworthy message

The local church is to be ‘the pillar and foundation of the truth’, 1 Timothy 3.15, to hold high God’s truth to a lost world. Because the world is under the influence of the devil, the father of lies, John 8.44, the church will always have to ‘contend for the faith that was once entrusted to the saints,’ Jude v3. A church’s leadership, especially the elders, have particular responsibility in this, Titus 1.9. Elders must have a good grasp of doctrine.

- *God’s truth is the church’s treasure*

The Scriptures are God-breathed, 2 Timothy 3.16 – not the words of men but the word of God. The gospel is the message from outside, from heaven, from the Lord Jesus, Galatians 1.12. It alone brings salvation. So, the truth of Jesus Christ is to be viewed as the treasure of the church. It must be guarded, 2 Timothy 1.13, 14.

- *Sound doctrine*

The spiritual health of individual Christians and of a church depend on God’s truth – that’s why the apostles use the phrase ‘sound doctrine’, 1 Timothy 1.10; Titus 1.9, 2.1 etc. – because it makes us spiritually ‘sound’ (fit, robust, vigorous). We are transformed by the renewing of our minds, Romans 12.2, and it is God’s truth which does the renewing. Without the truth we remain worldly and infantile spiritually.

Notice, that God did not entrust his truth to a group of academic scholars or to highly respected publishing houses, but to local churches made up of ordinary people with ordinary men as leaders.

The need to defend the truth today

Look at some sections of your church’s doctrinal basis, which seeks to sum up the main teachings of the Bible.¹

Think about how you could use these truths to comfort or encourage a Christian facing trouble.

- *What we believe about God*

We believe in the one true and living God, co-equal in three Persons, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, who is invisible, personal, omnipresent, eternal, dependent on none, unchanging, truthful, trustworthy, almighty,

¹ Here I have used the 1966 Statement of Faith used by many Grace Baptist Churches

eternal, dependent on none, unchanging, truthful, trustworthy, almighty, sovereign, omniscient, righteous, holy, good, loving, merciful, long-suffering and gracious, the Creator of all things (Genesis 1; Deuteronomy. 32; 1 Timothy 1:17; Romans 9; Matthew 3).

- *What we believe about the Bible*

We believe that Almighty God in His great goodness has revealed all that is necessary to life and salvation in the sixty-six books of the Old and New Testament which is the Word of God. All Scripture was given by inspiration of God, is infallible and inerrant, and is sufficient in all matters of faith and practice. Its authority is derived from its Author and not from the opinions of men (Psalm 19; 2 Timothy 3:14-17; 2 Peter 1:16-21).

- *What we believe about salvation*

We believe that the Lord Jesus Christ shall come again to judge all people, to raise the dead, both righteous and unrighteous, and that the righteous shall be glorified and enjoy everlasting life and the wicked endure everlasting punishment. (John 14:1-3; Acts 1:6-11; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; 2 Thessalonians 1:5-12).

We believe that the elect, who are called by grace, are justified in the sight of God on account of the imputed righteousness of Jesus Christ which is received by faith alone. They shall persevere in holiness and enter into the joys of heaven (John 10; Romans 8).

(Martin Luther said, 'If the article of Justification be once lost, then all Christian doctrine is lost... He that strays from Christian righteousness, must needs fall into the righteousness of the law'.)

Secondary issues

Crucial here is that we make a distinction between primary, secondary and lesser truths. We are to stand and be prepared to die for the gospel (the truth that saves) not for a particular shade of eschatology or whatever. Liberals undermine primary doctrines while fundamentalists make all beliefs primary and so divide the church unnecessarily. Elders must be alive to both dangers. We must often ask, 'How important is the issue?' In Romans 14, for example, it was obvious there were differing views among Christians concerning the OT food laws. Paul had his own opinion, v14, but he did not push it. Something more important was at stake, v19, 20.

Many find a theological triage, devised by Al Mohler, helpful in this area.

- *First level issues*

Doctrines most central and essential to Christian faith. These include the Trinity, the full deity and humanity of Jesus, the finished work of Christ in atonement and resurrection, justification by faith alone, the authority of Scripture, how I am saved. Denial of these doctrines represents nothing less than an eventual denial of Christianity itself.

- *Second level issues*

These are distinguished from first-order issues by the fact that believing Christians may disagree on second order issues and still be real Christians, though this disagreement will create significant practical boundaries between believers. These include things like the candidates and mode of baptism, church government, the role of women in the church. Disagreement on these issues will mean that we can enjoy fellowship, but not in the same local church.

- *Third level issues*

These are truths over which Christians may disagree and remain in a local church together. They include issues such as eschatology, the age of the earth, use of alcohol, use of Sundays, education of children of believers, use of contraception, gifts of the Holy Spirit today. Christians may find themselves in disagreement here often because of varied interpretations of difficult parts of Scripture. Nevertheless, they can stand together on gospel issues of more urgent importance.

- *Fourth level issues*

These are issues on which the Bible does not speak directly. Consequently, within a Biblical framework, the application of wisdom is needed and Christians may see things differently. Examples of these things are whether the churches should have closed during Covid, Brexit, Climate change etc. Here Christians should do all they can to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, Ephesians 4.2,3.

3: Time management for elders

Crucial for elders who are in secular work or who have other commitments is the question of time. How are they going to be able to fulfil the role of an elder simultaneously with looking after their families and being a good workplace colleague? How can you be a good elder when you can't do everything?

If you don't get this right, it will bring a great deal of personal stress, maybe distress to your family and you will not enjoy being an elder – which is not good for you or the church, Hebrews 13.17.

Routine and responsibility

To begin, it is worth noting some initial observations from Genesis 1 and 2. *First*, routine is your friend. When God created the world, he ordered time with built in rhythms and routines. God made day and night, Genesis 1.3-5, the months and the years, etc. He himself set the example of a rhythm of work and rest with the weekly Sabbath, Genesis 2.1-4. His plan was that we should be creatures of routine and habit. Therefore, if we can structure our involvement as elders into some kind of manageable routine it will be best for us.

Further, God made Adam a responsible being, Genesis 2.16, 17. Especially God put us in charge of ourselves. So, the key to time management is managing ourselves – self-discipline. In taking on eldership it is not good being disorganised. It will require a sensible scheduling of routines. How often will you meet as elders? What time of day? How long, approximately, will meetings last?

Covering for each other

We find that NT churches had a plurality of elders, Acts 14.23, Titus 1.5. The apostles never envisaged one elder alone leading a church. One of the reasons for this is that no man can be on call all the time without wearing himself out. Elders are meant to share together the load of caring for the church.

As the pastor is the full-time elder with responsibility for teaching, 1 Tim. 5.17, he can be expected to be more available than other elders. But precautions need to be taken that he does not wear himself out. Elders' meetings can share out tasks among the group. This requires willingness, 1 Peter 5.2, from everybody.

Focused responsibilities

As elders seek to keep a caring eye on all the church and its activities, it is often wise to apportion particular areas of church life to particular elders – with him reporting back to the full elders' meeting when necessary.

It can be helpful to think of the church as a 'spiritual factory' and to divide out responsibilities according to the 'process' of church. For example:

Elder 1: keeping an eye on evangelism and welcome.

Elder 2: looking after those who want to become church members / baptism.

Elders 3 & 4: focusing on the care of church members – youth, women, men, home groups and preaching.

Elder 5: concern for the mission and sending out missionaries, visiting them etc. and for those moving away.

This avoids all the elders trying to do everything. In adopting such a division of labour, elders need to be diligent in their assignment and also to trust one another.

Delegating to deacons

It is true that elders should be in overall control of all the church does, 1 Timothy 5.19. This is corroborated by the fact that when churches were set up in NT times, it was elders who were appointed first, with no mention of deacons, Acts 14.23; Titus 1.5. It seems that only later as the work expanded that deacons were appointed to relieve the elders. We see this pattern in Acts 6.

Hence, we find that although the elders ultimately are responsible for everything, they can delegate some things to others while concentrating on the spiritual care of the congregation. This frees up elders.

But beware, there is a tendency in some elderships to be more involved in what might legitimately termed 'deacons' work'. They make extra work for themselves instead of trusting the deacons. Elders with a background in business or manual work naturally feel more at home in dealing with things like building projects and finances etc with which they are familiar. But they are distracted from their true task.

Wives on board

Becoming an elder does involve sacrifice. It will mean a certain amount of sacrifice on behalf of your wife and family. But this is part of what it is to be a Christian, Mark 8.34, we deny ourselves, take up the cross and follow Jesus. This needs to be talked through and agreed. A wife needs to be on board – prepared perhaps to sacrifice some time with her husband in order for him to be taking responsibility and helping Christ's church. Time is precious these days. But sacrificing time for Christ and his work is always worthwhile.

4: Promoting church membership

Though the elders should be welcoming and kind to all who attend services, they have particular responsibility for the church membership – those Christians who have committed themselves to the church. So, elders need to be clear on the matter of church membership.

Church membership is right

Here are five considerations as to why we believe in church membership:

- *1. Church membership is Scriptural*

The NT churches were not loose affiliations of Christians who happened to meet together when they felt like it. They were communities of people who were, first of all, committed to Christ but secondly were deeply committed to one another. They were a community who felt for one another, Romans 12.15.

Hence the metaphor of the church as a body, with members, 1 Corinthians 12.12, 27; Romans 12.3f. We are each given gifts by the Spirit, to serve one another 1 Corinthians 12.7. This only makes sense in the context of committed membership to a specific local congregation. The idea of being committed to Christ the head without being committed to Christ's body, the church, is nonsense in NT terms. Similarly, we find that the local church is a family of committed 'brothers and sisters' with Christ the elder brother.

Behind this teaching you have the OT concept of the people of God as a distinct community with lists of names. There was a membership.

- *2. Church membership is spiritual*

The NT teaches that active participation in a local church is God's will for all Christians. Yes, there is a personal or individual aspect to our Christian lives. But there is also meant to be a corporate aspect. Thus, we find so many 'one another' commands in the NT letters. We are to be devoted to one another in brotherly love, Romans 12.10. We are to accept one another just as Christ accepted us, Romans 15.7. We are to be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ, God forgave us, Ephesians 4.32. Such things are central to true Christian behaviour and discipleship.

As individuals, it is through interaction with each other that we grow spiritually in Christian character as we learn to love others different from ourselves. And

only within the church where there is commitment and trust do we have opportunity to develop our gifts in the service of others. Being committed to a local congregation is therefore not just useful but essential for spiritual growth to maturity.

- *3. Church membership is pastoral*

Church membership brings people under the pastoral care of the leadership of a church. We find in Scripture that God has ordained that all local churches should have leaders who have the responsibility before God to care for his people. The writer to the Hebrews speaks of leaders as those who ‘keep watch over you as men who must give an account’, Hebrews 3.17.

Again, we see the logic of church membership at this point. How can the leaders know who they responsible for unless there is a membership?

- *4. Church membership is responsible*

When someone becomes a church member, they are given responsibility. This may be a major reason why church membership is out of fashion. Contemporary people don’t like responsibility. They just want to attend without obligation.

Strikingly, part of the responsibility of members in NT churches was to be involved in the decision making of the church. Who should be allowed into membership? The church decides. Who decides whether candidates qualify and would be faithful leaders? It is the church. To whom are the leaders accountable should they step out of line? The answer is the members’ meeting, Matthew 18.15-17. That’s why a born-again church membership is required.

- *5. Church membership is powerful*

Church membership brings a practical unity. It is an acknowledgment that we all believe the same things. It is a statement that we are all committed to God and to each other. We are a community.

There is strength in such unity. That is why, for example, Paul is so keen for unity when he writes, Philippians 2.1-3. Individual twigs are easy to snap. But bundled together very hard to break. Church membership ties us together as Christians. Membership, rightly handled, makes for a strong church.

Who should be a church member?

Because church is meant to be the body of Christ, the family of God and has

responsibility in decision making – the church needs to be made up of born-again believers in whom the Holy Spirit dwells.

What is the credible evidence that someone is born again? 1 John addresses this question.

There are basically 3 marks that indicate that the Holy Spirit is in someone's life:

- The intellectual mark – what they believe about Jesus. 'Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God', 1 John 5.1. And of course, what is meant by 'the Christ', for John, is specified by the Scriptures. What is a sign of being truly born again? *First*, is what they believe about Jesus.
- The moral mark – sincere obedience to Christ. 'This is how we know we are in him: Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did,' 1 John 2.5b, 6. *Second*, their behaviour has changed. What is a sign that someone is born of God, born of the Spirit? 'No-one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God's seed remains in him; he cannot go on sinning because he is born of God', 1 John 3.9. A truly born-again person cannot be comfortable to accept sin as part of their lives. Rather, though they may fall at times, they pick themselves up, ask for forgiveness and push on with following Christ.
- The social mark – we love God's people and that indicates we love God. 'We know we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers and sisters', 1 John 3.14. *Thirdly*, they have a real affection for other Christians. 'Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God,' 1 John 4.7. Those who truly love their fellow disciples will not be content simply to have their name on a membership list. They will want to serve their brothers and sisters in the church. 'Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth,' 1 John 3.18.

We see that a candidate's acceptance of the reliability of the Bible is foundational to all these marks.

We cannot infallibly know whether someone is a Christian – but we look for credible evidence along these lines. And if truly Christians – the NT tells people to be baptised.

Responsibilities of church members

Here is an example of the expectations which a church should have of its members:

1. To confess that Jesus Christ, God's Son, died for our sins and rose again as Lord of all.

This is witnessed in baptism, daily life and is in accordance with the church's statement of faith.

2. To attend as far as is practically possible the meetings of the church, especially on Sundays.

As Christians we should want to meet with others of God's people in order to be an encouragement to each other, to be instructed in the Word and to worship. *Hebrews 10.25*

3. To pray regularly for all aspects of the church's life and ministry, for the Lord to build His church.

You cannot do this without your own personal quiet times and family prayers. *2 Corinthians 1.11*

4. To support the church financially.

We are encouraged to at least tithe our money. *Malachi 3.10*

5. To look for areas of service where your gifts may be used.

Elders may suggest some service, but it is always good to have volunteers. *Ephesians 4.16*

6. To respect the authority of the elders.

Elders do not lord it over the flock but are to be good shepherds responsible to Christ. *Hebrews 13.17*

7. To live a life that is holy, pleasing to God and good for His church.

Be in the world but not of it. *John 17.14-16, 1Peter 1.15, 16*

Part of an elder's duty will be to encourage people to live up to these commitments.

5: Practical shepherding

So far we have covered, the overall shape of what elders do. Now we will look at the practical side of helping the flock.

Knowing the flock

Helping people usually goes best if you have a prior relationship with them – you know them, they know you and trust you.

How does a 21st century elder go about knowing his flock? Whereas in past centuries people tended to work at home, and it was easy to visit with that slower pace of life – now often both husband and wife are out at work all day. So, what can the elders do to know their flock? Here are 7 suggestions.

- Sunday attendance

God's people gather on the Lord's Day for worship and encouragement, Psalm 122.1-2; Hebrews 10.25. Church on Sundays is an easy starting point with respect to checking in with people and seeing how they are doing in a non-threatening, casual way. Coffee following the service makes this very natural. It can be good for elders to arrive early – pray together early – so that they can be around to greet people as they arrive. You are about building good relationships – taking interest in people.

- Incarnational ministry

The ministry of Jesus is our example. He became one of us. 'The Word became flesh', John 1.14. Living among us the Son of God was tempted in all points just as we are and so is able to sympathise with us, even now, Hebrews 4.15, 16. We know our people by facing the same challenges which they do. If you can live among the people that can be a great help.

- Hospitality and Home Groups

Hospitality is mentioned many times in the NT and is required of church leaders, 1 Timothy 3.2; Titus 1.8. Hospitality is not so much about a laden table as about an open door – it is about welcoming, accepting and sharing with people. It is about love for the stranger (*philo – xenia*) – getting to know people you don't know.

This is especially a matter over which an elder and his wife need to come to some sensible agreement. It must not become a contentious issue between you, 1 Peter 4.9. Where people feel accepted, they open up. Home groups should be an extension of that same dynamic of hospitality among the church.

- *Creative loafing*

Jesus did not just teach his disciples. They were with him. There are various references to ‘incidental’ conversations, Luke 11.1; Mark 2.23; John 11.1-16. Jesus allowed himself to be known by the disciples in the ordinary things of life, and at the same time got to know them. To just hang around people when you can is good. Is there a men’s curry evening? Get there if at all possible. Is there a Spring Clean at the church – be there. I call this creative loafing. You don’t have to be there – you are just loafing. But it produces friendship and understanding. Is there a young people’s work? Drop in when you can. The leaders will feel supported.

- *Technology*

We are fortunate, in a busy world, to have the recent advance in communication through digital technology. This can be useful pastorally. We can phone. We can email. We can text. All of these can be helpful. Though bear in mind nothing is as good as face to face, 2 John 12; 3 John 13. This kind of technology is good to use to encourage people. It lets them know you are thinking of them. But none of these, nor the phone, are appropriate for serious crises or sensitive emotional matters. For such things you need face to face contact. This is full communication – tone of voice, facial expression, possibility of physical hug etc.

Also, if you are texting etc – it is good that your wife / other elders have access to what you are saying. Some elders have fallen by communicating inappropriately. You need to be accountable with such things. Further, be careful of misusing email / text by saying things in them that you would not say face to face – by way of anger.

- *Listening*

The Lord’s brother, James encourages us to have big ears and small mouths, James 1.19. If you are going to know people, you have to listen to them. This is obvious. But it is not always easy. We must train ourselves. Don’t be thinking of what you are going to say next in a conversation when you ought to be listening to the other person.

- *The prayer list*

The church has a membership list. As elders, make it into a prayer list – with a few people to pray for each day so that either in a week or a month or two months – you are able to bring each person of the church briefly to the Lord in prayer. We are called to be those who pray for people as well as those who shepherd the flock, James 5.14. And as you often pray for people you will of

course get to remember their situations and the Lord will give you a love for them.

Know your flock – and use the knowledge you gain to bless them.

Encouraging the flock

In our pastoral dealings we need constantly to try to aim for the heart. And our goal is always repentance and faith. Whatever the issue folk are facing, they will need a combination of these two basic things. (Sometimes a change of thinking about an issue – which is a kind of repentance). That's our aim, Colossians 2.6, 7.

- *Repentance from the heart*

We can come at this in two ways.

First, we can think in terms of uncovering the **idolatry** in the heart. Why are people spiritually sick, disobedient, lukewarm, less than wholehearted in their walk with God? It is because something else has taken the place of God in their hearts. There is something which has become more important to them than Christ. These are idols. They can take many forms – sex, money, power, family, reputation, self-regard. Why did David not own up over Bathsheba – because he loved his position of power as king and didn't want anything undermining that. Idols must be exposed and people brought to repentance. They are offensive to God. They damage people – because idols make us insensitive to God and spiritual things, Psalm 115.8. We become like what we worship. Show them this. Challenge and change their thinking.

Second, we can come at it from the point of view of **hypocrisy** – our inner lives not matching our outer lives. This is particularly the approach of the Lord Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. It's not just murder which is sin but hatred in the heart. It's not just the act of adultery which is wrong but lust in the heart. Jesus denounces the hypocritical Pharisees, Matthew 23.27, 28.

You must seek to gently bring conviction. I know making people feel guilty is out of fashion with our culture – but it isn't with the Holy Spirit, John 16.8.

- *Faith from the heart*

Not only do idols need to be exposed and hypocrisy forsaken, but people need to be inspired to put the Lord back in his rightful place in their hearts. So, we must show the goodness of God and the love of God to them. We love (him and others) because he first loved us, John 4.19.

Note four vital areas here when it comes to comforting and motivating the heart.

First, the Fatherhood of God in providence

This is where the Lord Jesus often goes to comfort his disciples, Matthew 10.28-31. Or Matthew 7.9-11 – our God hears our prayers as a father hears his children's requests. And he is not only our Father, but he is God – he is sovereign so we may trust him in all things, Romans 8.28. Very often people need this in daily life and as they face choices or worries of various kinds – redundancies, children astray etc.

Second, the glory of God in his goodness

For the Christian God is our Father in the most profound sense. One of the great names for God in the NT is 'the Father of mercies,' 2 Corinthians 1.3. The word 'father' denotes a man who has begotten children. What kind of 'children' does God beget? What flows out from his deepest being? Mercies! And, if we wanted any proof of that, it is God loving us so much that he sent his Son, came in the person of his Son, Jesus, to die in our place to pay for all our sins – that we might have a home in heaven. He is the Father of mercies and he is rich in mercy. The Puritan Thomas Goodwin writes: 'If your heart be hard, his mercies are tender. If your heart be dead, he has mercy to liven it. If you be sick, he has mercy to heal you. If you be sinful, he has mercies to sanctify and cleanse you. As large and as various as are your wants, so large and various are his mercies'.

Third, the Finished work of Christ in atonement

Through Christ, God is for us and we are safe forever, Romans 8.33, 38-39. People very often need assurance of God's love – especially in the light of their sins or as they get older and approach death. He won't let us go – John 10.27-29. Seek to inspire!

Fourth, the Future reward of obedience in glory

They are not wasting their time in being Christians – in works of love and mercy which may not be appreciated here – in working for the kingdom which is despised by the world, in facing all kinds of hardships while staying faithful, Romans 8.18; 2 Cor 4.17.

Hence, in your casual conversations or more formal meetings you need to be aiming at both repentance and faith. Obviously, one might need to be more prominent than the other according to the situation people are in – but overall, you need to aim at balance. True encouragement includes both aspects.

6: Praying as elders

The Lord Jesus Christ said, 'I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it,' Matthew 18.18. The church grows and exists amid a spiritual warfare.

This is a call to all Christians to pray. But church leaders especially should be men who pray.

Obstacles to prayer

Here are three common hindrances which will encourage us not to pray and need to be overcome.

- *A legalistic view of our sins*

All of us, including elders are sinners who are far from perfect. 'If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves,' 1 John 1.8. A sense of our sin and continuing failure can be something that makes us feel unworthy to pray and that God would not hear us. But the gospel is not about what we deserve, but God's free grace in Christ Jesus. Sin should not keep us from prayer. If we are aware of our sins, we should come repentantly but we should come nevertheless, knowing that, 'If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness,' 1 John 1.9. So don't be put off. Keep praying.

Concerning prayer Bishop J. C. Ryle writes, '*There is a way by which any man, however sinful and unworthy, may draw near to God the Father. Jesus Christ has opened that way by the sacrifice He made for us upon the cross. The holiness and justice of God need not frighten sinners and keep them back. Only let them cry to God in the name of Jesus – only let them plead the atoning blood of Jesus – and they shall find God upon a throne of grace, willing and ready to hear.*'²

- *Boring repetition*

Sometimes we fail to pray because we don't enjoy it. The reason we don't feel like praying is that when we do pray, we tend to say the same old things about the same old things. We get bored. One answer to this is to pray a Bible passage and relate it to the things (same old things) that do need constantly praying for. We often find in Scripture that when people pray there is a Bible passage which informs their prayers. For example, on the cross Jesus thought of Psalm 22 when

² *Practical Religion*, by J C Ryle, James Clarke & Co, 1964, page 52

he cried out, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me,' Matthew 26.46. When the early church prayed following the arrest and beating of Peter and John, they have Psalm 2 in mind, Acts 4.23-31. Having a passage of Scripture in front of us, helps us to see things from a different angle and even provides us with new vocabulary in prayer.

- *Being too tired*

The disciples were too tired to pray in Gethsemane, Mark 14.37. True prayer is often a fight. Paul speaks of Epaphras, one of the leaders of the church in Colossae: 'He is always wrestling in prayer for you, that you may stand firm in the will of God, mature and fully assured', Colossians 4.12. In the OT we read of Jacob wrestling with God himself, and would not let go until he found blessing, Genesis 32.22-32. (Of course, God put himself in this position because he wanted to bless Jacob). Elders too wrestle in prayer for blessing on the church.

Understandably, sometimes we feel tired. What can we do about this? Often what is required is to reorder our priorities. It may be that we go to bed earlier. It may be that we decide to not worry so much about our garden looking pristine and save our strength. A classic passage in the NT has to do with a husband and wife forgoing sexual relations (which uses up energy) for a season in order to give themselves to prayer, 1 Corinthians 7.3-5.

Fruitful prayer

The Lord Jesus told us that without him we can do nothing. It is only as we abide in Jesus, the true vine, that we can be fruitful for God, John 15.5. Prayer is very much part of abiding in Christ. It is essential to fruitfulness.

Here are three things which ought to be on the prayer list for all elders

- *Your own personal walk with God*

Living in a fallen world we are all prone to losing our spiritual vitality. Our hearts, even as elders can become hardened, Hebrews 3.7,8. It is a constant danger that we draw near to God with our lips while our hearts are far from him, Mark 7.6. Having spelt out the high personal ideals of love, sincere piety and trust in God in his Sermon on the Mount, the Lord Jesus tells us that the way forward is to pray. 'Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you,' Matthew 7.7.

- *Your fellowship together as elders*

Christ tells us that the way to abide in him is to obey his commands and his first command is that we love one another, John 15.10, 12. Quite a few elderships fail because relationships go wrong between the men. There needs to be a good team spirit among elders without rivalry or mistrust. Some leaders might be tempted to draw people away after them, and have their own following, Acts 20.28, 29 and divide the church. The devil knows that if he can bring disunity in the leadership team then he has a hold on the church that he can exploit.

- *Your church members*

This is part of what Peter has in mind when he writes to elders, 'Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care,' 1 Peter 5.2. It is worthwhile to consider how the Lord Jesus prays for his disciples in John 17. He prays for their spiritual protection, v15; for their sanctification through the truth, v17; for their mission of witness to the world, v18; for their unity, v21. He prays for their union with himself, and that they may come to glory in his presence, v23, 24. Protection, sanctification, mission, unity, glory. This gives elders a framework to order their prayers for the people of their congregation.

There are many other topics which will come on to the prayer list of elders, but these headings provide the basics. Elders will prayer together, but the private prayers of each elder are very much necessary too.

God's promises

Would we see a growing church of loving, holy, happy, witnessing Christians, then we must pray. The Lord Jesus promises that believing prayer in a loving spirit will be rewarded: 'Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins,' Mark 11.24, 25.

'It will be yours', promises the Lord Jesus. What an encouragement to prayer that is.

7: Working together – some exercises

Elders should be a close team of servants of Christ and his church. This can only be attained as the elders cultivate a humble respect for one another before Christ, Philippians 2.3, 4. Bearing this in mind, the following exercises will prove useful.

Vision for the church

Does the eldership team have an agreed vision for what the church should be? Are you able to articulate that vision? Are you able to do that from Scripture?

In my own ministry the church at Antioch, which we find in Acts 11 and 13, was something of a template for a successful church. I was aiming to see Every-day Outreach 11.19, 20; Christian Innovation 11.20; Realistic Leadership 11.22-25; Christ-centred Teaching 11.26; Spiritual Sensitivity 11.27, 28, 13.2; Spontaneous Generosity 11.29; Courageous Obedience 13.2,3.

An eldership should have an agreed goal for the church which, under Christ, they are seeking to build. If they don't have that, it is likely to be a source of tension among them.

Priorities for ministry

A healthy church will be three dimensional. Inwardly there will be fellowship, nurture and care. Outwardly there will be evangelism and works of service for the community, Galatians 6.10. Upwardly there will be worship and heartfelt praise to God in the Sunday services. All these will be informed and encouraged by the preaching of God's word.

At any time, these three dimensions can get out of balance. For example, there can be a big emphasis on worship but little outreach. Or there can be prominence given to caring and showing love within the congregation, but little or no worship in the prayer times.

Is there a tendency for some elders to prioritise one of these dimensions over others? Is this a cause of tension and disagreement in the eldership? How can the balance be kept in a good spirit? How can elders work together to keep the balance?

Priorities in elders' meetings

It is helpful to think through what each elder sees as most important when the elders meet to discuss the needs of the church. Here are 12 ingredients which make up a meeting. Prioritise them roughly in the order you see as most important (1) down to least important (12).

- Getting decisions made
- Support for one another and recognition of one another's gifts
- Proper preparation before the meeting / agendas
- Prayer and worship together
- Keeping to time
- Revolving chairman
- Willingness to listen to differing views
- Willingness of everyone to take on tasks
- Honesty with each other
- Courtesy in speaking
- Unity of heart
- Proper minutes of the meeting

Having ordered these in terms of what you see as most important – try now to reorder them as to how you think other elders would list them in order of importance. Share the results and talk them through together.

'Better no meeting than a bad meeting' – do you agree with that statement? Is there sense in having an elders' secretary who can keep minutes and keep confidences?