Integrity

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THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS IN THE CHURCH

themselves accomplices in sinful disregard of Christ's direct orders.

There is no stronger word for authority in Greek than that which Paul used when he told Titus to exhort and reprove "with all authority" (*epitagē;* 2:15). One who interprets the Scriptures along authoritarian lines could use this passage to put the preacher at the very peak of the hierarchy, but, fortunately, Jesus has disallowed such interpretation. Titus could speak authoritatively because he was speaking for God, not because by virtue of office he "had authority over" someone.

There is, of course, a sense in which certain people in the church must have authority. For instance, if a committee is appointed to oversee the Bible school, it must have some authority to make decisions. Otherwise much time would be wasted. But the crucial question is: can such decisions be overruled by the whole church? Any functionary in the church whose "rule" cannot be *over*ruled by the whole church has gone beyond what the Lord permits. The trouble with authoritarian elderships is that they cannot be overruled by the church except at the considerable risk of making havoc of the fellowship.

The nucleus of the problem of church hierarchy is the situation wherein debate over who has authority can occur. We need to see that the very attitudes of Jesus' disciples which provoked them to debate the question of who would be the greatest were wrong, and that there is something amiss in any church today in which the issue of who has authority compels discussion. From the Biblical viewpoint, it is not an intelligent question. The Lord's way is better, and it will always work!   —HL

The Pattern for Ministry

This special issue is really an answer to a cry for help—our response to a growing anxiety among our readers that the churches to which they belong are failing to meet New Testament specifications regarding leadership. On the one hand there is great concern about how the church can carry out its mission with the greatest possible effectiveness, in conformity with the pattern of ministry set forth by our Lord. On the other hand there is dismay over the ever-present temptation to compromise the church's essential uniqueness and corporate priesthood by adopting organizational forms which violate the very essence of true Christian ministry.

Feeling as we do that there is a word from the Lord which will be of this sin the double cure, we have asked J. Harold Thomas and Joseph F. Jones to address themselves to a central question. (We would like to also include some models of church organization, but, because we lack the space, they will have to come later.) These men are well qualified for their task, for they are not only both capable teachers, but also their many years of experience as preachers have equipped them for dealing with the effects the various means of decision-making have on the work and life of the church.

Both writers refer to Jesus' teaching in the gospels regarding the ministry, and my space will be devoted to underscoring what they have said about his all-important pattern of service.

It is always embarrassing for those who have been with Jesus to be confronted with their hierarchical aspirations. This was the case when, at Capernaum, Jesus questioned his disciples about what they had been discussing; in their shame "they kept silent, for on the way they had discussed with one another which of them was the greatest." Then Jesus said, "If any one wants to be first, he shall be last of all, and servant of all" (Mk. 9:35).

Unfortunately his prescription did not cure their disorder, for a little later, while they were en route to Jerusalem, James and John were maneuvering for position, thereby arousing the indignation of the ten who had similar ambitions. Again Jesus said,

THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS IN THE CHURCH

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What It Is Not

The decision-making process in the church is not to be the result of men, ambitious of authority, achieving a role of control and "lording it" over the Christian community. When James and John sought high places of authority in his kingdom, Jesus rebuked both their ambition and the indignation of the other disciples. He said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must become your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave; even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many" (Mt. 20:25-27; Mk. 10:42-45). Jesus repeated this needed lesson when on the night of his betrayal the disciples were still disputing as to which would be the greatest in the kingdom, and he dramatized his lesson by washing their feet (Lk. 22:24-27; Jn. 13:1-17).

It is hardly possible that Peter was not remembering these teachings of Jesus when he admonished elders to tend God's flock, not as "lording it over" their charges, but as being examples to them (1 Pet. 5:2-3). So elders are not to be power-conscious and authoritarian as those who hand down decrees to the church. This is not the decision-making process. Whatever is to be said about authority and decision-making must be said in the light of these direct prohibitions.

Another scripture which presents an underlying principle related to decision-making in the church is Romans 14. Differences of opinion among Christians are under discussion—whether to eat meat or not to eat meat; whether to observe days or not to observe days. Ah, what a temptation to people who feel that decisions must be made! What a temptation to elders or leaders or a majority to decide "one way or the other"! But our passage lays down a principle that allows both ways! "Who are you [any man] to pass judgment on the servant of another [God]? It is before his own master [God] that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Master is able to make him stand" (verse 4). In Christianity there is "one Lord" (Eph. 4:5) who has "all authority" (Mt. 28:18)—a fact his servants have always been forgetting. So nobody "lords it" over the servants of the one Lord

and Master except himself. And no decision-making may usurp his Lordship. This affects the areas of decision-making and the nature of decisions that are to be made.

Examples in the New Testament

It seems in order now to look at some examples of decision-making recorded in the New Testament. I think of four.

First is the decision as to who should take the place of Judas in the complement of apostles (Acts 1:15-26). Peter raised the matter and appealed to Old Testament scripture for support. In the episode two points are impressive, under the circumstances. The eleven did not make the selection, but the 120 disciples who were present. And after the selection was made, when there was no clear decision whether Barsabbas or Matthias should become an apostle, even then the eleven did not make the final choice, but prayed for God to show them whom he had chosen and then cast lots. Casting lots cannot be equated with voting as I understand it. So, the apostles refused to make the choice of the twelfth man. I regard this as exceptional restraint—particularly in the light of the concern these men had shown during the lifetime of Jesus for their authority and power. And I think their example here says a lot to elders about making decisions independently and calling upon the congregation to abide by them.

A second incident is recorded in Acts 6. There was murmuring about the manner in which the apostles were distributing commodities to the poor. Grecians felt that there was discrimination against Grecian widows. Again the restraint of the apostles is remarkable. There must have been a temptation to rebut the complaints and to assert apostolic rights and authority! But listen to what they said: "It is not right that we should give up preaching the word to serve tables." And they said to the whole body of disciples, "Therefore, brethren, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint to this duty." The church chose seven men and the apostles prayed and laid their hands on them and set them apart for the ministry to the poor.

Again the decision of the apostles was to let the congregation make the decision as to the men who served them. And it has been noted that the names of the seven men were Greek names, which clearly means that there was no relegation of those of some exposure to Grecian influence to a subordinate role in the life of the church.

A third incident we may note is the decision of the church in Antioch to send Barnabas and Saul on a mission tour. Some details of the procedure are worthy of attention.

In the church in Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the Tetrarch) and Saul. While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Separate apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work for which I have called them." So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off (Acts 13:1-3).

Nothing is said here about congregational involvement. The teachers and prophets are mentioned as a group—Barnabas and Saul being included. They were worshiping and fasting and after a time Barnabas and Saul are sent out as missionaries. The directive is ascribed to the Holy Spirit and it was given when the teachers and

The language completely negates any conclusion that the apostles and elders . . . by-passed the feelings of those other than apostles and elders.

prophets were worshiping and fasting. And worshiping and fasting followed the decision given by the Holy Spirit and the two missionaries were formally appointed by the laying on of hands. It would be great indeed if all actions taken by churches could be described as the result of the same kind of preparation of 1) worshiping and fasting and 2) an assured directive from the Holy Spirit.

The fourth example of decision-making in the early church is recorded in Acts 15. The apostles and elders met to deal with the conditions upon which Gentiles were to be received into Christian fellowship. We should note, perhaps, the incidental decision of the congregation in Antioch.

Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brethren, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." And when Paul and Barnabas had no small discussion and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders about this question. So, being sent on their way by the church . . . they came to Jerusalem (Acts 15:1-4).

If we could be sure that Peter's visit to Antioch, noted by Paul in Galatians 2, took place in the midst of the dissension and debate, it would add some flavor here. But we cannot be sure. But the Antioch church, perhaps because the persons who had stirred up the disciples were from Judea and perhaps because any word for the church at large that would allay the spreading trouble would have to come from the apostles of Jesus, made no declaration itself. For whatever reasons, the deference of Antioch was comely.

At Jerusalem, though the fruitful work of Paul and Barnabas pleased many, others of the Pharisaic party were unsatisfied, contending that Gentiles could be received as Christians only if they were circumcised and obedient to Moses' law. There was much debate, after which Peter made a strong declaration against the imposition of the Jewish laws upon Gentile believers. Paul and Barnabas were convincing with accounts of God's actions which had accompanied the conversions of Gentiles. And James, apparently the brother of Jesus and an elder in Jerusalem, agreed with Peter and Paul and Barnabas and voiced a proposal as to the message that should be sent abroad among the churches.

Then follows in Acts 15:22 an important statement for our consideration in this article. "Then it seemed good to the apostles and elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas." I regard this as important because "the whole church" is said to have shared in this momentous decision. The language completely negates any conclusion that the apostles and elders, even in this matter that affected the church at large, were by-passing the feelings of those other than apostles and elders.

I know of no more instances that illustrate how decisions were made in churches in the New Testament unless I should include the one of which Diotrephes (referred to in 3 John) was the leader. This man "put himself first" and refused to acknowledge the authority of John or the feelings of those who disagreed with him (Diotrephes). He put the dissidents out of the church! This kind of decision-making is

definitely not approved. There are numerous instances of actions taken after decisions were made and of injunctions for churches to take action, but there is little describing the decision-making process.

Developments in the Restoration Movement

In the suggestions made to me relative to this paper the hope was expressed that we could explore the experience of the churches of our modern Restoration Movement in the matter of decision-making. I am not prepared to deal with this out of any extended research into historical data. I will venture a few general suggestions.

First, I would note the background of some of the principal leaders in the Restoration Movement. The Campbells and Barton W. Stone were of Presbyterian background, which would make them tend to a direction of the local church by an eldership (a plurality of local elders) rather than by an "episcopal" system, i.e., by a single bishop whose authority would be over more than one church. The Campbells, after leaving the Presbyterian Church, affiliated with the Baptists for a while, only to learn that at that time their experiences with Associations of Baptists were little different from those with Synods of Presbyterians—so that they finally moved into a purer congregationalism when they abandoned both Synodical and Associational relations.

But, practically, some vestiges of their background remained. A contingent of the Restoration Movement never escaped the Associational idea, and the controversy over the missionary society reflected the adherence to the idea on the one hand and the reaction to it on the other.

In the Synods of the Presbyterians and in the Associations of the Baptists preachers were dominant, whether from theoretical or practical considerations I am not sure. But it was significant that Baptist preachers wore the title Elder, and that the local organization of Baptist churches were boards of deacons. And preachers of the Restoration churches also wore the designation Elder. This had to have a bearing on the role of preachers in decisions of the churches—at least in many matters.

It is a reasonable surmise that in the frontier situation to which so many Restoration churches were related there was nearly the whole spectrum of variety in the decision-making process of the churches. You can assume that many churches were ruled solely by the judgment and declarations of the evangelists that figured in their establishment. The degree to which this would be abused would be determined by the training, temperament and maturity of the evangelist in each case. It is also to be expected that we will find instances of the sole direction of the life of the church by one strong personality (in some cases of a woman). This again might be something of a practical necessity rather than a theoretical ideal that was advocated.

Practically, with a shortage of preachers and with the maturing of congregations, the advocacy of the restoration of the New Testament examples of churches led by elders and deacons resulted in that polity in many churches early in the Restoration Movement. Usually when this occurred evangelists whose influence had been dominant over the congregations tended to make a graceful withdrawal. But some evangelists insisted on a continued "control" over the churches, calling upon the

elders and/or deacons to be subordinate to them. It is understandable that this would be resisted for psychological and for scriptural reasons.

Whereas in the segments of the Restoration Movement that have come to be known as Disciples of Christ and Christian Churches there was early acceptance of the full-time minister of a congregation and the general designation of this minister as the pastor, in the "Churches of Christ" the use of a full-time minister was long resisted. This resistance has abated and the large majority of these churches have full-time ministers. But they are not called "Pastors" because that term is still held to be an alternate term for "Elder."

Generally, however, the evangelist or the minister has become the pastor functionally because of his training, experience and more ready availability to the flock. There remains a submerged uneasiness about this because of the preachment that the elders are primary in the oversight and leadership of the church. But the trend appears to be that the minister's role is accepted more and more and that additional ministers are being added in the programs of the churches—full-time men directing different categories of the church life such as education, music, visitation, counseling, etc.

In the decision-making process of the churches ministers usually have input for the consideration of elders. In cases where there are more than one minister the "pulpit minister" usually exercises more influence with the elders. The other ministers are usually his team. He corresponds to the executive officer of a company or in a political organization. He proposes the program of the church largely, submitting this to the elders for approval. If tension develops between the minister and elders over the program, the minister can sometimes bring a pressure from within the congregation to bear on the elders. But the elders are usually the ones who make the final decisions. The congregation is not usually allowed participation directly in the decision-making. Indirectly by various means the feelings within the congregation may be evaluated.

Deacons usually participate in decision-making only in limited ways. They may be asked for input. They may be used as "sounding boards" for a feel of congregational reactions. Final decisions are sometimes made known to the deacons before they are announced to the whole congregation—again, perhaps, for feeling reactions —and sometimes at the same time.

Even in the naming of additional elders and/or deacons to a constituted incumbency the announcement of names proposed and approved by the elders is made to the congregation with the proviso that if no scriptural reason is submitted by members as to why any prospective elder or deacon should not be appointed the appointment will be finalized.

In all this there appears a sharp distinction between the decision-making process of modern Churches of Christ generally and what we noted in the New Testament examples. In those examples (with one exception) it is clear that the whole church

shared in the decision. The 120 were asked to share in naming Judas' successor. The church named the seven in Jerusalem. The whole church shared in selecting the men to carry the recommendations from the Jerusalem Council to the Gentile churches.

When the whole church does not share in the decision-making processes it is quite obvious that any influence on such decisions by women is only secondary and often imperceptible. Likewise the young people of the church have no direct way to express themselves. The suggestion that women and young people might express themselves in open congregational meetings seems to disturb many; and to propose that they should vote appalls many. The question is: Are women and young Christians in "the whole church"? When the whole church expressed itself in New Testament instances was it only the men who did so? Were the women and younger Christians able to express themselves only indirectly through the mature male members to whom they were related?

The general closed-session decision-making by elders in churches is not attributable in most instances to power-lust. It is a product of a number of things. First, it represents less than thorough consideration of the Biblical teaching about "ruling" by elders. Secondly, it represents a reaction to the system of ruling the churches by the clergy. Thirdly, it reflects a combination of an undue distortion of the Biblical proscriptions against women and a conventional male chauvinism. Fourthly, it reflects insecurity—a fear that when everybody is permitted to participate things will get out of control. Fifthly, it is a concession to convenience and the time abbreviation of decision-making by a few as opposed to the many. Finally, it has been established by precedent and long-acceptance. In most instances it is a benevolent authoritarianism that makes it easy for "ordinary members" to abdicate their rights and responsibilities. It is like a benevolent dictatorship that perpetuates itself by the celerity and efficiency and sufficiency with which it deals with matters. The tragedy comes when it is no longer benevolent, but self-serving and self-aggrandizing. As long as power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely, the practice of decision-making solely by elders will eventually lead to sad consequences.

The decision-making process in the churches should be brought into harmony with the truths that 1) there is one Lord and Master over all; 2) that "lording it over" others by anyone or any groups is strictly prohibited by Jesus; 3) that in the early church approved leaders found that prayer and fasting provided the Holy Spirit the opportunity to bless them with guidance; 4) that the apostles asked for the participation of the whole church in decision-making; 5) that leadership and ruling is essentially the demonstration of humility and responsibility to needs rather than the assumption and assertion of authoritarianism; and 6) that the responsibility of leadership is to induce the maximal possible growth of everyone in the church toward "the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ" which can never be realized by those who are not allowed to participate in the thinking and the discussion about what the church should do and be. ☐

ELDERS AS DECISION-MAKERS: PERSONAL AND SOCIAL DIMENSIONS

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In his cursory survey of the decision-making process in the early church, J. Harold Thomas has focused attention primarily upon the book of Acts, with emphasis on four situations in which the church as a community of believers was corporately involved. His conclusion is that the feelings and concern of the "whole church" were sought and sensitively considered when decisions had to be made; and that congregational involvement was the basic pattern pursued, even when there were apostles and elders present in any given situation. This conclusion certainly commends itself for careful and penetrating assessment by a brotherhood which has prided itself on speaking where the Bible speaks.

The second part of Thomas' article, however, is a broad reflection on the pattern of decision-making which developed within the churches of our Restoration Movement. In essence, he concludes that churches of Christ within this Movement developed a system of church governance which concentrates virtually all decision-making authority in the body of elders, with selected deacons to serve in various capacities, providing "input" for the elders on decisions to be made. Ministers (the common term for preachers or evangelists) working with these churches have significant responsibilities touching the life of the congregation, and work closely with the governing body of elders; but they are not generally looked upon as involved in policy formation or the finalizing of decisions.

While Thomas concludes that there is a sharp distinction between the elder-centered decision-making process of modern churches of Christ generally and the New Testament focus upon congregational involvement, it should be recognized that certain Scriptures (other than Acts) have been utilized in buttressing this position of the elders as rulers, policy-fashioners, or decision-makers. What about these particular Scriptures, the historical interpretation our Restoration Movement placed upon them, and their use in sustaining this position? It is the intent of this article to explore again the meaning of certain "proof text passages" on the ruling role of elders, and then to examine some of the implications of this pattern of authority which generally characterizes the churches of Christ, and concerning which Thomas concludes, "The practice of decision-making solely by elders will eventually lead to sad consequences."

Elders in Every Church

In establishing the presence and role of elders in congregational life attention is frequently called to the work of Paul and his colleagues, who on their first major evangelistic thrust returned to Antioch of Pisidia, and "appointed elders [*presbuteroi*] for them in every church, with prayer and fasting," committing them to the Lord for fulfilling the functions they were to assume (Acts 14:23). Reference is also frequently made to the bishops (*episkopoi*) and deacons, leaders in Philippi, to whom, along with "all the saints," Paul addressed his letter (Phil. 1:1-2). Luke's account of Paul's visit to Ephesus in Acts 20 has been offered also to strengthen the conclusion that every church, where membership and situation made it possible, had its body of elders. "And from Miletus he [Paul] sent to Ephesus and called to him the elders [*presbuteroi*] of the church"; and in giving them his apostolic charge he characterized these brethren as overseers (*episkopoi*), to care for (*poimainein*) the church of God (Acts 20:28).

When we include with these passages the textually uncertain reference in 1 Peter 5:2 to elders as "exercising the oversight," we have the cluster of Scriptures deemed adequate proof that this was to be God's pattern of leadership in the church for all subsequent history. Little question was raised about the lack of reference to elders in many other churches described in the New Testament, although these congregations had numerous servants of God designated to perform varied and significant functions. (The thesis of B.H. Streeter, set forth almost fifty years ago in his penetrating study, *The Primitive Church,* would have merited serious consideration and assessment, namely, that from the New Testament evidence there existed "far greater diversity and variegation in Primitive Christianity than is commonly recognized" (p. ix), and that "in the Primitive Church there was no single system of Church Order laid down by the Apostles" (p. 261).

Elders Rule, Members Obey

With this Restoration assumption deemed adequately demonstrated, a few additional passages led to the unquestioned conclusion that since every church had (or should have) elders, then these brethren were the rulers to make all final and significant decisions. Supportive of this conclusion was the interpretation given 1 Tim. 5:17, "Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching." The expression "elders who rule well" (*hoi kalōs proestōtes presbuteroi*) came to have something of the simplistic meaning found in our modern notions of church governance, that elders in their ruling should make good decisions for the church; and the members of the congregation should in their subjection accept or obey the elders' decisions. The point to be noted here is that "ruling" (whatever its basic meaning) and "decision-making" were believed to be synonymous. But what of this conclusion?

The Greek verb *proistēmi,* root term in such passages as 1 Timothy 3:5 and 5:17 (also found in 1 Tim. 3:12 in relation to deacons) and translated in some versions as "rule," has a wide range of meanings; but according to Professor Bo Reicke it seems to carry two basic meanings: (1) to lead; and (2) to care for. Reicke concludes, "This is explained by the fact that caring was the obligation of leading

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members in the infant church" (*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament,* VI, 701). In Romans 12:8 the apostle exhorts members in exercising their gifts to demonstrate caring with zealous commitment, in the expression, "he who gives aid [*ho proistamenos*], with zeal" (RSV). Although most translations in the Tyndale-King James tradition rendered this passage "he that ruleth," the RSV translators may be much nearer to Paul's meaning in that the expression is set in close proximity with three exhortations all pertaining to acts of Christian love.

In 1 Thessalonians 5:12 Paul speaks of those who "are over you in the Lord" (*proistamenoi*), and according to the context the task of such leaders "is in large measure that of pastoral care, and the emphasis is not on their rank or authority but on their efforts for the eternal salvation of believers" (Reicke, *op. cit.,* 702). Occurring repeatedly in 1 Timothy, this verb and participle (*proistēmi* and *proistamenos*) stress the ideas of guiding and caring. Where the terms are used in connection with church leaders (elders or deacons), the focus is primarily directed, not to the authority of these leaders, but to the discretion and care which they demonstrated toward the well-being of believers.

One additional reference to 1 Timothy 5:17 seems appropriate. Elders who "rule well" are those who are deeply concerned about the welfare of every member in God's family; they exercise a sincere care of souls, and this is done in part through competent and committed labor in the word of God, in demonstrating an aptness to teach and nurture (1 Tim. 3:2). Such ruling is certainly not the authoritative and arbitrary decision-making which our contemporary minds attribute to elders, but the diligent and loving care of the house of God. How grievous to see that in many churches there are elders who not only lack a fundamental knowledge of God's Truth, but equally evidence an ineptness in teaching and nurturing members of the Body; yet they are only too often very ready to cast a vote in significant decisions affecting the spiritual life and development of every member.

The episcopal concept of elders' responsibilities has usually been interpreted in terms of oversight, with the assumption that the contemporary meaning which we attach to oversight is synonymous with decision-making in the church. Such passages as 1 Timothy 3:1-6, Titus 1:5-9 and Acts 20:28 (and the textually uncertain reference in 1 Peter 5:2) are usually cited where either the noun (*episkopos*) or verb (*episkopeō*) forms are used, and where the rendering is generally "bishop" for the noun and "oversight" for the verb or participial form. (Perhaps a comment is appropriate on the expression "exercising the oversight" found in a part of 1 Peter 5:2: it is a translation of the participial form tied directly with the work of elders, likely meaning that the task of shepherding the flock, *poimanate,* was integrally related to "looking after," *episkopountes,* the sheep.)

Here we can lump together the two terms cited above (*episkopos,* bishop or overseer; and the corresponding verb in two forms, *episkeptomai* and *episkopeō*) with the essential meaning, "to seek out someone," "to visit," or "to be concerned"

Yet we persist in using Scriptures to sustain a system which is not only unsupported in Biblical teaching, but holds grievous consequences.

about another, all such terms couching a deep sense of personal responsibility for others. Hence the bishops (overseers) have as their primary function the wholeness of Christian members, including their physical, moral, and spiritual welfare. And some New Testament scholars feel that while bishops must lead in their personal concern for others, *that this is the essential task of the entire Christian community.* Hermann Beyer so treats Hebrews 12:14ff., translating *episkopountes* in verse 15 as "seeing to it that," commenting that the term "here expresses an attitude which displays the responsibility of the community for the eternal salvation of all its members" (*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament,* II, 604). Not only must elders or bishops evidence concern, but the task of the entire congregation of saints is to demonstrate loving care one for the other.

Without claiming to have studied all the passages which are sometimes employed to establish the ruling role of elders, nor to have exhausted the meanings of those we have examined, one conclusion seems evident: that the contemporary notion in churches of Christ that the exclusive decision-making power as we have perceived it, vested in the body of elders, is not Biblically rooted. Yet we persist in using Scriptures to sustain a system which is not only unsupported in Biblical teaching, but holds grievous consequences, some of which we must now explore.

Consequences of the System

When speaking of the "sad consequences" or grievous implications of "the practice of decision-making solely by elders" (Thomas and Jones), we do not intend to impugn any present elders or to be disparaging of godly men. Some of the most spiritual and committed men that this writer has ever been privileged to work with in thirty-five years of preaching and teaching have been elders, appointed by churches, and who willingly accepted their responsibilities as they understood them. They have accepted a system of interpretation and practice into which they (we) were born; and where they have engaged in the practice of decision-making to the exclusion of most—if not all—other members of the body, they have done so conscientiously and lovingly. Yet with this disclaimer of disparagement of individual brethren who serve as elders, it can be affirmed that the system has foisted some very undesirable consequences.

(1) With the vesting of decision-making almost exclusively in one body of leaders, we have seen in many congregations the rise of destructive authoritarianism. Many elders hold a regrettably ego-inflated notion of their "position" rather than a humble awareness of their functionary role in the Body of Christ. When members seem to fear doing any good Christian works without first getting the "approval of the eldership" (a common expression among our brotherhood), or feel guilty should they question a decision of the elders, then the authoritarian status of the eldership seems well entrenched. Such authoritarianism in the eldership is compounded in its working when we add to it the unquestioned assumption that elders once appointed

We are led to believe that when the eldership has decided and spoken, such decisions carry with them a weight of finality and sacredness which dare not be criticized or questioned.

serve for life—unlimited tenure (perhaps control is more accurate). And this authoritarianistic, life-long tenure view has frequently been coupled with Biblical ignorance—a lack of that basic knowledge of God's revealed Truth to guide and nurture Christian lives into spiritual wholeness. This compounded consequence can hardly lend itself to what the apostles saw as "tending" or "caring for" the flock of God with loving concern.

(2) The system among us may have stifled the personal spiritual growth of many members in the Body of Christ. The raising of honest questions or healthy voicing of dissent or difference is hardly welcomed by many elderships among us. (Not only is this a threat to the existing view of eldership, but runs counter to our ill-conceived notion of unity as conformity and submission.) We are led to believe that when the eldership has decided and spoken, such decisions carry with them a weight of finality and sacredness which dare not be criticized or questioned. When the seeking and searching of competent and conscientious Christians is stifled through such an authoritarian system, personal resentments are aroused, contributing to two of the most neurotic twins in church life: anger and guilt. In such an atmosphere it is obvious that personal spiritual growth toward maturity in Christ can hardly exist.

(3) Perhaps one of the most regrettable consequences of this system is that it throttles the input of gifts from many in the Body. In a certain sense this adds insult to injury, for it is not an uncommon situation in many congregations to find numerous members far more Biblically read and more gifted with abilities, insights, education and experience than those of the eldership; but their voice is not heard, and their contributions which could mean so much to the life and vitality of God's people are wasted. What a poor stewardship of God's gracious gifts we make through a system which tends to exclude, or be threatened by, the exercise of these gifts for "the upbuilding of the Body of Christ"!

(4) The practice among us so often fails in the development of new leadership capable of guiding the People of God. Elder elders (whether in age or years in office) may be seriously threatened when younger men are suggested as potential leaders for the church. It is mockery to younger men of ability—who are entrusted with highly responsible jobs in business, industry, education or other segments of our society—either to be by-passed or, perhaps, "put in as deacons" (often viewed as a consolation prize for not quite making it to the eldership!) and then required to sit quietly in the final decision-making moments of a "business meeting" while the elders vote on the major issues before us.

(5) The true nature of ministry has also been grossly distorted among many of our churches through the practice we have encouraged. Focusing on the "status of position," we have implied that the most significant of all ministries is that of "being an elder" in the church, while the "cup of cold water" given by some little known member is seldom recognized. While the elders are charged with the

weightier matters of spiritual import, deacons are relegated the more material and mundane responsibilities of church life; and the godly, very competent, and often highly qualified women of the church must find their greatest fulfillment in providing the "covered dishes" for the church dinners. The varied structure of Christian ministry, so richly portrayed in the New Testament documents, must be restored to the life of the church, and not allowed to be distorted through stress on positions clothed in secular connotations and worldly notions of power and prestige. To those who would so view the eldership function in the church, Jesus would say, "This is the way the world sees it; but it shall not be so among you." For "he that would be great among you must be servant of all."

(6) Closely related to the consequences already suggested is the tragic distinction which such a practice sometimes encourages between human beings, their worth and dignity. While recognizing the basically different endowments of persons from nature, Jesus never wearied of emphasizing the inherent worth of each individual in himself and before God. When it comes to the Body of Christ, there is one body and many members (1 Cor. 12:12-24); and there is no unimportant member. When elders are exalted through such a system into a position of prominence, with their exclusive decisions possessing an authority and finality which defy any response but unquestioning obedience, then the logical conclusion points toward an unhealthy distinction between persons, their worth and dignity.

It is our hope and prayer that penetrating study and concern will be focused on the need for viable ways of involving the whole church, and the various members of the Body according to their gifts of grace, in the decision-making process of the churches; that the place and functioning of elders will be restored in the truly Biblical role in the tender care and loving concern for the well-being of the flock of God. May the elders among us be genuine "examples to the flock," shepherding with that same unselfish caring which characterized the "Chief Shepherd," and that such servants of the People of God will receive "the unfading crown of glory" (1 Pet. 5:3-5). ☐

THE PATTERN FOR MINISTRY *(continued from page 130)*

"You know that those who are recognized as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them; and their great men exercise authority over them. But it is not so among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant; and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many" (Mk. 10:42-45 // Mt. 20:25-28).

Nevertheless the squabble continued. According to Luke, even after the Last Supper "there arose a dispute among them as to which of them was regarded to be greatest." So Jesus said to them, "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who have authority over them are called 'Benefactors.' But not so with you, but let him who is greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as the servant. . . . But I am among you as the one who serves" (Lk. 22:25-27).

It is essential for us to understand that Jesus' resolution of this question of primacy among his disciples was not to dispose of all rank among them while still leaving open the possibility

that they as a group would rank above others in God's family. On the contrary, hierarchical notions are ruled out entirely. Not only are the apostles not over each other, but they are not over anybody. Obviously the same rule would apply to any and all of their successors.

Analysis of these texts reveals that verbs with hierarchical connotations can never be used to indicate truly Christian actions and attitudes. It is never so that Jesus' servants, as such, "lord it over" or "have authority over" anyone. A possible softening of this restriction might be discerned in the fact that Mark and Matthew use the compound verbs (*katakurieuō* and *katexousiazō*), which could be taken to indicate "the exercise of dominion against someone, i.e., to one's own advantage" (so Foerster, TDNT, III, 1098), but this may be an undue stress on the prefix (*kata*, against). At any rate, this distinction would not apply to Luke's version, which uses the simplex forms (*kurieuō* and *exousiazō*), and according to which it is the use of power as such, and not its misuse, that is rejected.

Taken together, the three accounts constitute an imposing reversal of man's estimate of greatness. He who would be *first* (*prōtos*, here used hierarchically, "first in rank") must be *last* (*eschatos*, also used hierarchically, "last in rank") *of all* (further heightening the contrast), *servant* (*diakonos*; see below) *of all*, and *slave* (an even more emphatic word) *of all*. He who would be *great* (*megas*, here in the sense of rank or dignity, "in high position") must be *your servant* (*diakonos*). The *greatest* among you must be as the *youngest* (the word choice is influenced by the consideration that the youngest was obliged to perform the lowliest service). The *leader* (*hēgoumenos*, used of men in any leading position) must be as the *servant* (*diakonos*).

As proof that this standard of greatness will work in a world with directly opposite views, Jesus points to himself as the pattern of ministry. He did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many. Or in Luke's words, "I am among you as the one who serves." The repeated use of the words *serve* (*diakoneō*) and *servant* (*diakonos*, often transliterated deacon) shows that these terms are the key to Jesus' pattern of human relationships. Since the disciple is not above his master, there is for him only one road to greatness: he must become the servant of all, even the slave of all.

This service is always self-sacrificial, the point of the sacrifice being in the good that is done for others by it. And the totality of self-surrender involved in genuine discipleship may be seen in the Christian's Model, who gave his life in service for others. This is the course set before us, for Jesus said, "If any one serves me, let him follow me" (Jn. 12:26). It is no wonder, then, that the word "servant," more than any other, is used to describe the various ministerial functions in the early church. At last Jesus' disciples learned this lesson.

There are some interesting verbal points of contact between our texts and others in the New Testament. Peter, for instance, defines the work of elders in these words: "nor yet as lording it over [*katakurieuō*] those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock" (1 Pet. 5:3). When Paul told the Corinthians "that to spare you I came no more to Corinth," he hastened to correct the possible misconception that he claimed the right to dictate the terms of their faith by adding, "Not that we lord it over [*kurieuō*] your faith, but are workers with you for your joy; for in your faith you are standing firm" (2 Cor. 1:23-24). The Corinthians had their own relationship with Christ; and in relation to their joy Paul was a helper, not a dictator. This same attitude of self-surrender applies to marriage: "the wife does not have authority over [*exousiazō*] her own body . . . also the husband does not have authority over his own body" (1 Cor. 7:4). Jesus' order that "the leader must be as the servant" compels us to understand the references to leaders in the church—such as those mentioned in Hebrews 13:7, 17, 24, and Silas and Judas who were "leading men among the brethren," Acts 15:22—in nonauthoritarian terms. Thus, even when Christians are admonished to "obey your leaders and submit to them," such obedience and submission must be a voluntary response of one who assumes the position of a servant, and not the result of yielding to any possible compulsion by the leaders themselves, for it may be questioned whether Christians can ever yield to such compulsion without making