

SENIORITY AND SUPERVISION

IN his essay on "The Christian Ministry" Bishop Lightfoot calls attention to the necessity for the definition of terms, since "on no subject has more serious error arisen from the confusion of language".¹ This will readily be conceded, for words, after all, are but symbols by which we try to clarify our own thoughts and convey them to others. As an instrument of thought we cannot do without them, but unless they are used with care they may play us strange tricks. In the course of time they change their meaning, gathering associations as stones gather moss, which may have to be removed in order to lay bare their original meaning. Something more even than definition is needed, a knowledge of the background against which they are used, if we are to get at the living realities to which they refer, and to understand how they were intended in the particular context where we find them.

There are two words in the New Testament, *ἐπίσκοπος* and *πρεσβύτερος*, to which these considerations specially apply, and we may well ask whether all the controversy over the form which the Christian ministry should take would have been so acute had the ideas for which they originally stood been better understood and more constantly borne in mind.

Before examining who were the men to whom these words were applied, and what duties they were expected to fulfil, there is a third word, *ἀπόστολος*, the study of which will afford a convenient starting point. In the Authorised Version this is most usually translated "apostle", twice "messenger", and once "he that is sent", the last being its original and etymological meaning. The equivalent word "missionary", derived from the Latin, might as well be used in every case with some variation of meaning, and supplies a convenient alternative term. Our Lord gave various surnames to His disciples: Matthew (xvi. 18) records how Simon was surnamed Peter, Mark (iii. 17) that He called James and John "sons of thunder", and Luke (vi. 13) that having chosen twelve He named them missionaries; John (xiii. 16) tells how afterwards He warned them that the missionary is not greater than him who sends

¹ *St. Paul's Epistle to the Philippians*, p. 186.

him forth. It is noteworthy that in the gospels of Matthew and John, who were of their number, they are never again spoken of by this name, but as "the twelve" or "the disciples"; from which it appears that this is how they thought of themselves.

After Pentecost, when the number of disciples was greatly multiplied, Luke's usage indicates that the surname given to them by the Lord came into use, and they became known as "the missionaries" *par excellence*. Their commission at first had been to preach that the Kingdom of God was nigh, but afterwards to be witnesses of Christ and His resurrection (Acts i. 8), and for this purpose Matthias was added to the number (Acts i. 16).

Paul (2 Cor. viii. 23, R.V. marg.) makes mention of other apostles or missionaries commissioned by the churches, reckons James the Lord's brother as an apostle (Gal. i. 19) and Epaphroditus (Phil. ii. 25, marg.), probably also Andronicus and Junia (Rom. xvi. 7); and Luke includes Barnabas among the number (Acts xiv. 14).

An unbiased examination of these references, and their setting, reveals how close the New Testament conception of an apostle is to the modern idea of a missionary. What then becomes of the much debated "apostolic succession"? In the strict sense of the words, the twelve had no successors, though some shared with them the privileges of being eye-witnesses of Christ, and others shared in their commission to preach the gospel. A truly noble succession of such missionaries has continued ever since, called by Christ Himself, and commissioned by their fellow Christians, going forth into all lands, and caring little what they were called provided Christ might be preached and souls won for Him. That the bishops of the second and later centuries were their successors as "apostles" is therefore meaningless; that a succession of such bishops existed is a bare historical fact; to what extent elders or bishops inherited and carried out any of the functions fulfilled by these early missionaries is a fair subject for historical investigation.

Returning now to the two words which denote seniority (*πρεσβύτερος*) and supervision (*ἐπίσκοπος*), what meaning are we to attach to them, and are they to be set in opposition to one another, or how should they be treated?

We begin with the word *πρεσβύτερος*, a presbyter, usually translated "elder", but also "old" (Acts ii. 17) and "oldest" (John viii. 9). It bears on its face its natural meaning of one who is older in years, in which sense it is used in the last named passage.

The Bible teaches that elders should be had in honour, and the presence of the fifth commandment in the decalogue gives a fundamental character to this principle. The relationship between old and young, which is intrinsic to the existence of a human family, is extended throughout both the Old and New Testaments to the older and younger members of the community in general.

Each period of life has its privileges and its duties. Youth is the time of activity and strength, the time to fight and overcome (1 John ii. 13, 14), to see visions of the future (Acts ii. 17), and to undertake laborious tasks (Acts v. 6). Youth needs guidance and should seek it from the older generation, and it was here that Rehoboam failed. Age brings experience and wisdom learned in its hard school; it is the duty of elders to treasure up knowledge, and especially the knowledge of God (1 John ii. 14), and to instruct those who come after. Parents should also provide for their children, supervising their bodily and spiritual growth; supervision is the natural accompaniment of seniority.

From the New Testament passages which mention "elders" we may select two where the contrast drawn between the old and the young shows that seniority in age is intended, namely 1 Tim. v and 1 Pet. v.

In the former Paul is addressing his son in the faith, still a young man. The older folk are to be treated with respect, such as is due to parents (v. 1), and especially those who have the privilege of labouring in the "word and doctrine" (v. 17); it is expected that they will be much in prayer (v. 5) and rule well (v. 17).

In the other passage Peter is evidently recalling the words of Christ to him by the lakeside in his early manhood, now many years ago, when the great Shepherd bade him feed His sheep and lambs, and spoke of the days when Peter would find himself among the "elders" (John xxi. 18), which days had now come (1 Pet. v. 1). Peter connects with his age the duty of supervision (*ἐπίσκοπή*, v. 2), to care for, guide and provide

for the flock of Christ, whilst it is for the young to submit themselves, and for both in humility to render mutual service.

How simple and natural it all is, and how far removed from the controversies which have embittered the very words denoting seniority and supervision.

With this background, let us see who are the men who are termed "elders" in the New Testament. In the fourth chapter of Acts (*vv.* 5, 8, 23) we read of the elders of the Jews, associated with the chief priests, rulers and scribes. Our thoughts are carried back to the Old Testament, where we find mention of the elders of Joseph's house and of the land of Egypt (*Gen.* 1. 7). As we trace the word *zagen* through the Old Testament we find its meaning extended to include seniority in influence or position, but never losing altogether its reference to age. The elders, who incidentally are quite different from the priests (*kohen*), are the spokesmen and leaders either of a city or a tribal group, who judge their causes and superintend their affairs. Like the senate in Rome and the aldermen in early England, their designation shows that they were drawn from the fathers of the people.

The first mention of Christian elders comes when the brethren at Antioch in the days of the famine sent relief by Paul and Barnabas to the Church in Jerusalem (*Acts.* xi. 30), where it was received by the elders, who seem to have charged themselves with its distribution. There is no means of deciding whether a distinct body is here alluded to, or an indefinite group of senior men corresponding to the *νεώτεροι* of *Acts.* v. 6.

In this connexion it is interesting to note that at the opening of his letter to the Philippians Paul singles out the "bishops and deacons" for special mention. Lightfoot assigns as a probable reason that the contribution of gifts which this letter acknowledges (*ii.* 25 ; *iv.* 18 ; *cf.* 2 *Cor.* viii. 1) was made in their name, the "bishops" being those who superintended the collection and despatch of the gifts, and the "deacons" those who administered it. In the Pauline Epistles this service of mutual gifts is constantly referred to as *διακονία*.

Returning to the Acts, the Jerusalem elders are again met with in *xv.* 4, where they are distinguished from the apostles on the one hand and the assembly or church on the other. Again we cannot be sure whether the word is used rather generally, or of a well-defined body of persons, nor can we tell, if it be the

latter, how they came into being. In favour of the former view it is to be noted that James is classed with the elders in one place (*Acts.* xxi. 18) and with the apostles in another (*Gal.* i. 18, 19).

In *Acts.* xiv. 23 we read that Barnabas and Paul appointed (Authorised Version "ordained") elders in each of the Galatian Churches. The word (*χειροτονέω*) which is translated "ordained" originally signified to elect by show of hands, and then more generally to appoint; it suggests that certain men were chosen out of the assembly, the choice being guided and approved by the two missionaries. It is exactly thus that the leaders of infant Christian communities in the mission field are selected and appointed to-day. Leaving aside the manner of their appointment as of less importance than the fact itself, we set ourselves the question, why did Barnabas and Paul take this action, and what end did they have in view?

In general terms the answer is simple and evident; it was to supervise the interests of the little community, the responsibility for which naturally rested on its senior members. As in modern life every society or union has a committee to watch over and execute its business, so the infant churches would benefit by the appointment of a few who were older in years or more advanced in Christian experience to guide and help them in the pathway of holiness.

There is no mention of the appointment of any similar body at Philippi, or at Ephesus; but, as we have seen, one apparently existed at the former, and certainly at the latter, for on his return from his third journey Paul called them to meet him at Miletus (*Acts.* xx. 17). His address to them helps further to elucidate the objects for which they existed. He addresses them as "overseers" (*ἐπίσκοποι*), made such by the calling and gift of the Holy Spirit, and the first element in his charge is that they should "feed the church of God". They are also exhorted to watch and warn against error, and to support the weak; in fact to execute all that loving service in which his own thought and labour had been employed when he was present with them.

It is interesting to observe how the thought of seniority is linked with that of supervision and pastoral care, exactly as in *1 Pet.* v. In the latter case all older men are urged to take this responsibility upon themselves, voluntarily (*ἐκουσίως*) and

enthusiastically (*προθύμως*); and it may well be that the elders of Ephesus also were not any appointed body but all the senior members of the congregation.

In his letter to Titus Paul commissions him to complete the task of putting things right which he had begun in Crete, and to "appoint elders" (i. 5, R.V.) in every city. The word for appoint (*καθίστημι*) is not the same as those used in Acts xiv. 23 and xx. 28, but one which means to set down, establish or settle into a position. From what follows it is clear that the function of the elders is to be stewards of the manifold riches of God, dispensers of hospitality and sound doctrine, edifying the Church and preserving it from error. Paul here, as Peter in his letter to the dispersion, displays anxiety lest the pride of position might lead to the desire for gain or power, a prophetic warning against the evils which have done such infinite harm to the Church in later days.

There is one other rather obscure reference to a body of elders in 1 Tim. iv. 14, where Paul refers to the gift which was given to Timothy "by prophecy, with the laying on of the hands of the presbytery": We can only speculate when this was, or what was its nature. The near parallel in Acts xiii. 1-3, where prophets laid hands on Paul and Barnabas, and the allied passage in 2 Tim. i. 6 suggest that some form of missionary commission is to be understood.

It is now universally acknowledged that the words translated "elder" and "overseer" in the Pastoral Epistles refer to one and the same group of persons, viewed either in respect of their seniority or of the oversight involved therein. As for the bishop in the modern sense, Lightfoot says that this office "appears to be unknown in Apostolic times" (op. cit., p. 182). He nevertheless speaks of the presbyter-bishops, or superintendent-elders, whichever we choose to call them, as holding a "definite office" in the Church. But is not even this going somewhat farther than the Scriptures clearly warrant, by importing into them a crystallisation of thought which belongs rather to the second century?

We may if we please speak of apostles, elders and deacons as officers of the Church, and we are at liberty to include evangelists, teachers and pastors under the same category. But they are not yet "definite". In 1 Tim. iii. 1, Dean Alford replaces the Authorised Version by the translation "if any man seeks

(the) overseership", and says in his comment: "it is merely laying a trap for misunderstanding, to render the word, at this time of the Church's history, 'the office of a Bishop'. The *ἐπισκοποι* of the New Testament have nothing in common with our *Bishops*." He then proceeds to attribute the rendering of the word sometimes as "overseer" and sometimes as "bishop", to ecclesiastical prejudices.

It is indeed evident that as used in the New Testament the "elder" is not a distinct office in the sense that it became later when the three orders of bishops, presbyters and deacons came to be distinguished from each other. For Peter calls himself first an apostle and then an elder (1 Pet. i. 1; v. 1), while Paul rejoices in the title of apostle but is also a deacon and calls Epaphroditus alternately by these names (Phil. ii. 25; Col. i. 7). The only office, if it be such, assigned to Timothy is that of deacon (1 Tim. iv. 6), though his duty is to supervise the appointment of bishops! Our Saviour Christ Himself accepted the lowly position of a deacon (*διακονῶν*, Luke xxii. 27), but His Disciples call Him a "bishop" (1 Pet. ii. 25) and an "apostle" (Heb. iii. 1). Would it not be more accurate to say that the words which *afterwards* connoted a definite office are used in the New Testament as descriptive attributes, of which all could be applied to one and the same person?

In another place Bishop Lightfoot speaks of the presbyter-bishops as officers of the Church appointed "for communicating instruction and preserving public order, for conducting religious worship and for dispensing social charities" (op. cit., p. 184). These words do not entirely coincide with what we find in the Pastoral Epistles and the charge to the elders at Miletus. The first and the last of these objects were certainly things for which the elders had their share of responsibility; although the ministry of the word was also, as the word "minister" actually means, the work of deacons, and indeed of all "faithful men" (2 Tim. ii. 2), and no doubt also the distribution of gifts was the concern of all from the apostle Epaphroditus to the humblest Christian.

As to the "preservation of public order" there is less proof; for although Titus was charged to set things in order in Crete, it is not evident how far the responsibility for this rested upon the elders he appointed; yet something of this nature may be implied in the thought that the man who is to take

care of the Church should be one whose own children are subject to him (1 Tim. iii. 3-6).

When we come, however, to "conducting religious worship", where is there even a hint that this was specially entrusted to the elders, deacons, or anyone in particular? It is not suggested in Paul's address at Miletus nor in his instructions to Timothy and Titus, whereas in one place where religious worship and order is the subject (1 Cor. xi) there is no mention either of bishop or deacon. The only persons singled out in Paul's remarks on worship in 1 Cor. xiv are the "prophets", who also come in for special mention in the instructions concerning the Eucharist in the *Didache*.

We conclude, therefore, that so far from "bishop" and "presbyter" in the New Testament denoting distinct offices, they actually refer to the same persons, and their collocation is due to the natural relationship between the fact of seniority and the duty of supervision. We see that the ministry rendered by them—for, like *all* other Christians, they were ministers (*διάκονοι*) of Christ—was just that involved in these two terms: namely, a handing on of sound doctrine and instruction and a quasi-parental care for those younger in years or in the faith, or who in other ways would look up to them as their leaders.

As we consider the application to the question of the ministry to-day it is reasonable to ask, which is the more important, to secure the best leaders for the Church, or the mode by which they reach that position? Which matters most, the duties they perform, or the titles they bear?

The qualities needed for leadership are the same now as then: Christian experience and a good name, the knowledge of God and His Word, indifference to worldly gain, the gifts of the Spirit, and to crown all, a humble spirit. Nor have their duties greatly changed: to feed the flock of Christ, to minister in the Word and doctrine, and to watch over the interests of the whole community.

If God in His goodness raises up such men in the Church, are not the controversies concerning the form of the ministry, whether it be called Presbyterian or Episcopal, really beside the mark? In the mission field the "Younger Churches" possess a greater sense of realism in regard to this matter, owing in part to their comparative freedom from the incrustations of age, and in part to the greater similarity of their conditions

to those of the primitive Church. The thoughtful Christian in India or China to-day realises the need of leaders in the Church, but cares little by what name they are called. Christ is their all in all, whether the missionary who has led them to Him be Anglican, Presbyterian, Lutheran or Methodist. He sees how the village communities need sound teachers and inspiring leadership, but provided such men are appointed, he cannot appreciate the value of the line of succession in the ministry in which they stand. In a word, the facts seem to him so much more important than the names.

We have dwelt upon the words "bishop" and "elder" and have barely touched upon the "deacon" (*διάκονος*), the minister, the servant. Yet does it not bear in itself the secret of unity? "Remember", Dr. Moule used to say to his students, "that your office is ministerial and not magisterial." It is not by accident that this word bulks so largely in the New Testament, nor that of the names of the three orders of ministry this alone is that which Christ condescended to use of Himself. After Him, Stephen, Philip, Timothy, Paul all are given this significant title. What a noble succession is here! When all who are called to minister in the Church follow their example of sacrificial service, then controversy will die out and love will prevail.

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