

## **WHAT THE NEW COVENANT MEANS ⇒THE LEADERSHIP OF THE CHURCH←**

In the previous chapter we looked at the gifts of the Holy Spirit for the building up of the church. These were given by God to anyone in the church, as He decided. But we also find in the New Testament some official leaders. It is the purpose of this chapter to look at these leaders and consider their relationship to the people with the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

The initial leadership of the church was in the hands of the twelve apostles, with Peter as their leader by Christ's own appointment when he said: "You are Peter and on this rock I will build my church". (Matthew 16:18).

Later on in the church in Jerusalem, a number of elders were appointed and James the half-brother of Jesus appears to have played a prominent leadership role. The apostles later left the scene, perhaps to carry out the task of apostles in founding new churches; a task we looked at in the last chapter. (See Acts 11:30, 14:23, 15:2-23, 21:28).

When Paul and Barnabas founded churches in gentile areas they appointed elders in each congregation to oversee these congregations (Acts 14:23, 20:17-28). Paul had a number of missionary associates such as Timothy and Titus. In his letters to them he described the qualities expected in elders and told them to appoint elders in each congregation (1 Timothy 3:1-7, Titus 1:5-9). In a number of these places the elders were described alternatively as "bishops" or "overseers".

There are a number of conclusions we can draw from the way the churches were organised in the New Testament. Each congregation had a number of elders. There is a great advantage in having a number of elders rather than one leader. They can help each other. When one is tired or needs a rest from his responsibilities for a while, others can take over his responsibilities without loss to the congregation. Their joint decisions would carry greater weight with the whole congregation than the decisions of a single individual. As stated earlier, these elders were also called bishops or overseers. There was no difference between an elder and a bishop. The word "presbyter" used in some churches today is simply the Greek word for elder.

From the history of the early church we find support for the idea that the elders were only elders in the congregations in which they were appointed. They did not move from one congregation to another. That is, there was no sort of profession of "church elder". Even in the great council of Nicea in 325 A.D., by which time a number of changes had taken in church organisation, it was clearly stated that "no bishop, presbyter or deacon should move from one city to another" (canon 15). This rule was of course made because some had already moved.

I can find no evidence that that elders were paid for holding that position. Indeed there is evidence from as late as the Council of Elvira in 305 A.D. that they earned their own living. In this council it was ruled that those who engaged in trade were not allowed to do so outside their own districts. There appears to be no discussion in the early church about clergy salaries, though there certainly would have been if salaries were paid! Paul did however say that those who work well as teachers should receive some support - "the worker earns his pay" (1 Timothy 5:17-18); but the translation "stipend" in the New English Bible is very difficult to support. There is no evidence that they were paid a regular salary.

Training was very scarce in the early days of the church. Barnabas and Paul appointed elders after only a few weeks or months. In most denominations today a period of about three years full time training is required. This has both advantages and disadvantages. On the positive side it leads to greater learning. On the negative side, those undergoing the

training generally lose their independence of thought. They too readily adopt the ideas of their teachers without adequate consideration, and without ensuring that what they are taught agrees with the teaching of Christ and the apostles. They often undergo their training at a young age and become professional religious leaders before they have experience of the life most of their congregations lead. They expect a lifelong position with salaries and benefits.

In New Testament times, the inspired roles, which were called the gifts of the Spirit (the topic of the previous chapter), were held and exercised side by side with the role of elder. With most elders being also teachers, it would have been their duty to encourage these roles. However, the elders increasing power, their common lust for power, as well as their misunderstanding of their role, have led to the disappearance in most places of the inspired roles. In some cases elders have become over-bearing and unwilling to permit anyone to express any opinion, and certainly not divergent one. This affects the nature of the congregations. Thoughtful people, especially men, are forced out of the church. This leaves only those who are more submissive, those who fit happily into an authority structure, or the elderly who look forward to a peaceful retirement. They fill the back pews of the churches as if apologetic for their presence. Many have been suppressed by the leaders. How different they are from the Christians who first spread the gospel! Like the first Israelites who had been brought up in slavery in Egypt, they will die in the desert, and only the new generation, which had not known slavery, will be fit to enter the promised land.

It may well not be appropriate in the modern age to adopt an identical system of leadership in the church to that adopted many centuries ago, but there is certainly a need for the system to be re-thought. The primary aim of the leaders should be to promote the spiritual growth of their congregations, not to generate a state of perpetual dependence.