The Eldership in the Reformed Church

by Professor T. F. Torrance.

(highlighted texts—PG)

The institution of the office of elder in the Reformed Church in the sixteenth century was an innovation in the traditional structure of he western Catholic Church and the canonical pattern of its ministry. There were precedents for something like this in the Waldensian and Bohemian (later Moravian) Communities in the twelfth and fifteenth centuries, and there still are features corresponding to it in the leadership of congregational life in Greek Orthodox Churches arising out of the overlap between the worshipping congregation and the cultural community. In the Reformed Church itself the eldership came to be more closely associated with the ministry of Word and Sacrament which has had the effect of linking together 'clerical' and 'lay' service within the corporate priesthood of the Church and in the operation of its 'sacral courts' at synodal, presbyterial andconsistorial levels. The eldership has certainly been a source of inner cohesion and stability in the life of Reformed Churches, leaving upon them characteristics of particular significance in the ecumenical fellowship of Churches.

From the first, however, there have been semantic difficulties with the terms used to designate this office, especially with the English word 'elder', and there have been persistent ambiguities and problems about the nature and function of the elder's office, not least over the question of explicit justification for it on grounds of biblical teaching and apostolic ordinance. These ambiguities and problems have not unnaturally come to the surface whenever Reformed Churches have entered into close contact with other Churches in the evangelical and catholic traditions alike. Without any definite or certain biblical evidence for it, and without any canonical precedent for it in the ancient Church, the eldership in Reformed Churches has regularly tended to develop features of its own within the different countries and cultures in which the Reformed Church has spread. In the ecumenical context of today, however, the Reformed Church is bound to take a fresh hard look at the nature and function of the eldership, if only on its own basic principle that it is not only an ecclesia reformata but an ecclesia reformanda--not just a reformed church but one always open to reformation in the light of what may still be learned from the Holy Scriptures and a deeper understanding of the Christian Faith. This is an obligation which the Reformed Church ought to feel more deeply than most Churches because of its claim that even matters of church order are de fide.

This essay is written from within the perspective of the Church of Scotland, and in the light of its historical roots and developments since the Reformation, as well as questions which debate about the eldership has been forcing into the open.

1. How Elders Came to be Introduced into the Reformed Church.

During the Reformation and its extensive research into the history and life of the Early Church, evidence was found for the existence of seniores plebis or seniores laici, lay councillors or assessors, associated with the regular ministry. Questions about their function had been raised by Zwingli in Zurich and Bucer in Strasbourg, while careful investigation was initiated by Oecolampadius in Basel and pursued further by Peter Martyr in Oxford and by John Calvin in Geneva.[1] Attention was drawn to the note of Pseudo-Ambrose allegedly about two kinds of 'presbyter' in the Early Church, to the

writings of Origen, Cyprian, Optatus, and Augustine, and later of Isidore of Seville, about seniores/gerontes or 'elders' in the North African Church.[2] Seniores were the men who were chosen or appointed to form the local councils of North African Communities, the gerousiai (as they were called in Greek), civil functionaries presiding over the affairs of the local community and helping to maintain public and moral order.[3] With the spread of Christianity, however, these 'elders' were sometimes associated with the bishops, presbyters and deacons and sometimes, as Optatus indicates, sub-deacons, of the Christian Churches in superintending the mores of the people. There is no record in documents or the many extant inscriptions of their being called 'presbyters' (presbyteri).[4].

In their conviction that laymen, that is, people not ordained to the ministry of Word and Sacrament, should have part in the government of the Church, so far as moral and judicial questions were concerned, the Reformers of Geneva introduced the seniores laici of North Africa into local Church jurisdiction. In Geneva these 'seniors' or 'elders' were representatives of the City Councils who were associated with the ministers in keeping discipline. Together they constituted the 'Consistory' which comprised twelve members from the City Councils, elected annually, and six pastors, and was presided over by one of the syndics or magistrates.[5] Their prime function was to act as judges in matters involving spiritual and moral discipline with authority to pronounce censure in the community, but without prejudice to civil jurisdiction. Calvin insisted, however, that councillors joined with ministers in this way must leave their batons outside the door where the Consistory met, for they could not exercise their civil authority in the public affairs of the Church. While they had to take an oath similar to that prescribed for ministers, they were not ordained or set apart in any way, and were never regarded as members of the Presbyterium which was comprised solely of ordained presbyters, the Venerable Compagnie des Pasteurs.

It should be pointed out that 'elders' appear elsewhere during the Reformation period, for example, among English exiles at Frankfurt who were evidently influenced by the teaching of Bucer and Martyr as well as Calvin. Moreover in France where the Reformed Church did not have the kind of relation to the State found in Geneva 'ancients' were not just civil functionaries associated with ministers in moral and judicial matters, but came to be more closely related to the worshipping and sacramental life of the Church.

During the Reformation in Scotland, 'elders', initially taken from the Lords of the Congregation and the Burgh Councillors, were associated with ministers in the Church Courts, in Assembly, and in Synods, and in the General Session or Eldership which, at that time, was something between what we call a Kirk Session and a Presbytery. These elders were not ordained, but were called and admitted on an annual basis. Gradually, however, they came into closer connection with the work of the ordained ministry, and took over some of the functions which in Geneva were carried out by deacons: catechetical Instruction of the young, visitation of the sick, and even the reading of prayers in the absence of the minister. It should be noted, however, that these Scottish elders did not take over the function of the deacons in Geneva in giving the chalice at the celebration of the Lord's Supper.[6].

In 1578 under the influence of Andrew Melville (and of Theodore Beza), the General Assembly gave its approval to a revision of the Polity of the Kirk, The Second Book of Discipline. It instructed, in contrast to what Calvin had taught, that elders were to be appointed, admitted and commissioned for life, which meant that their office was to be recognised as a fully 'spiritual' one for which they were set apart, though not by the laying on of hands. This was reinforced by the Act of the General Assembly in 1582, which in session 12 laid down the order for the election and admission of elders, taking over for the whole Church the particular form used in the Presbytery of Edinburgh. Professor Gordon Donaldson has pointed out that it took some time for the impact of these acts of the Assembly to take effect, as there is evidence of annual elections of elders continuing to take place, while in 1656 it was still believed that the 'order and practice' of the Church was regular elections.[7] However, together with the

account given of the form and practice in 1641 by Alexander Henderson in The Government and Order of the Church of Scotland, written at the instruction of the General Assembly to guide the Scots divines at the Westminster Assembly, the Act of 1582 remains the most authoritative statement of the elder's office in the Church of Scotland. It may be pointed out here that in his account of the celebration of the Lord's Supper, Alexander Henderson provides us with early Assembly authority for the practice of the celebrating minister eating the bread and drinking the wine 'first himself' before passing them on to the people to share among themselves, and also for the rule that the Elders are to 'attend about the Table', not evidently to dispense the bread and wine, but to see that 'all who are admitted to the Table, may have the bread and the wine in their own place and order of sitting'.[8].

Now when the Reformers in Strasbourg, Basel and Geneva found seniores in the North African Church they looked for biblical evidence for this, and claimed to find it in a number of passages: Rom. 12.8; 1Cor. 12.28, and some of them, on occasion at least, e.g. Calvin with reference to Pseudo-Ambrose, in 1Tim. 5.17. John Knox's Book of Common Order referred to Rom. 12, 1Cor. 12 and Eph. 4, but not to 1Tim. 5.17; the second Book of Discipline, however, did make use of 1Tim. 5.17. The position taken up by Calvin was clearly ambiguous, for while his interpretation of 1Tim. 5.17 appeared to sanction the theory that elders were presbyters, he did not embody it in the constitution of the Genevan Church, for he refused to entertain the idea that elders might be admitted to the Presbytery or that they should join with ministers in acts of ordination by the laying on of hands. However, once the views of Beza and Melville about the ministry were taken up in the Second Book of Discipline, regarding 'Presbyter or Elder' and 'Presbyters or Seniors', [9] they had the effect of continuing to fuel the theory that 'elder' and 'presbyter' meant the same thing.

All this came up for careful and detailed examination at The Westminster Assembly as the Scots, among others, wanted to have elders adopted in all the Churches in the British Isles.[10] Eventually the Westminster Assembly rejected 1Tim. 5.17 as having any reference to 'elders', and thereby also rejected the specious theory (as Campbell called it) that there were two kinds of 'presbyter' in the Early Church. They did so on the authority of the great Hebrew and Judaic scholars of the Reformed Church, Buxdorf, Blondel and Vitringa, as well as of the equally great scholars in the Assembly, Lightfoot and Selden. The Assembly referred instead to 2Chron. 19.8 f., Rom. 12.7 f., and 1Cor. 12.28. **Two significant points emerged in the Westminster discussion that should be noted. (a) 'Elders' could be read into these New Testament passages only on the assumption that the Early Church had instituted something analogous to the 'elders of the people' (seniores plebis) found in the Old Testament; and (b) the Church officials that they called 'other Church governors', as even George Gillespie admitted, probably corresponded to 'deacons' in the Early Church.**

It must be affirmed that the Westminster Assembly decidedly rejected the use of the term 'presbyter' for the elder, and always spoke of elders as 'other Church governors', 'elders of the people', or 'commonly called elders'. Against that one must take account of the fact that in the 1611 Authorised Version of the Bible presbyteroi was frequently translated 'elders'. This may help to explain why in the Church of Scotland the reference in Acts 15.23 to 'the Apostles and Elders (presbyteroi)' could be cited in justification for 'ruling elders', although the Westminster Divines, like the Reformers, rightly understood the term presbyteroi there very differently. Thus the tendency to speak of the elder as 'presbyter' persisted, and along with it the theory that there were two kinds of presbyter or elder in the Early Church, a teaching presbyter or elder and a ruling presbyter or elder, but both evidently of the same order. This implied that elders should take part in the ordaining of ministers and in the ordaining of elders, which ran sharply against the Reformed (and Westminster) doctrine of the Ministry of Word and Sacrament, as held in the Church of Scotland.

It was inevitable that in Scotland, as in the U.S.A., the theory of 'the ruling elder' would prove troublesome and indeed that the whole concept of the eldership should be reopened. That is what happened in the nineteenth century after the publication in 1831 of the book by Samuel Miller of Princeton on The Ruling Elder. The case for the theory that ministers and elders were both 'presbyters', differing only in respect of their particular functions, was now subjected to a thorough examination, if only because it was held to have associations with 'Brownist' or 'Congregationalist' notions of the Church and Ministry. In the U.S.A. this theory of the eldership was demolished by Smyth of Charlston [sic] and Hodge of Princeton with immense learning, but the same thing was done much more lucidly and succinctly by Peter Colin Campbell of Aberdeen, to name only one of those who entered the debate.

Clearly the biblical grounds for the conception of elders in the Reformed Church had to be examined more thoroughly than before. As a result Reformed scholars found themselves forced more and more to the conclusion that there is no clear evidence in the New Testament for what we call 'elders', let alone the theory that there are two kinds of presbyter. The biblical passages to which appeal is made, when objectively considered, cannot be taken to bear the interpretation Presbyterians put upon them. Moreover, they were never understood in this sense by any of the Church Fathers, not even by Pseudo-Ambrose who did not make use of 1Tim. 5.17 in the way that was sometimes alleged. It is also the case that outside Presbyterian Churches, there is no Church that interprets the New Testament passages adduced by them in this way. Hence Presbyterians are isolated from the rest of Christendom past and present in claiming that these biblical texts provide evidence for 'elders' in their sense. The conclusion seems inescapable: Presbyterians adduced this 'biblical evidence' in order to have some authoritative justification for an eldership they found, not within the New Testament itself; but within certain sections of the The 4th/5th century North African Church. And yet even there, as we have noted, there is no evidence that these 'elders' were ever called 'presbyters'.

Even if the Church were to follow Calvin and the Westminster Divines (different as they were) in their approach to the eldership, it would still not be possible for it to do more than get biblical evidence for some office similar to that of the Old Testament 'elders of the people' who served in communities of Israel in a civil capacity and thereby shared with the religious leaders responsibility for governing the public life of the people of God. Calvin himself; however, never advanced biblical evidence for what we call 'elders', but only, and then very tentatively, for what he called 'elders'. He was definitely not a Presbyterian! In Scotland, with the Melvillean revolution, the Church embarked upon a course in which it was to substitute elders, set apart for life, in place of Calvin's deacons, transferring to them the functions ascribed to deacons in the New Testament, and detailed by Calvin in his description of their office in the Early Church, while restricting the functions of deacons in the Church of Scotland mainly to the gathering and distributing of the alms of the congregation in its social care of the needy. Perhaps we may put a better gloss on this departure from Calvin's model by claiming that actually our 'elders' are the nearest thing in any Church today to what the Pastoral Epistles speak of as 'deacons'.[11] However, the fact that our elders are called 'elders' and not 'deacons' means that they cannot draw support from what the New Testament has to say about deacons, and are thus unable to find in the New Testament any description of their specific office as elders. Consequently they can only turn to Presbyterian tradition rather than to Holy Scripture for any guidance in the fulfilment of their duties.

2. The Relation of Elders to the Diaconate.

It seems to be clear that in the New Testament there is no evidence that can stand up to objective criticism for the title 'elder' used in our way. This does not mean that there are no biblical grounds at all for the kind of office which we refer to under the eldership. It would seem to be entirely consistent with biblical teaching that there should be associated with those specifically ordained to the ministry of the Word and Sacrament others who are 'ordained' to a complementary ministry within the

congregational life and activity of God's people. This second use of the-term 'ordained' (now in common vogue) has been put in citation marks in order to avoid ambiguity, for ordination in the proper sense, normally and traditionally, carries with it the notion of 'the power of order' or potestas ordinis, as The Second Book of Discipline, I.3f speaks of it. In the Church of Scotland elders have never been regarded as invested with 'the power of order', even for the 'ordination' of other elders, for their distinctive ministry is not the service of the Word but the service of response to the Word.[12] Its distinctive mode is not one 'of authority' but one 'of charity', as the sixteenth century Scottish divines expressed it.[13] While ministers are ordained to dispense the Word and Sacraments to the people, elders are set apart to help the people in their reception of the Word and in their participation in the Sacraments, and to seek the fruit of the Gospel in the faith and life of the community. Elders are meant to represent the people, and to fulfil their ministry from the people toward God. Thus their specific calling is to help the faithful from within their midst, prompting them in their responses to the Gospel proclaimed to them, leading them in their worship, assisting them in their understanding of the Faith, and guiding them in the way of obedience to Christ's commandment of love**. To take elders out of that relationship and assimilate them to the order of ministers of Word and Sacrament would have the effect of damaging the two-way movement of service in Christ's Church, from God to man and from man to God, and thus doing away with the complementary functions within the corporate pattern of ministry which the introduction of elders in the Reformed Church promoted.[14].**

In accordance with the nature of their office elders are set apart or 'ordained' for service in the Church, that is, 'solemnly received with lifted up hands'.[15] Stress is laid upon the rule that elders are commissioned or 'ordained' only by those who are themselves ordained and commissioned, that is, not by the people, but by those who are called and sent by Christ with authority to act in his Name and, in a significant sense, in his stead, as St. Paul expressed it.[16] Although elders may be elected by the people and are their representatives within the corporate ministry of the Church, they are not to be regarded as their delegates, carrying the power of the people and answerable to them. It is by Christ through ministers in his Church that they are commissioned and it is to him that they are answerable. In the view of Reformed or of Presbyterian Churches 'the power of order' is not lodged with the people, and devolved by them upon ministers and other office-bearers in the Church. Power is lodged only in Christ and is devolved by him through those he calls and authorises to act in his Name, yet only in 'the form of a servant' in accordance with the example which he gave to his disciples. A clear distinction was drawn in ordination between the 'immediate' act of Christ through his Spirit and his 'mediate' act through the Pastors of the Church. That is to say, the Lord Jesus Christ was regarded as the real Ordinary in the Church: all power and authority derive immediately and mediately from Christ himself acting through his Spirit in the Church.[17].

It cannot be claimed that this conception of the eldership prevails in all Reformed or Presbyterian Churches, or that it is held consistently in any one of them. Even in Scotland actual practice through several centuries is found by historians (e.g. Gordon Donaldson) not Infrequently to diverge from the formal positions laid down in the Kirk's authoritative standards. Moreover, in the nineteenth century there was a growing reaction against the hard line Melvillean and Westminster authoritarian conception of the ministry, reinforced by Acts of the General Assembly against 'Brownism' or 'Independency'. This was partly due to the demand for a Christ-centred rather than a Church-centred form of Christianity, but due also in no small measure tothe general pressure for democratisation within the Church. There was so much uncertainty in regard to these matters in the latter part of the nineteenth century that The Presbyterian Alliance instituted an investigation of the practice and procedure of Presbyterian Churches adhering to it. It was found that Samuel Miller's notion of the eldership had gained ground in some Churches to such an extent that elders sometimes engaged in acts of ordination, not only of elders but even of ministers. Nevertheless this practice was not found to have been sanctioned by any Church law in any of the Presbyterian Churches adhering to the Alliance at the time of the investigation.

Undoubtedly since then there has been some symbiosis between many Presbyterian and Congregational Churches which has allowed some of them to be united, mainly, it must be admitted, on the ground of Reformed principles, although in some instances with a significant recovery of the biblical and early Christian conception of the diaconate. This is a symbiosis that will undoubtedly continue with the formation of The World Alliance of Reformed Churches which includes Churches of the Congregationalist as well as of the Presbyterian type.

The kind of ministry exercised by elders in the Reformed Church does not seem to be inconsistent with the outlook we find in the New Testament, but there is no explicit evidence for the eldership as such. On the other hand, the nature of the office elders hold and the kind of functions they perform bear a close resemblance to the office and functions of the deacon described in the Pastoral Epistles and Early Church documents.[18] There we learn that deacons fulfilled an important assistant ministry in the Church in association with bishops and presbyters, and had particularly to do with ministry of the divine mercy and with seeking the fruit of it in the life and mission of the community, and that they assisted Presbyters or Bishops in serving communicants at the Lord's Supper. Thus it would seem to be the case that our elders now fulfil a ministry which in the New Testament itself is ascribed to deacons. In other words, the best, and indeed the only, biblical evidence for the ministry fulfilled by our elders is found in New Testament teaching about deacons, supplemented by what we learn from Early Church documents. Consider, for example, the Epistle to the Philippians, in which St. Paul mentions only 'bishops and deacons'. Are we to include 'elders' here under 'bishops' or under 'deacons'? That is the issue, and when faced with it, Reformed commentators have regularly included them under 'deacons'. It might be said, then, that what we call 'elders' are really 'elder-deacons'.[19] This falls closely in line with what a great scholar like J. N. D. Kelly has to say about deacons in his commentary, The Pastoral Epistles. Of course, the actual name of the office, 'elder' or 'deacon', does not finally matter very much, so long as the nature and integrity of the office itself are maintained. But it would seem right for a Church which claims to be reformed according to the Word of God, and to be continuously open to further reformation in the light of what is learned from that Word, that it should subordinate its own ecclesiological tradition to the Holy Scriptures, and in name and office put into practice the New Testament teaching about the diaconate.

Given this substantial relation between the Reformed elder and the biblical and early Christian deacon, there are two significant implications that should be noted.

(a)The eldership in the Reformed Church, like the diaconate in the Early Church, is essentially a sacramental office closely associated with the celebration and administration of the Lord's Supper or Eucharist. Thus it has long been a primary function of Scottish elders, meeting as a Kirk Session, to join corporately with the presiding minister at the celebration of Holy Communion, rather after the pattern set by Jesus and his disciples at their last celebration of the Passover together, when he solemnly inaugurated the New Covenant in his Body and Blood, thereby instituting the Holy Supper in the Church**. In the earlycenturies deacons acted as ministerial assistants to presbyters and/or bishops.[20]** They were given an important part in the regular liturgy of the Church, such as in reading the Scripture, prompting the responses and leading the praise, while also assisting in a subsidiary way at the celebration of the Eucharist, but also exercised a stewardship over the gifts that were brought to it for the Agape or 'Love-feast'. Hence deacons were charged with the distribution of goods and alms to the poor, as well as with assisting the presiding presbyter or bishop in taking Communion from the central celebration to house-churches within the paroichia or 'diocese'. This association of elders and deacons the the celebration of the Lord's Supper would seem to argue for an integration of their duties in the Church of Scotland. Moreover, it would have the effect of recovering something of the wholeness of their office and of reinforcing the fact that it is essentially spiritual. In their own distinctive way elder-deacons are 'stewards of the mysteries of God' in the life and mission of Christ's Church.

(b)**The fact that the ministry in the Church is essentially corporate with a two-fold activity as 'service of the Word' and as 'service of response to the Word', argues that our elder-deacons, like deacons in the Early Church, should be regarded as members of the kleros, no less than presbyters.** It might be claimed, as it was by Clement of Rome (I Clem. 40), that they have a status within the Church of Christ similar to that of the Levites in the Church of Old Testament who had the Lord himself as their peculiar 'allotment' or 'inheritance' (Deut. 18.2; cf. Acts 1.17), even though they did not belong to the priesthood as such.[21] That is to say, while elder-deacons are not to be regarded as included within the order of those ordained to the ministry of Word and Sacrament, nevertheless they are to be regarded among those who have been solemnly set apart and sanctified for holy office within the corporate priesthood of the Church.[22].

3. The Diakonia of The Acts of the Apostles, Ch. .

How are we to understand the office of 'the seven men' appointed and ordained by the Apostles to a diakonia in the infant Church, as recorded by St. Luke in the sixth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles? **This was a matter debated in several Councils of the Early Church, when it was eventually concluded that the incident referred to the institution, not of deacons, but of presbyters in the local community of Hellenistic Jews who had come to believe in Christ, whose function it was in the ministry (diakonia) to proclaim the Word, minister the Sacraments, and have the pastoral care of the needy.**

When the Church in Jerusalem became too large for the Twelve Disciples themselves to look after as pastors of the flock, they decided to appoint others to carry out the duties of local ministry, and to devote themselves as Apostles to the Word, for which they had been specially trained and commissioned by the Lord. They felt themselves uniquely called to provide the Church with the authoritative understanding of Christ and his Gospel which the Lord meant the Church to have and which he mediated to it through the Apostles -- that is what we now have in the Scriptures of the New Testament in which we receive from the Apostolic Foundation of the Church and through the Apostolic Tradition the 'deposit' of the Faith once delivered to the Saints.

John Lightfoot, the learned Westminster Divine, once drew attention to a very significant reference in Acts 1.15, where we are told that the company of persons in the first assembly of disciples numbered about a hundred and twenty.[23] It would appear that the Primitive Church took care to act within the provisions of Jewish law later recorded in the Mishnah tractate Sanhedrin,[24] a Rabbinic codification of earlier material (mishnayot) not infrequently reflected in the New Testament. There we find it laid down that if a community is one hundred and twenty strong it is entitled to have its own little 'sanhedrin' of 'seven', appointed through 'the laying on of the elders' hands', to exercise oversight over its affairs.[25] That was the legal ruling which the Apostles seem to have followed when they laid their hands on seven chosen men, giving them authority to have charge of the local congregation of converted Hellenistic Jews (traditionally separated from Palestinian Jews even in their synagogues). Thus Acts 6 gives us a record of the first community within the rapidly growing Church to have its own ministers. They were those who elsewhere in the New Testament were called 'presbyters', not 'deacons', although they also seem to have performed functions that were later assigned specifically to deacons.

By way of support for this interpretation of 'the seven men' in Acts 6, we may point to the fact that in Rome Jewish synagogues were organised on the Sanhedrin model of small communities of worshippers of a hundred and twenty, each with its own 'seven',[26] and that in formal assembly these elders or presbyters, including the archisynagogos or 'ruler of the Synagogue', were 'arranged like the half of a round threshing-floor so that they might all see one another', as we find it laid down in the Mishnah.[27] It is particularly interesting that Christian congregations in first century Rome also followed the same

pattern, as we can see so vividly in the catacomb paintings of the celebration of the Eucharist. The most well known of these, of course, is the Catacomb of Aquila and Priscilla where the seven presbyters (including Priscilla as a presbytera!) are depicted in a semi-circle behind the Holy Table with Aquila in the centre as their proestos or presiding presbyter-bishop, and the deacons in front with the baskets of offerings. Optatus tells us that even in the fourth century there were more than forty little congregations or churches in Rome, although they were united through the una cathedra of Peter the apostolorum caput.[28] In Alexandria, on the other hand, where in the first century there was by far the largest concentration of Jews outside Judaea, more than a million of them, the model followed was that laid down for large communities outside Jerusalem who might have twenty-three 'elders' or zekenim plus their presiding officer, presumably the Sagan.[29] It is hardly surprising, then, that in Alexandria the Christian church should have been organised on much the same pattern, with a large presbytery of twenty-four presbyters (twelve from the urban and twelve from the surrounding areas) including their presiding (proistamenos) presbyter or bishop.

It might be instructive also to refer to the contrast drawn in the Mishnah Sanhedrin between lesser Sanhedrin and the great Sanhedrin in Jerusalem, which numbered 70 zekenim (or presbyteroi) plus the presiding High Priest and/or the Sagan. A similar contrast would seem to be implied in the New Testament between local communities within the Christian Church and the mother community in Jerusalem which, as we know more fully from outside the New Testament, came to have a Christian Sanhedrin of seventy presbyters presided over by St. James, our Lord's brother (cf. Acts 15.13; 21.18, etc.).[30] As T. M. Lindsay pointed out,[31] James and his presbytery, who had charge over the mother Church in Jerusalem and Judaea, formed a body quite distinct from that of the Twelve Apostles who were 'ministers at large' having authority over the whole universal Church in accordance with our Lord's solemn appointment recorded by the Evangelists, in St. Matthew 19.28 and St. Luke 22.29f. It should also be noted that there is an implied contrast between the ordination of the seven presbyters in Acts 6 through the laying on of hands, and the commissioning of the twelve Disciples as Apostles by Christ, not by the laying on of his hands but by his direct appointment in which he solemnly entrusted them with judicial authority in his Kingdom, as the passages already cited from St. Matthew and St. Luke make clear. This contrast between the commissioning of the Apostles immediately by our Lord and the ordination of presbyters through the laying of hands, distinguished presbyters and all other ministers in the Church sharply from the Apostles to whom there could be no successors.

It should be emphasised that the use of the word diakonia here by St. Luke does not lend any justification to the view that 'the seven' in Acts 6 (as even Calvin mistakenly thought) were 'deacons'. The term refers not to any particular office, but rather to the unique nature and mode of ministry in Christ's Church as a humble form of service.[32] Diakonia applies to all forms of ministry, of Word and Sacrament as exercised by presbyters or bishops, as well as to the complementary ministry fulfilled by deacons. Even the ministry of the Apostles was regarded as a diakonia (see, for example, Acts 1.17; 6.1,4), after the pattern of Christ himself who came 'not to be served but to serve' (Mark 10.45; Matt. 20.28; cf. Luke 22.26). It was thus that St. Ignatius of Antioch could point to the ministry of deacons (diakonoi) as exhibiting in the most vivid Christ-like way the unique mode of humble ministry which Christ himself, the Diakonos par excellence, had exercised on earth and instituted in his Church.

It would appear that whenever in the history of the Church Acts 6 has been adduced to support the institution of deacons, confusion has resulted: problems have arisen which have proved difficult to disentangle. This has certainly been the case whenever Reformed Churchmen have wanted to limit the diaconate to the ministry of alms and at the same time find in Acts 6 authority for the diaconate, in spite of the fact that the seven spoken of there were not called 'deacons'. The ministry of 'tables' mentioned there cannot be interpreted as a ministry of 'banks', that is, a ministry in monetary matters, but rather as a diakonia in the distribution of goods from the Lord's Table which presupposes a complex practice in which the Lord's Supper and the Love-feast, the Eucharist and the Agape, and the evangelical mission of

the Church, were closely bound together. In the Early Church this leitourgia was continued for several centuries in the regular worship and mission of the people of God: while the bishop and his presbyters presided at the Table of the Lord, the deacons, after fulfilling their part in the Eucharistic Celebration, distributed to the poor gifts that had been offered at the Lord's Table.

So far as deacons themselves are concerned, there was never any suggestion in the New Testament or in the Early Church that their office was restricted to the ministry of alms and social care. Yet that is what the Church of Scotland unfortunately came to hold, when it transferred many of the functions of deacons to elders. Those functions became distorted in the process. **The eldership as such was left without biblical support as an evangelical office, while room was made for deacons only in a very attenuated form. This is largely, I believe, why the diaconate thus conceived has constantly given ground for so much confusion and why it has been so difficult to resurrect and maintain in its wholeness within the Church of Scotland**. Much of that confusion might be done away if we frankly acknowledge that we have misread the Holy Scriptures through the distorting lenses of a Presbyterian Tradition. It is imperative that we set about once again to reform our church polity in accordance with the revealed Word of God. That should not entail a rejection of the rich tradition of service fulfilled by the Reformed eldership which has often been admired in other Communions, but rather that the eldership, assimilated to the biblical and early Christian diaconate, would recover something of its wholeness as an essentially spiritual and evangelical diakonia, taking its distinctive character from the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ which it is meant to serve. So far as the Church of Scotland is concerned, this would have the much needed effect of deepening mutuality and complementarity between the presbyteral ministry of the Word and Sacrament and the diaconal ministry of shared obedience to Christ. It would also mean that **elder-deacons** would exercise a more central ministry in the responses of God's worshipping people, in leading their praise and thanksgiving, in guiding their intercession and witness, and in the translation of their love to God into a living liturgy of service in the depths of human need. Such a reformation in the office of the elder-deacon within the Reformed Church might then even play a modest ecumenical role in prompting fuller recovery of the biblical and early Christian pattern of diakonia in other Churches as well.

THOMAS F. TORRANCE, 37 Braid Farm Road, Edinburgh EH106L.

----

1. For Peter Martyr see Loci Communes, 4.1.11; and for John Calvin see the 1559 Institute 4.3.8; 4.11.1, 6,43; Commentaries on Rom. 12.8; 1 Cor. 12.28; and 1 Tim. 5.17.

2 For this appeal to patristic evidence, see Peter Colin Campbell, The Theory of Ruling Eldership, 1866, pp. 6-12.

3. See especially, Gesta apud Zenophilum and Actapurgationis Felicis, in the Appendix to S. Optati Milevitani LIBRI VI, CSEL vol. XXI, 1893, pp. 187-204.

4. See Vitringa, De Synagoga Vetere, ii.3: 'care was taken that they should not be called presbyters, lest any one should ignorantly confound them with the elders or presbyters mentioned in Scripture, but seniores and gerontes'. And John Forbes, Instr. Hist.- Theol., 1645, 16.1.17.

5. Les Ordonnances Ecclesiastiques, Johannis Calvini Opera Selecta, edited by P. Barth & W. Niesel, vol.II, 1952, p. 369f; and J. K. S. Reid, Calvin: Theological Treatises, 1954, p. 63f.

6. Steuart of Pardovan, Collections, I. viii.3.

7. G. Donaldson, Scottish Reformation, 1972, p.222; cf. W. R. Foster, The Church Before the Covenants, p. 69, and W. Makey, The Church of the Covenant, pp.125-7.

8. op.cit., I. iii.3.

9. Second Book of Discipline, II.6 & IV.I.

10. See the account of the debate given by Peter Colin Campbell, op. cit., pp. 32ff.

11. cf. A Manual of Church Doctrine according to the Church of Scotland, by H. J. Wotherspoon and J. M. Kirkpatrick, revised and enlarged by T. F. Torrance and Ronald Selby Wright, London, 1960, pp. 99ff.

12. Second Book of Discipline, I.6.5: 'As the Pastors and Doctors should be diligent in Teiching and sawing the Seid of the Word, so the Elders should be cairful in seiking the Fruit of the same in the People'. Likewise, Alexander Henderson, op. cit., III.V.

13. See, for example, George Gillespie, An Assertion of The Government of the Church of Scotland in The points of Ruling-Elders, and of the Authority of Presbyteries and Synods, Edinburgh, 1641, pp. 14ff.

14. For the theology that lies behind this diaconal/complementary form of ministry, see 'Service in Jesus Christ', my contribution to Service in Christ. Essays Presented to Karl Barth on his 80th Birthday, edited by James I. McCord and T. H. L. Parker, London, 1966, pp. 1-16.

15. Thus A. Henderson, op. cit., I.III. 'Ordain' was the term intruded by C. Gillespie, op. cit., p.15, and is found in Pardovan's Collections, new edition, 1773, I.VII..

16. For ordination of ministers, see Sec. Bk. of Disc., II.6; T. Smeaton, Orth. Resp., p. 107 A. Henderson, op. cit., I.1; Form of Presb. Ch.-Gov. and Ordination; cf. S. Rutherford, Due Right of Presbyteries, 1644, pp. 186f; C. Gillespie, Miscellany Questions, 1649, p. 63f.

17. cf S. Rutherford, A Peaceable and Temperate Plea for Paul's Presbyterie in Scotland, 1642, pp. 2ff; The Due right of Presbyteries, 1644, p. 206f; and G. Gillespie, Miscellany Questions, 1649, p. 40f.

18. For Calvin's view of the diaconate see J. K. S. Reid, 'Diakonia in the Thought of Calvin', Service in Christ, edit. by J. I. McCord and T. H. L. Parker, 1960, pp.101-9.

19 It is not surprising that Steuart of Pardovan could claim that 'the office of Deacon is included in the office of a Ruling Elder', Collections, VI.2. cf. A Manual of Church Doctrine, 1960, pp. 80ff, 99ff.

20. See John Forbes, op. cit., I.XVI.1, 21-22.

21 The Westminster Assembly employed a similar analogy with reference to 2 Chron. xix.8-10, in support of those 'commonly called Elders': The Form of Church Government, 'Other Church-Governors'.

22. Evidently seniores plebis in North Africa, while not clergy, could yet be included with them under ecclesiastici viri: Gesta apud Zenophilum, Appendix to the works of Optatus, op. cit., p. 189.

23. The Works of the Reverend and Learned John Lightfoot, D.D., revised edition, London, 1684, vol.1, pp.276 & 279.

24. Sanhedrin 1.6, Eng. edit. by Herbert Danby, The Mishnah, 1933, p.383; cf. also Babylonian Talmud, Megillah, IV.1; Josephus, Antiquities, IV.viii. 14, 38, and Jewish War, II.xx.5.

25. See T. M. Lindsay, The Church and the Ministry in the Early Centuries, 1903, pp.115ff; W. Lockton, Divers Orders of Ministers, pp. 22ff.; and D. Daube, The New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism, 1956, pp. 237f.

26. cf. E. Schurer, A History of the Jewish People in the Time of Christ, II.II, p. 247f.

27. The Mishnah, 4.3, edit. by H. Danby, p.387.

28. LIBRI VII, 2.4, CSEL edition, p. 39; cf 1.10, p.12f.

29. See Schuerer, op. cit., II.II, pp. 55ff, 70ff, 227ff.

30. See R. H. Connolly, Didascalia Apostolorum, 1929; and F. F. Bruce, Men and Movements in the Primitive Church, ch. 3 on 'James and the Church of Jerusalem' pp. 86ff.

31. op. cit., pp. 118ff.

32. cf. again my essay 'Service in Jesus Christ', op. cit., pp.1-9, and 13f.