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## THE ELDERSHIP IN MARTIN BUCER AND JOHN CALVIN\*

Rev. Dr. R. E. H. Uprichard

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The office of eldership within the reformed Church has provoked animated discussion right from its inception.\*\* Did the reformers invent this office or rediscover it? Did they recover it from the early Church or from the Scripture or from both? Was the practical necessity of discipline within the Church in general and the preservation of ecclesiastical control of the Church over against state intervention in particular the primary motivation for the introduction of the eldership? Did the reformers only seek biblical 'justification' as a secondary measure? Are we to equate 'presbyter' and 'bishop' in the New Testament, or the presbyter of the New Testament with the elder of the reformed Church today? Are there grounds for maintaining the duality of ruling and teaching functions within the eldership - the 'minister' or 'teaching elder' and the 'ruling elders' comprising the 'Kirk Session' of reformed Churches today?

These are by no means purely academic questions. Our answers to them will determine our view of biblical polity, our scriptural concept of Church government. These answers are all the more important in the ecumenical scene today. In a word, this is the

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\* We would thank Professor Howard Marshall, editor of *The Evangelical Quarterly* for permission to re-print this article in honour of Professor Russell. Rev. Dr Uprichard not only did both his Masters and Doctorate under the supervision of Professor Russell, but he also contributed to the first Issue of *Irish Biblical Studies*. It is a great pleasure to welcome him back to the pages of *Irish Biblical Studies*.

\*\* Grateful acknowledgment is made to the Queen's University of Belfast for use of R. N. Caswell, 'The Theory and Practice of Calvin's Church Discipline' (Ph.D Thesis 1960) and of personal help from the Rev. Professor-Emeritus. J M. Barkley, the Rev. Professor-Emeritus R. F. G. Holmes, both of Union Theological College, Belfast and from Mr. David Wright of New College, Edinburgh in the composition of the foregoing.

scenario of on-going debate between those affirming a three-fold order of ordained ministry: bishop, priest and deacon, the 'Episcopal' perception of the majority of Christendom, and those professing a two-fold form: bishop = presbyter = teaching/ruling elder and deacon, the understanding generally maintained within Reformed Churches. The Christian Church zealous to know that unity which is Christ's will for his Church as it enters the twenty-first century cannot afford to ignore how Christ wants his Church to be ordered according to his Word until he returns.

One of the most recent, pertinent and challenging comments on this issue is T. F. Torrance's booklet *The Eldership in the Reformed Church*.<sup>53</sup> Reviewing the antecedents of eldership in the early Church documents and extant inscriptions Professor Torrance claims that there are no grounds for equating this office with that of 'presbyter'. According to his understanding, the reformers imported the idea of the *seniores* from the North African Church of the 4th/5th century and then looked for biblical evidence for this. Calvin's position is described as 'clearly ambiguous, for while his interpretation of 1 Tim. 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.' Professor Torrance's contention is '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.'<sup>54</sup> He further suggests that the nearest approximation to our idea of elder is the deacon of the Pastoral Epistles and that the appointment of the Seven in Acts 6 is not the origin of the diaconate but of the presbyterate. His conclusion with regard to our idea of elder is that we can turn only to Presbyterian tradition rather than to Holy Scripture for any guidance in the fulfillment of their duties. These observations have far-reaching effects and call for a reinvestigation of the eldership in the reformed Church during its

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<sup>53</sup> T.F. Torrance, *The Eldership in the Reformed Church* (Edinburgh, 1984).

<sup>54</sup> T.F. Torrance, *op. cit.* 57.

most formative stage in the teaching of Bucer and Calvin. Are there any clues in the developing view of these two reformers which can help answer the questions posed by the debate?

## **Martin Bucer**

Bucer's concept of the eldership was set within the context of a lifelong personal conviction about the importance of discipline within the Church and a constant attempt to establish an ecclesiastical discipline independent of the secular power. This interest arises as early as 1523 in his work 'Das Ym Selbs' which introduces the theme that no-one should live for himself but for his neighbour and attempts an answer as to how a man can do this. At this time, however, Bucer's belief that the early Church ought to prevent unworthy people from participating in the Lord's Supper marked the sum of his conception of discipline.

Bucer's contact with Oecolampadius around 1530 stimulated his views. Oecolampadius maintained that discipline was both desirable and possible and should be under Church control. At first Bucer was doubtful but then agreed. We should base our ideas on New Testament days and not as he (Bucer) had been doing on the situation in the days of the prophets in the Old Testament.

By 1532 the city council set up in Strasbourg a board of Kirchenpfleger comprising 21, 3 from each of the 7 parishes reminiscent of Oecolampadius' council in structure. The Kirchenpfleger were to supervise the preaching of the pastors and to meet with the Kircherkonvent for the good of the Church in general. 'The idea of discipline definitely becomes real with the creation of the Kirchenpfleger in Strasbourg'.<sup>55</sup>

The 1533 Synod establishing the 'Strasbourg Ordinances' was a landmark in this developing discipline. Some measures are particularly noteworthy.

1. Believers were to be invited to the Lord's Table.
2. The Kirchenpfleger nominated by the State were invested with ecclesiastical authority; now they were Church officials,

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<sup>55</sup> J. Courvoisier, *La Notion d'Eglise Chez Bucer* (Paris, 1933), 26.

‘geistliche Personen’ where formerly they were simply described as laymen.

3. 1 Cor. 14 and other New Testament texts are quoted which identify, the *Kirchenpfleger* with the elders of the primitive Church. They are of divine origin, willed by the Holy Spirit.

This identification with the New Testament elder marks a vital stage in the process of Bucer’s thought.<sup>56</sup> His views on the eldership are further amplified in his tract dated 1533/34 ‘*Quid de baptisate*’. Elders are described as those ‘who would apply themselves with us to govern the Church and would set up and administer all that had to do with holy admonition and censure’.<sup>57</sup> For this were needed laymen ‘courageux - comprehensiv - pieux - intelligents - ayant l’ experience’.<sup>58</sup> 1 Cor. 12 was quoted and, in an important analogical allusion incorporating 1 Tim. 5:17, it was maintained that just as the Jews had priests, scribes and also leaders of the people so it was certain that the elders whom St. Paul named were not all teachers. As far as the establishment of the *Kirchenpfleger* as an ecclesiastical council independent of secular influence was concerned, however, this was a process which met with much opposition and Bucer’s success in Strasbourg was piecemeal as was Calvin’s in Geneva. But the progress of thought is significant at this point, particularly the identification with the New Testament elder.

Bucer’s commentary on the Gospels (1536) extended his discussion on discipline in general. Elders were especially charged with carrying out discipline. Confession might be made before them though the

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<sup>56</sup> J. M. Barkley, *The Eldership in Irish Presbyterianism* (1963), 10. R.N. Caswell, ‘The Theory and Practice of Calvin’s Church Discipline’ (Ph.D Thesis, Queen’s University Belfast, 1960), 152.

W. Pauck, *The Heritage of the Reformation* (Oxford University Press, 1968, 2 and *passim*).

G.Hamman, *Entre la secte et la cité: le Projet d’Eglise du Reformateur Martin Bucer (1491-1551)* (Geneva, 1984), 286 and *passim*.

<sup>57</sup> Cited from ‘*Quid de Baptisate*’ in J. M. Barkley, *op. cit.*, 11.

<sup>58</sup> Cited from ‘*Quid de Baptisate*’ in J. M. Barkley, *op. cit.*, 11.

private form was not excluded. In the third edition, however, there was a modification reserving discipline chiefly to ministers.

Bucer's 'De Vera Animarum Cura' (1538), a treatise on pastoral care, is more significant for our purpose.<sup>59</sup> It claimed that it was the duty of all Christians to exercise pastoral care but particularly those 'who are specially ordained for the care of souls and the healing of sinners'. Paul's Corinthian correspondence is quoted to show that punishment was imposed by many and in the name of the Church. Paul caused it but the elders of the Church administered it (*Presbyteri autem Ecclesiae Corinthicae administrabant*). The value of this example for us is in showing how the Church will admonish and castigate such through elders, I Tim. 5 being quoted. In discipline however, the magistrate was also deemed responsible (*omnino enim haec partes sunt magistratum*). The importance of the New Testament elder within the disciplinary function of the Church is again noteworthy. The partial success of Bucer's disciplinary efforts on the ground is evident from later developments. By 1546 discipline was only effective among restricted groups, churches within churches, (*Gemeinschaften*) composed of those willing to submit to discipline. This marks the beginning of the 'Ecclesiola' within the 'Ecclesia', characteristic of some later developments within reformed churches. The *Kirchenpfleger* were invited to attend these fellowships. Offenders were invited to absent themselves. Bucer attempted to establish independent ecclesiastical discipline in Hesse. Elders were elevated to an essential place. Excommunication was only to take place with the approval of the 'superintendents'. But again the practicalities were such that in the event discipline was carried out by both elders and magistrates. The battle between secular and ecclesiastical continued.

Bucer's mature view on Church polity and the eldership are evident in his 'De Regno Christi' addressed to Edward VI, 'written in 1550'.<sup>60</sup> There were four lists of offices in Bucer's view of ministry:

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<sup>59</sup> 'De Vera Animarum Cura', in *Scripta Anglicana* (Basle, 1577), 293-353.

<sup>60</sup> In *Melancthon and Bucer*, edited by W. Pauck (London, 1969), 174-394.

1. Pastors for preaching the Word, administration of sacraments and cure of souls.
2. Teachers or Doctors including school teachers and Professors of theology.
3. Elders for the government of the Church and discipline.
4. Deacons for the care of poor and administration.

In 'De Regno Christi' Bucer referred to the presiding elder as bishop. He recognized two ranks of elders and bemoaned the fact that St. Ambrose testified to the existence and abolition of this office of elders who along with the minister were responsible for discipline in the Church and that their disappearance had harmful effects. For both Strasbourg and England Bucer envisaged offices of preaching and teaching elders trained for their tasks; untrained lay elders who, together with the older ministers, would be responsible for the administration of discipline; and deacons who would be in charge of poor relief and the administration of benevolences.<sup>61</sup>

The following excerpt from 'De Regno Christi' indicated his views, speaking of New Testament elders Bucer continued:-

Here however, it must be observed that it is not necessary for all elders to be trained in letters and languages, or even in the ability of public teaching. This office, although it is also that of elders, pertains especially to the one who holds the first place among the elders, to whom the name of bishop is uniquely given --Saint Ambrose testifies that there was this kind of elder both in the synagogue and in the early Church and that this office was abolished not without a vitiation of doctrine and disadvantage to the Churches. Commenting on the first part of the fifth chapter of the first letter to Timothy he writes: 'Do not slander an elder'. Hence both the synagogue and afterward the Church had elders without whose counsel nothing was done in the Church. What negligence abolished this I do not know, unless perhaps the

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<sup>61</sup>

W. Pauck, op. cit., 230-232, esp. 231 n. 35.

scorn of teachers, or more likely their pride, when they wanted only themselves to seem to be something.<sup>62</sup>

## John Calvin

The influence of Martin Bucer on John Calvin is generally agreed to be substantial. It is particularly evident in the sphere of ideas on Church discipline and polity. It is perhaps best seen as we compare Calvin's views on these matters before, during and after his years spent with Bucer in Strasbourg 1538-1541.

Calvin's Genevan Confession (1536), Catechism (1537) and Genevan Articles (1537) all recognized the need for discipline expressed in terms of excommunication. In the 1536 Institutes excommunication was mentioned, three aims of discipline noted and Christ's reference to the 'keys' related both to discipline and preaching.<sup>63</sup> The section on discipline in the 1539 Institutes was again quite small. The necessity of the three aims was dealt with more fully. The 'keys' were referred to again in this double sense of discipline and preaching but there is little positive direction given.

The Genevan Articles (Ordonnances) of 1537 referred specifically to the concept of eldership. 'We have deliberately required of you to be pleased to ordain and elect certain persons of good life and witness from among the faithful in all the quarters of the city', having oversight of the life and government of each of them.'<sup>64</sup> Part of the work of these 'persons' was reporting cases of indiscipline or immorality to the minister.

By the time Calvin came to Strasbourg in 1538 his views on discipline were at least basically formed. The 'keys', admonition and exclusion from the sacraments were the major aspect of his thinking. It is difficult to assess the source of his views. Certainly Scripture

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<sup>62</sup> W. Pauck, *op. cit.*, 231-232

<sup>63</sup> In this and the following, development in Calvin's thought as expressed in the Institutes may be determined from the annotated account with dating in the margin of the appropriate volume of Calvin, *Institution de la Religion Chrestienne* by D. Benoit (Paris, 1961).

<sup>64</sup> K. S. Reid, *Calvin's Theological Treatises* (London, 1954), 52.



played a prominent part. Calvin's knowledge of the Fathers was quite detailed so this must not be excluded, nor indeed the influence of other reformers such as Oecolampadius and Bucer either directly or indirectly.

When Calvin and Bucer came together in Strasbourg in 1538 they certainly had both experienced the frustrating problem of seeking to establish an independent ecclesiastical discipline in Geneva and Strasbourg with only indifferent success. Calvin's years in Strasbourg were most formative. He shared Bucer's views on discipline and along with Bucer sought to implement it while he was there. But Calvin complained of the piecemeal nature of its implementation and that it was by no means purely ecclesiastical.

The massive nature of the influence both of Bucer and of these years in Strasbourg on Calvin can be seen after his return to Geneva in 1541.<sup>65</sup> It was above all obvious in the following aspects of Calvin's thinking:-

1. Calvin's organisation in Geneva of the Consistory, the soul of his system, was based on Bucer's Kirchenpfleger and Kirchenkonvent. Calvin's Congregation (Compagnie de pasteurs) corresponded exactly to Bucer's Kirchenkonvent. There is no definite trace of these organisations during his first stay.

2. Calvin's Genevan Ordonnances of 1541 began with a recital of Bucer's list of four offices; Pastors, Teachers, Elders and Deacons. In particular, they described these offices as 'instituted by our Lord'. There was, then, a significant difference between the 'certain persons' Calvin asked for in 1537 in Geneva and the 'anciens' he required on his return. Courvoisier stresses the contrast in these terms. 'In 1537, it was Calvin's own idea, in 1541 it is the ordinance of our Lord, a divine institution! In 1537 the necessity of discipline is indicated; in 1541 only the word "elder" appears.'<sup>66</sup> This vitally affected Calvin's view of the authority on which these men

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<sup>65</sup> J. M. Barkley, *op. cit.*, 11f.

R.N. Caswell, *op. cit.*, 144-173.

W. Pauck, *op. cit.*, 85-99.

<sup>66</sup> J Courvoisier, 'Bucer et l'oeuvre de Calvin', *Revue de Theologie et Philosophie* Jan-Mar 1933, 69.

would be appointed. As Courvoisier notes, 'Before 1538 the men that he is speaking of are laymen, now they are considered as members of the clergy, their ministry and their authority given directly by God with the same warrant as preachers. It is an exact parallel to the idea introduced by Bucer in the Strasbourg ordinances of 1533-34, when he identified the "Kirchenpfleger" with the elders of the primitive Church'.<sup>67</sup> As the Genevan Ordonnances stated, 'It has seemed well advised to us that the spiritual government, such as our Lord showed and instituted in His Word should be set out in a suitable form so that it can take place and be observed in our midst'.<sup>68</sup> Elders had a place in the spiritual government of the Church for theirs was an appointment 'iure divino'. Both this and the equation with the New Testament elder is highly significant in the progress of the development of the thinking of both Bucer and Calvin.

3. Calvin reflects a persuasion concerning the visibility of the Church after his time in Strasbourg not in evidence to the same degree prior to it.

4. Generally in terms of discipline, Bucer's influence on Calvin can be seen in the way very large parts of the 'De Vera Animarum Cura' found their way into the Institutes of 1539 and 1542, the evident link between discipline and the Lord's Table and Calvin's subsequent attempt to realize Bucer's ideal of *ecclesiastical* discipline.

Indeed, as we consider references to discipline in general and to the eldership in particular in the Institutes of 1536 and 1539 together with his commentary on Romans at 12:8 (1536) and compare these with similar references in the later versions of the Institutes and Calvin's later commentaries, the significance of Bucer's influence is yet more pervasive. Perhaps, in this light, Calvin's position might not be as 'clearly ambiguous' as suggested. Is there a line of development here within Bucer and Calvin which stresses the rationale of the progression of thought and gives consistency even amid certain ambiguity?

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<sup>67</sup> J. Courvoisier, *La Notion*, 143

<sup>68</sup> Cited from the Genevan Ordinances in J. M. Barkley, *op. cit.*, 1-13.

As we have noted, the *Institutes* of 1536 and 1539 give some detail in discipline. It is only with the editions 1543/45 however that the features familiar to modern readers occur. In the relevant section on the Officers of the Church (Book IV Chapter 111, paras 8 and 9) the only references dating back to 1536 and 1539 are to the work of the diaconate and its origin. Those portions dealing with the eldership (Rom. 12:7, 8; I Cor. 12:28) are all dated 1541 and 1545.

Similarly, the reference to elders in Calvin's commentary at Rom. 12:8 (1536) is certainly significant when compared with later data in his commentaries.

Although he properly calls those *rulers* to whom the ministration of the Church was committed (and they were Seniors, who ruled and governed others, and exercised the censure of manners), yet that which he saith of them may generally be applied to all kinds of superiors; for it is no small care (that) is required of those who are to provide for the safety of all, neither is a slender diligence looked for of them who ought to watch night and day for the health of all men; although the estate of that time showeth that Paul did not speak of all superiors (because then there were no godly magistrates), but of Seniors (elders), who were the correctors of manners'.<sup>69</sup>

Calvin's references to the eldership in the *Institutes* occur at two major points under the 'Officers of the Church' (Book IV Chapter III para 8) and under the 'Jurisdiction of the Church' (Book IV Chapter XI para 1).

In the former, having equated the New Testament titles of bishops, presbyters and pastors and related these to the ministry of the Word, Calvin goes on to note other offices as indicated at Rom. 12:7; I Cor. 12:28.

But in the Epistle to the Romans, and the First Epistle to the Corinthians, he enumerates other offices as powers, gifts of healing, interpretations, government, care of poor (Rom.

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<sup>69</sup> J Calvin, *Commentary upon The Epistle of Saint Paul to the Romans* (Edinburgh, 1844), 351.

12:7; I Cor. 12:28). As to those which were temporary I say nothing for it is not worth while to dwell upon them. But there are two of perpetual duration--viz ---government and care of the poor. By these governors I understand seniors selected from the people to unite with the bishops in pronouncing censures and exercising discipline. For this is the only meaning which can be given to the passage 'He that ruleth with diligence' (Rom. 12:8). From the beginning, therefore, each Church had its senate composed of pious grave and venerable men in whom was lodged the power of correcting faults. Of this power we shall afterwards speak. Moreover, experience shows that this arrangement was not confined to one age, and therefore we are to regard the office of government as necessary for all ages.<sup>70</sup>

It is to be noted that this office is distinguished from that of bishop/presbyter/pastor and from the ministry of the Word. It is also pertinent to note the texts are confined to Rom. 12:7,8; 1 Cor. 12:28. This section is dated 1541 and 1545.

Under the 'Jurisdiction of the Church' Calvin stresses the necessity for spiritual government in the Church.

To this end, there were established in the Church from the first, tribunals which might take cognizance of morals, animadvert on vices and exercise the office of the keys. This order is mentioned by Paul in the First Epistle to the Corinthians under the name of governments (I Cor. 12:28); in like manner, in the Epistle to the Romans, when he says 'He that ruleth with diligence' (Rom. 12:8). For he is not addressing magistrates, none of whom were then Christians, but those who were joined with pastors in the spiritual government of the Church. In the Epistle to Timothy, also, he mentions two kinds of presbyters, some who labour in the word and others who do not perform the office of preaching but rule well (I Tim. 5:17). By this latter class there is no

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<sup>70</sup>

J Calvin, *Institutes*, Book IV, Chapter III, para. 8.

doubt he means those who were appointed to the inspection of manners and 'the whole use of the keys'.<sup>71</sup>

It is interesting to note the same use of texts (Rom. 12:8; 1 Cor. 12:28), the development of the power of the keys in this connection, the stress in spiritual office and the reference to 'two kinds of presbyters' citing 1 Timothy 5:17, while maintaining the distinction relating to the ministry of the Word. This portion is dated 1545.

A similar progression of thought is evident as we examine the relevant points in Calvin's commentaries dated after his visit to Strasbourg.

For example, in 1 Corinthians dated 1546 Calvin comments on 5:4.

As, however, a multitude never accomplishes anything with moderation or seriousness if not governed by counsel, there was appointed in the ancient Church a Presbytery, that is, an assembly of elders, who, by the consent of all, had the power of first judging the case'.<sup>72</sup>

Later at 12:28 there is a clear reference to two kinds of presbyters and 1 Tim. 5:17 is alluded to.

'By *Governments* I understand *Elders*, who had the charge of discipline. For the primitive Church had its Senate, for the purpose of keeping the people in propriety of deportment, as Paul shows elsewhere when he makes mention of two kinds of Presbyters. (1 Tim. 5:17) ("Deux ordres de Prestress: c'est à dire d'Anciens"- "Two kinds of Presbyters; that is to say, Elders"). Hence *government* consisted of those Presbyters who excelled others in gravity, experience and authority'.<sup>73</sup>

Calvin's commentary on 1 Timothy was published in 1548. The comment on 5:17 is yet more revealing.

We may learn from this, that there were at that time two kinds of elders; for all were not ordained to teach. The words

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<sup>71</sup> J. Calvin, *Institutes*, IV, X, 1.

<sup>72</sup> J Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, Vol. 1 (Edinburgh, 1848), 183.

<sup>73</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on First Corinthians*, 417.

plainly mean, that there were some who 'ruled well' and honourably, but who did not hold the office of teachers. And, indeed, there were chosen from among the people men of worth and good character, who, united with the pastors in a common council and authority, administered the discipline of the Church, and were a kind of censors for the correction of morals. Ambrose complains that this custom had gone into disuse, through the carelessness, or rather through the pride, of the doctors, who wish to possess undivided power.<sup>74</sup>

In 1561, in a sermon on 1 Tim. 5:17, Calvin also refers to this distinction between teaching and ruling functions claiming that one could not change what God had commanded as something inviolable. It is only fair to note, however, that Calvin alludes here to 'some who "ruled well" and honourably, but who did not hold the office of teachers'. This distinguishes the office of teacher from that of elder. Thus the 'ambiguity' arises. It is always difficult to estimate with precision how far Calvin understood the pastor/ teacher as a distinct office assisted by the elders or how far he perceived a presbyterial office with dual functions of teaching and ruling.

Calvin's Commentary on Acts, part 1 (chapters 1-13) was published in 1552 and part 2 (chapters 1~28) in 1554. Commenting on elders therein it is clear that he regards the elders as appointed along with the apostles for the government of the Church, the former regarded as a local on-going and necessary form of ministry, the latter as extraordinary in their appointment. The deacons with whom Calvin equates the Seven appointed in Acts 6 were under the jurisdiction of

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<sup>74</sup> Calvin, *Commentaries on The Epistles to Timothy, Titus and Philemon* (Edinburgh, 1856), 138-9.

For an extended discussion on various interpretations of 1 Tim. 5:17 see R. N. Caswell, *op. cit.*, esp. 221-30 and for a recent discussion on the issue see G. W. Knight, III, 'Two Offices (Elders/Bishops and Deacons) and Two Orders of Elders (Preaching/Teaching Elders and Ruling Elders): A New Testament Study' in *Presbyterian Covenant Seminary Review*, Vol. IX Spring 1985, Number 1 and R. S. Rayburn, 'Three Offices: Minister, Elder, Deacon in *Presbyterian Covenant Seminary Review*', XII Fall 1986, Number 2.

the elders. The elders referred to in Acts 14:23 he takes as teachers or pastors though he recognises at that point other elders whose work is the custody of morality within the Church. All of this confirms the mature expression of his views noted already in 1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy.

Comparing references both in the earlier versions of the Institutes and Calvin's commentaries with those later and taking Calvin's residence in Strasbourg (1538-41) as the dividing line certain important indications emerge: -

1. The office is much more clearly defined. Earlier the references are to seniors who are correctors of manners. Later, they are quite clearly elders, who assist pastors in the oversight of the Church.

2. The duties of this office became much more clearly integrated within the context of Church government. As early forms of government had the Senate, so the Church has the Presbytery without whose consent nothing might be done.- The developed structures of Calvin's comments on Acts make this evident.

3. The link with the early Church is perforce a link with Scripture and its authority. The polity is gradually traced to biblical norms. This is paralleled in the Genevan Ordinances when they describe the 'spiritual government' of which elders formed one of the four orders as being 'such as our Lord showed and instituted by His Word should be set out in a suitable form so that it can take place and be observed in our midst'.<sup>75</sup>

4. There are two kinds of presbyters, those who teach and those who rule. This is stated and the reference in Calvin's sermon on 1 Tim. 5:17 in 1561 adds the *imprimatur* of scriptural permanence to this view. This fact has far-reaching implications in considering the equation of elder and presbyter. While Bucer and Calvin seemed to reserve the title bishop for the presiding elder, they obviously viewed the New Testament elder as one of two kinds of New Testament presbyter.

This not only evinces clear lines of development in Calvin's thought but confirms the view that Bucer's influence on his thought was of

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Cited from Genevan Ordinances in J. M. Barkley, op. cit. 12-13.

paramount importance and that, indeed, what we have here is the developing progression of a Bucer-Calvin concept of eldership. The fact that Calvin's allusion to Ambrose in his comment on 1 Tim. 5:17 is little more than a transcript and almost a verbatim one at that of Bucer's view expressed on the subject in 'De Regno Christi' bears this out.

Having briefly reviewed this Bucer-Calvin developing theme on the eldership, we must now attempt to assess its significance. Certain features about it call for comment. First, it was a developing progression of thought which was quite clearly evident. This arises naturally from the historical drift of thought during these years in the two reformers' views. The paucity and relative imprecision of earlier allusions stand in stark contrast with the much fuller and more defined assertions of later data. The move from Old Testament to New Testament context of discipline within Bucer and that from 'certain men' to 'anciens' within Calvin confirms this. There is also, in both men, an increasing sense of the importance of this office within the polity and government of the Church. Compounded with this progression is the plain and widely accepted influence which Bucer exerted over Calvin. It is an influence perhaps most clearly discernible in reference to Church polity and the eldership. It would, in a word, be difficult to read the story of this period even from a purely historical point of view and escape this evident progression.

At the same time our perception of the progression might require some qualification from the historical point of view. If we presume that Bucer and Calvin started historically with quite distinct offices of pastor/teacher and elder, it would be reasonable to assume that this separation would have been yet more clear in their understanding at the point of its inception into their respective schemes of discipline. The real difficulty is that we cannot with any degree of accuracy know more of their thinking at source on the matter. It might prove helpful to examine the source with reference to Zurich and to pay even greater attention to the influence of specific local historical circumstances as, for example, in Strasbourg and Geneva on this source at its earliest appearance.

Secondly, it was also a definite progression of thought. This appears from two considerations particularly. A comparison of Bucer's



Strasbourg Ordinances of 1533 with Calvin's Genevan Ordinances of 1541 reveals that each marks a decisive point in the reformers' considerations. At those points each, having reached the conviction that Church government in general should be based on the Scriptures, affirmed that the eldership in particular should be regarded as a divine institution ordained by Christ, a spiritual office. The concurrence of their views is remarkable as Courvoisier notes, 'an exact parallel'.<sup>76</sup> The other consideration is the way in which both reformers came expressly to aver their belief that the New Testament at 1 Tim. 5:17 portrayed two kinds of elders, ruling and teaching in function. Again, the close resemblance of Calvin's comments on 1 Tim. 5:17 with Bucer's in 'De Regno Christi' as already noted makes this equally remarkable.

Thirdly, it was a conscious progression of thought. They did not come to these conclusions casually but as a result of considered opinion. The nub of the matter is, of course, whether they reached these convictions motivated by the practicalities of the situation, the need for discipline, the need to establish ecclesiastical as over against secular discipline within the Church, and simply went to the Scriptures to 'justify' an institution which they found in the 4/5th century Church and which was particularly suited to their situation or whether their approach was of a different nature.

Such a judgment as the former would be quite sweeping. They were men who, along with all the reformers, recognised the decisive importance of Scripture. Bucer and Calvin in particular had a detailed knowledge of Scripture and of the Church Fathers as well as of Church history. Even if they did move from the practicalities of their situation via Church history to the Scriptures this was a frequent and viable path taken by the Reformers and not in itself *ultra vires*.

J.M. Barkley commenting on this general problem claims:-

The Reformation was not an age of inventions, but an age of rediscovery, and from biblical and patristic evidence Bucer and Calvin re-discovered the eldership. At the same time, it

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<sup>76</sup> J. Courvoisier, *La Notion*, 143.

was the necessity of the times which led to this re-discovery'.<sup>77</sup>

This is surely an accurate assessment of the situation. Two considerations certainly support it. Both Bucer and Calvin following Oecolampadius quite consciously rejected the expressed view of other reformers that, now secular rulers were Christian and had 'kissed the Son', there was not the same need to exclude them from authority in the Church. Authority within the Church could come from both elder and magistrate. Bucer and Calvin claimed that the Church ought to be governed *qua* Church by its elders as appointed *jure divino*. The second consideration is that there were those even at the time, Zwingli and Melanchthon, for example, who viewed 1 Tim. 5:17 differently. Both Zwingli and Melanchthon claimed that Scripture knew of no other presbyters or priests than those who preach the Word of God nor was it possible to prove it otherwise.<sup>78</sup> It was, then, not casually nor in any fresh innovative sense but rather in rediscovering Scripture truth on the matter that Bucer and Calvin opposed such a view in favour of a two-presbyter theory. However controverted this theory became in the later history of the Church it must be seen to exist quite clearly in Bucer and Calvin and to appear as a consciously expressed view in awareness of contrary opinion. This brings us back to the point from which we began. in the light of these considerations, we must now look again at some of the questions raised and comments made by Professor Torrance on the subject.

With regard to the reformers' motives in formulating their views on the eldership would it be fair to say that they did not simply import their views from Church history and then seek biblical justification for them but rather re-discovered and developed them from Scripture under the most pressing practical circumstances? There can be no doubt about the pressing need to establish discipline in the Church and that on a purely ecclesiastical basis. There is clear evidence also

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<sup>77</sup> J Barkley, *op. cit.*, 14.

<sup>78</sup> U.Zwingli, *Omnia Opera* ((Tiguri), 1581), 1, 106. P. Melanchthon, *Opera* (Wittenberg, 1563), Vol. IV (ed. Peucher), 420.

as to how far this impinged on the reformers' considerations and thinking. There can be no doubt, on the other hand, about the precedents not only from Scripture but from the Church Fathers, the early history of the Christian Church even down to the Waldenses in the twelfth and the Bohemian Church in the fifteenth century for the institution of the eldership. On this evidence alone, the assumption that Bucer and Calvin 'invented' the eldership can be set aside. It is particularly the progression of thought, with all its varied motivation, continuing through Bucer and Calvin which seems to make 're-discovery' rather than simply 'justification' the tone of their thinking. The on-going nature of this development on the background of their great learning at least makes this a viable interpretation of the evidence.

What of the 'ambiguity' in Calvin on the whole subject of the eldership? Without doubt different strands of approach are evident in Calvin's opinions. Dealing precisely with Church 'governors' in the *Institutes*, he only quotes Rom. 12:7,8 and 1 Cor. 12:28, and there he stresses the distinction between such governors and the bishop/presbyter/pastor in his ministry of the Word. In the 'Jurisdiction of the Church', later in the *Institutes*, however, he does extend these texts to incorporate 1 Tim. 5:17, mentions two kinds of presbyters and elaborates this view in his commentaries on 1 Cor. and 1 Tim. and in preaching on 1 Tim. 5:17. The fact that he limits his textual warranty to Rom. 12:7,8 and 1 Cor. 12:28 in portraying among offices 'governors' or 'seniors' is not an insuperable barrier. Could it be again that we are seeing this expanding progression of thought developing as within the *Institutes* under the 'Jurisdiction of the Church' and in his commentaries and preaching he expresses further reflection on the biblical offices by including 1 Tim. 5:17 in his discussion? It is not without significance that in the section under the 'Jurisdiction of the Church', Rom. 12:8 and 1 Cor. 12:28 are mentioned as well as 1 Tim. 5:17 and that references in his commentary on Acts while maintaining a distinction between pastor and elder in the sense of governor do at least tentatively recognise the concept of two kinds of elder.

What of the further ambiguity in Calvin's reluctance to admit elders to the Presbytery or to join with ministers in acts of ordination by

laying on of hands? Is this perhaps partly explicable on the general ground that constantly for Bucer and Calvin the practicalities of the situation limited implementation of their views? It seems also clear, however, that both Calvin and Bucer, in whatever way they espoused the two-presbytery theory, reserved the title 'bishop' for the presiding/preaching presbyter. The distinction between teaching and ruling function, if not expressed overtly in a two-presbyter theory, was at least evident in this way.

What of the 'Presbyter theory' itself, however, in Bucer and Calvin? Professor Torrance comments that as a result of later investigation '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'.<sup>79</sup> This statement arises from an assessment of our reformed concept of eldership as historically orientated and in the light of much subsequent debate on the subject. It nonetheless seems reasonable to maintain that, however differently later Reformed scholars viewed the data, certainly with Bucer and Calvin there was a clear progression of thought moving in the direction of what later became known as the 'presbyter theory'.

While admitting the weakness in the evidence from extant documentation for the equation of presbyter with elder, the pressured motivation which formed the background of the reformers' view, and a degree of ambiguity and fluidity in their opinions, Bucer and Calvin nevertheless evince a progression of thought toward the 'presbyter theory'. The logical premises of their convictions were at the very least the recognition of a duality of function in teaching and ruling, within the New Testament presbyterate. The logical deduction of their reasoning is well couched in the unsuccessful bid of the Scottish Commissioners to the Westminster Assembly to have these views embodied in Presbyterian polity:

Besides those presbyters which rule well, and labour in the word and doctrine, there be other presbyters, who especially

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<sup>79</sup> T. F. Torrance, *op. cit.* 7.

apply themselves to ruling, though they do not labour in the word and doctrine.<sup>80</sup>

The whole scene, however, has been garbled by the extremism of later debate. It took three weeks to reach a conclusion in the Westminster Assembly even for a start! This must not prevent us from continuing to discuss and reassess the reasonably clear if tentative positions held by Bucer and Calvin in the formative stages of reformed thinking on the eldership and the honest if heated differences which arose at the time of the Reformation and later. Only then will we enter the twenty-first century with views on Church polity reflecting a true and biblical, if somewhat divided, ecumenism.

R.E.H.Uprichard.

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Cited from the proceedings of the Westminster Assembly in J. M. Barkley, *op. cit.*, 19.