

## • Book Reviews/Recensions/Buchbesprechungen

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### ***A Noble Task: Eldership and Ministry in the Local Church***

**Neil Summerton**

Revised edition (1. Ed.1986)

Carlisle: Paternoster, 1994, 208pp., £9.99, paperback, ISBN 0 85364 515 9

### **RÉSUMÉ**

*Summerton porte le regard d'un initié sur les assemblées de frères et montre comment la décadence, liée à la faiblesse des dirigeants, peut être évitée par des progrès quant à la qualité spirituelle des anciens et à l'exercice de leur fonction. L'ouvrage fait des suggestions bibliques, intelligentes et pratiques, et appelle avec compassion et compréhension à des changements fondamentaux et vivifiants. Il concerne toutes les dénominations dans lesquelles les anciens jouent un rôle de dirigeant. L'auteur traite des principes de la fonction d'ancien et de son exercice dans les communautés, ainsi que des principes, des objectifs et des divers types de ministère à plein temps. Ce livre est un outil précieux et très pratique pour les anciens, pour ceux qui se préparent à assumer cette charge, pour ceux qui les forment, et aussi pour les pasteurs qui veulent mieux collaborer avec les anciens.*

### **ZUSAMMENFASSUNG**

*Summerton bietet eine Bestandsaufnahme der Brüderbewegung aus dem Blickwinkel eines Eingeweihten und zeigt, wie deren Niedergang, der mit dem Unvermögen der Leiter verbunden ist, eventuell vermieden werden kann, indem man die geistliche Qualität und die Funktion der Ältesten ausbaut. Dieser Band, der biblische, umsichtige und praktische Anregungen gibt, ruft mit Leidenschaft und Verständnis zu grundlegenden und erneuernden Veränderungen auf. Er geht alle Konfessionen an, in denen die Ältesten eine leitende Rolle einnehmen. Der Autor untersucht Prinzipien und Praxis des Ältestenamtes einer Gemeinde sowie die Grundsätze, Ziele und Formen des vollzeitlichen Dienstes. Das Buch stellt ein wertvolles und äußerst praktisches Werkzeug dar für Älteste, für diejenigen, die sich darauf vorbereiten, Älteste zu werden, für solche, die letztere ausbilden sowie für Pastoren, die besser mit den Ältesten zusammenarbeiten wollen.*

Many would agree that the Brethren movement and its biblical leadership structure is far too good and still too young to die. The author of *A Noble Task* offers a pertinent survey and

appraisal of the (Open or Christian) Brethren movement (and former Brethren congregations) in Britain and shows how decline, related to deficiencies in leadership, can be averted, based on the firm conviction 'that it is essential to improve the elders' spirituality and practical performance' (p. 93). Most of what is said also applies to the situation of assemblies elsewhere and to other denominations where elders (or deacons) are involved in church leadership. Others are invited to study and learn from the Brethren experience and errors (10). Summerton (S), a civil servant, is himself an elder of an assembly in Highgate, London, and executive secretary of Partnership Ministries (cf. 205-06). In his assessment and proposal he sketches the biblical foundations and provides sensible and immensely practical suggestions, and present a compassionate and sympathetic call to a vital and revitalising change.

The introductory pages on the need for effective eldership with their brief historical survey and analysis of the current situation (15-19) set the agenda for the book: while the idea of collective leadership of the congregation is biblical and correct, the problem has been with its implementation: 'the spiritual state of many congregations can be traced to deficiencies in government, leadership and ministry in a phrase, to widespread default in the practice of eldership' (17). The weaknesses of this implementation, and how to improve it, are dealt with in two sections.

The first section is devoted to the 'Principles and practice of congregational eldership' (23-118). S begins with the calling to eldership, going through the personal, functional and practical qualification, namely 'observable matters of character and conduct, on the works which are the practical evidence of a living faith' (24). This section could be more detailed; for *mias gunaikos aner* (1 Tim 3,2,12) cf. S. Page, 'Marital Expectations of Church Leaders in the Pastoral Epistles', *JSNT* 50, 1993, 105-20). Then comes the appointment, recognition and retirement(!) of elders. As eldership is not a status but a responsibility, the idea 'once an elder, always an elder' does not apply: 'Wise elders, whatever their age but particularly after the age of 70, will regard their positions as continually at the Lord's disposal via their col-



leagues and the church as a whole' (36).

As men with the mere title 'elder' will be insufficient, S outlines and discusses the office and task of the elders: they are to pastor, teach and order the flock, i.e. all that relates to initiation, admission, discipline and *in extremis* withdrawal of fellowship, to steer, encourage and enable the flock, i.e. lead it and to pray, especially for the flock (43-44). Next S turns to the 'Dynamics of collective leadership', treating the effectiveness of the leadership group, the elders' need for assistance, the role of the deacons and the elders' relation to the deacons. One chapter is devoted to the elders' relation to the (rest of the) congregation including the rights of the congregation and how elders should and can build this relationship through good communication and consultation with the goal of winning the confidence of the congregation and conveying the necessary vision. One of the essentials for a functioning eldership is proper training. As elders do not drop from the clouds at the age of fifty-five, with grey hair and matching suits, S outlines what the preparation and development of elders implies. Arising from the material discussed so far, two digressions follow. The first appendix deals with the relationship of gift, ministry and office in the NT (119-32), the second considers the ministry and leadership of women (133-47), arguing that they should have 'a wide ambit for ministry of all kinds including ministries of a leadership character, in an appropriate biblical relationship with men' (144).

Though Brethren are at times described as not 'believing in ministers' (hardly advisable for any Christian!), S's second part is devoted to the principles, objectives and patterns of full-time congregational ministry (151-87). How can the ministry of the so-called 'resident full-time worker' be related to and integrated with a strong tradition of plural leadership and charismatic ministry? His role should be defined in the light of the needs of the congregation. S suggests various roles and tasks (from teaching to musical director/worship leader), recommends drawing up a job specification which should be open to adjustment, and discusses the impact of such ministry on the church and on the elders and how to manage them. 'To achieve an effective full-time ministry without impairing plural leadership and the exercise of charismatic gift would be at once a boon to the congregation and an example to the church at large' (9187). S's suggestions apply

also to situations where a lay eldership or a team ministry is to be developed or improved. A third appendix summarises the NT practice of supporting Christian workers.

Summerton argues for the need to train and equip future elders and to ensure that those who hold the office know what it involves and are able to fulfil the duties of a noble task. To foster this aim S adds twelve pages of slightly annotated bibliography (subdivided into eldership and plural leadership, ministry of women, pastoring [subdivisions for various areas of counselling], teaching and preaching, leadership, congregational strategy [including church planting and home groups] and worship; 193-204, English titles only). The book concludes with a listing of training opportunities for congregational elders (205-08), to 'whet the appetite for training which may expand horizons and challenge elders to more effective service'. It is encouraging to see the variety of training opportunities available in England (within the movement). Going through these pages may put the Brethren movement elsewhere to shame and encourage institutions often predominantly training 'full-timers' to offer similar courses and seminars for the elders (or lay-readership) of all denominations.

Altogether S offers a valuable, widely applicable tool for elders, those to be elders, those training elders and full-time elders, and ministers who want to co-operate with elders. It can be used for private study, in groups and as a basis for discussion. The comprehensive index allows its use for reference purposes. It is to be hoped that those with more conservative views on the ministry of women and full-time elders will not be put off right away, but study and put into practice what is to be learnt in other areas. A. Strauch's *Biblical Eldership: An Urgent Call to Restore Biblical Church Leadership*, 2. Ed. (Littleton, Colorado: Lewis & Roth, 1991) is helpful secondary reading.

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### ***Paul: Follower of Jesus or Founder of Christianity?***

**David Wenham**

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