

BY WHOSE AUTHORITY?

ELDERS IN BAPTIST LIFE

MARK DEVER

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*D*edicated to those brothers who have served with me  
as elders of the Capitol Hill Baptist Church.  
May your calling be fulfilled,  
your number increase,  
and the congregation we've been called to serve  
flourish  
until Christ returns.

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# P R E F A C E

P R E F A C E

**T**his brief book is composed largely of an address I gave at the New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary on February 6, 2004. I was invited by Stan Norman to come and speak to the topic of "Elders and Baptist Polity" at the initial meeting of the Baptist Center for Theology and Ministry. Professor Norman and President Chuck Kelley were kind to extend the invitation and gave me a warm welcome there. Since I was advocating the unusual position of Baptist churches adopting a plurality of non-staff elders, this paper received a good bit of attention. And because that interest continues, we have decided to publish the substance of the address in book form.

Unlike other 9Marks materials, we understand that this book will probably have its main use in Baptist churches, particularly in those in friendly cooperation with the Southern Baptist Convention. Now, I do believe that the biblical defense offered in this book for practicing a plural local eldership is sound, and therefore applicable to Bible-believing Methodists, Presbyterians,



Lutherans and others. But it was delivered primarily and is now published especially with Baptists in mind.

The issue of the leadership of the local church is an important topic biblically. If Christ gave Himself for the church, identifies with the church as with His own body, continues to care and provide for the church, and will ultimately take the church as His bride, those who shepherd it have a high and holy responsibility. In order to ascertain exactly how Christ intends his church to be led then, it is worth our time in study, prayer, reflection and consultation with God's Word, with other Christians, and with those who have gone before us. While lacking a plurality of elders in a local church does not invalidate that congregation's claim to be Christian, nor even largely Biblical, it does seem to be at odds with a pattern in the New Testament.

Speaking personally for a moment, as a Baptist pastor I have found having a plurality of elders immensely helpful. Our congregation's contributions to the SBC have not fallen as a result; they have increased. My pastoral leadership has not been compromised by the other men serving with me as elders; it has only been enhanced. We have not been tempted to baptize infants. And our congregation has not become more passive; under good leadership they are even more active in ministry. Each elder is a gift of Christ to His church. Let's not refuse His good gifts.

As I mentioned above, at 9Marks we get many questions about having elders, especially from Baptist church members, deacons and pastors. That's why we finally decided to publish this book. In the last few years, two multi-author books have come out, each with evangelical advocates of various kinds of church government setting out their case, and responding to the other authors. Though asked to contribute to at least one of these projects, I had to decline. You see, I do not think that what I am advocating fits neatly into any of the commonly recognized categories. For example, in this book (and in my earlier book *A*

*Display of God's Glory*) I would suggest that a congregation would benefit by having both a senior or lead pastor, and a plurality of elders, all in the context of congregationalism. In at least one of the multi-author volumes, all three of these aspects of Biblical church life and leadership are pitted against each other. Instead I would advocate a happy helping each of the other, co-existing and re-enforcing each other in the life of the local congregation.

If you're interested in what other Baptists are saying on this point, you should consider reading some of the other good resources that have recently been published. Phil Newton's book *Elders in Congregational Life* (Kregel, 2005) is a practical look by one Southern Baptist pastor at leading his congregation to adopt a plural elder model. John Hammett's book *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches* (Kregel, 2005) is a full ecclesiology written by a Southern Baptist professor of theology from Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary. On the 9Marks website ([www.9Marks.org](http://www.9Marks.org)), you can listen to an interview I conducted with both of these authors together discussing just such issues. Paul Alexander and I wrote a book called *The Deliberate Church* (Crossway 2005), almost half of which is taken up with the practical aspects of such a plural eldership, examples of how it works out, and practices that we have found useful. And then finally, my chapter on ecclesiology in *A Theology for the Church*, (Danny Akin, ed., B&H 2006) includes a fuller treatment of some of the related issues considered systematically.

Special thanks to Matt Schmucker, director of 9Marks, who has once again had much to do with getting this teaching from my computer to your eyes. May God bless it to your growth in Him, and to the prosperity of the congregations you love and serve.

Mark Dever  
January 2006  
Washington, D.C.

# INTRODUCTION

## INTRODUCTION

One of the two most divisive issues in Baptist churches today, said John Bisagno<sup>1</sup> at a recent Tennessee Baptist Evangelism Conference, is the topic of church government. We no longer live in the ordered days of my upbringing, nor in the days Louie D. Newton<sup>2</sup> describes in his book *Why I Am A Baptist*:

The first step I undertook when I became pastor of Druid Hills Church was to set up the Pastor’s Cabinet, composed of the heads of all the departments of the church life—Chairman and Vice-Chairman of the Board of Deacons, Chairman and Vice-Chairman of the Finance Committee, Chairman of the Trustees, Chairman of the Board of Ushers, Clerk, Treasurer, Chairman of the Relief Committee, Superintendent of

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<sup>1</sup>John Bisagno is a retired pastor of the First Baptist Church of Houston, Texas.

<sup>2</sup>Louie Newton was the long-time pastor of Atlanta’s Druid Hills Baptist Church.

the Sunday School, Director of the Training Union, President of the Woman's Missionary Society, President of the Brotherhood, Minister of Music, Chairman of the Music Committee, Chairman of the Guest Book Committee, Chairman of the Youth Council, Librarian, and Members of the Church Staff.<sup>3</sup>

What confidence we had in corporate organizational structures in the middle of the last century! Newton continues,

Stemming from this idea of the Pastor's Cabinet, all plans of evangelism, enlistment, stewardship and promotion are first discussed in this small, responsible group, then submitted to the larger groups for questions and suggestions, and finally, after the widest possible conference and agreement, submitted to the church for approval or disapproval.<sup>4</sup>

Would the Baptists of earlier eras have approved of the plethora of non-biblical offices in our churches? Perhaps so. The Philadelphia Baptist Confession (1742) says in its chapter "Of the holy Scriptures,"

The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down, or necessarily contained in the Holy Scripture; unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelation of the Spirit, or traditions of men.

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<sup>3</sup>Louie D. Newton, *Why I Am a Baptist* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957), 202.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 203.

Nevertheless we acknowledge the inward illuminations of the Spirit of God, to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the Word, and that *there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the church, common to human actions and societies; which are to be ordered by the light of nature, and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the word, which are always to be observed* (ch. 1, sec. 6; emphasis mine).

In other words, church government is a matter in which some latitude is appropriate. Baptists have always acknowledged this. At the same time, Baptists have always recognized that Scripture contains specific instructions about the local church's polity. The purpose of this study is to consider the role of church elders from a biblical, historical, and pragmatic perspective. We will begin with a survey of Scripture's teaching about elders. We will then examine elders in church history, and finally conclude with some practical comments on elders in Baptist life today.

# ONE

## ELDERS IN THE BIBLE

- I. Historical Prologue
- II. Basic Usage
- III. Single Versus Plural

## ELDERS IN THE BIBLE

### *Historical Prologue*

Baptists, perhaps more than any other historic Protestant group, turn to the New Testament in order to justify our polity. Roman Catholics claim to do the same, yet they do so without the same belief in the sufficiency of Scripture. They could rest in the authority of the magisterium of the church, content that dominical words are nice when they can be had, but entirely unnecessary, since Christ's Spirit continues to work through his vicar on earth, the successor to Peter in the chair of Rome.

Protestants, on the other hand, protested by placing the Bible front and center once more for determining the church's doctrine, including the doctrine of the church itself. Martin Luther, the Anabaptists, Ulrich Zwingli, William Tyndale, John Calvin, and Thomas Cranmer all turned and criticized what they had inherited from the Roman Catholics, saying that the Roman *developments* that had gone beyond Scripture were in fact *distortions* of it, and therefore needed to be re-formed according to Scripture. Some Reformers, such as Luther and Calvin, attempt-



ed to reform the church in cooperation with the state, or magistrate. Naturally, these “magisterial reformers” were limited to what the state would allow. The Baptists, however, having rejected infant baptism and thus any hope of the church and state being co-extensive, were free to treat Scripture as fully and finally sufficient, even on the potentially controversial topic of church structure. And so Baptists turn to the Bible, believing it is sufficient even to teach us how to organize our churches.

Once when I was teaching on the topic of elders in a Baptist church, an older lady shot back to me, “But it isn’t Baptist!” While I did not say this to her, I certainly do think that being “Baptist” means, in part, being faithful to Scripture. So the question a Baptist must begin with is not “Is it Baptist?” but “Is it biblical?” To answer that question, we will examine the role of elders in the New Testament.

### *Basic Usage*

Words with the *πρεσβύτ* root, from which “elder” is taken, occur seventy-five times in the New Testament. Nine occurrences refer to people of chronologically more-advanced age.<sup>5</sup> Four times words with this root refer to ancestors of the Hebrew nation.<sup>6</sup> John uses such words twelve times in Revelation to refer to the heavenly elders, or rulers.<sup>7</sup> Twenty-nine times (all in the Gospels and Acts) the word is used to refer to the Jewish non-priestly leaders either in the Sanhedrin or in local synagogues. The remaining twenty uses refer to elders in churches: in the Jerusalem church;<sup>8</sup> in Lystra, Iconium and Antioch;<sup>9</sup> in

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<sup>5</sup>Luke 1:18; 15:25; John 8:9; Acts 2:17; Phlm. 9; 1 Tim. 5:1,2; Titus 2:2,3.

<sup>6</sup>Matt. 15:2; Mark 7:3,5; Heb. 11:2.

<sup>7</sup>Rev. 4:4, 10; 5:5,6,8,11,14; 7:11,13; 11:16; 14:3; 19:4.

<sup>8</sup>Acts 11:30; 15:2,4,6,22,23; 16:4; 21:18.

<sup>9</sup>Acts 14:21,25.

Ephesus;<sup>10</sup> in the towns of Crete;<sup>11</sup> and other general references.<sup>12</sup> John also refers to himself twice as “the elder,”<sup>13</sup> though whether he is referring to an office he holds or to some other type of designation that was attached to him personally, we cannot say. It is in this last set of twenty occurrences we are most interested.

It is striking that in the New Testament the words “elder,” “shepherd” or “pastor,” and “bishop” or “overseer” are used interchangeably in the context of the local church office. This is seen most clearly in Acts 20, when Paul meets with the “elders” of the church in Ephesus (v. 17). Several verses later, Paul tells these same elders to keep watch over themselves and over the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made them “overseers” (another translation for “bishop”). In the very next sentence, he exhorts these elders, these overseers, to “be shepherds [from the same root as ‘pastors’] of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood” (v. 28). In the space of twelve verses, the same men are referred to as elders, overseers, and shepherds.

In Ephesians 4:11, Paul says that Christ “gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers.” The word Paul uses for “pastor” is *ποιμὲναφ*, which, again, is related to the word for “shepherd.” Then in 1 Peter 5:1-2, Peter addresses the “elders among you,” and tells them to pastor, or “shepherd,” God’s flock, the command form of the same word Paul uses for “pastor.” So they are to pastor or “be shepherds of” God’s flock, and they are to do so by “serving as overseers,” again, the same word for bishop. The overlap of these terms is impossible to miss.

There is still more evidence of this interchangeability. In 1 Peter 2:25, Jesus is called the “shepherd and overseer of your

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<sup>10</sup>Acts 20:17.

<sup>11</sup>Tit. 1:5.

<sup>12</sup>1 Tim. 4:4; 5:17,19; James 5:14; 1 Pet. 5:1, 5.

<sup>13</sup>2 John 1; 3 John 1.

souls.” The root of the word translated “overseer” here occurs eleven times in the New Testament. In Titus 1:7, for instance, Paul provides a list of qualifications for a particular officer he refers to as an “overseer” (the same officer and list he gives Timothy beginning in 1 Timothy 3:1). But in Titus 1:5, Paul refers to these same officers by saying that he left Titus in Crete in order to ensure that “elders” were in every town. Clearly, the New Testament refers to elders, shepherds or pastors, and bishops or overseers in the context of the local church interchangeably.<sup>14</sup>

This conclusion is not controversial. Baptists of the past knew this well. The Baptist 1689 Second London Confession reads, “The officers appointed by Christ . . . are Bishops or Elders and Deacons.”<sup>15</sup> Though the London Confession simply re-affirmed much of the Presbyterian Westminster Confession, and in several places the Congregationalist Savoy Declaration, this particular section was wholly new, authored by the Baptist ministers who assembled in 1677. The Baptist 1833 and 1853 New Hampshire Confession says that the church’s “only proper officers are Bishops or Pastors, and Deacons.”<sup>16</sup> Basil Manly Jr.’s 1859 Abstract of Principles reads, “The regular officers of a church are Bishops or Elders, and Deacons.”<sup>17</sup> The 1925 Baptist Faith and Message contains the same language: “Its Scriptural officers are bishops or elders and deacons.”<sup>18</sup> It was not until

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<sup>14</sup>So concluded R. B. C. Howell, pastor of First Baptist Church, Nashville, Tennessee: “The only officers appointed by God to preach, and administer ordinances, and whose commission has come down to our times, are called indifferently, elders, bishops and presbyters; all of which names, when referring to office, convey the same idea.” R. B. C. Howell, “Ministerial Ordination,” in *The Baptist Preacher*, ed. Henry Keeling (Richmond: H. K. Ellyson, 1847), 137.

<sup>15</sup>Chapter 26, paragraph 8.

<sup>16</sup>Article 13.

<sup>17</sup>Article 14.

<sup>18</sup>Article 12.

1963 that the biblical and historic word “elder” was finally dropped out of official usage by the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC). Article 6 of both the 1963 and 2000 Baptist Faith and Message now reads, “Its Scriptural officers are pastors and deacons.” Even then, the authors of the 1963 revision committee had no change in their understanding of the biblical vocabulary. Herschel Hobbs, who chaired the committee, wrote in 1964, “Pastor—this is one of three titles referring to the same office. The other two are ‘bishop’ and ‘elder.’”<sup>19</sup>

### *Single versus Plural*

A second question about elders immediately follows. Did local congregations in the New Testament typically contain a single elder (or bishop or pastor) or multiple elders?

Before Jesus established the church, the Jewish towns of Palestine were typically governed by multiple elders. Thus, in Luke 7, a Roman centurion sends several elders of the local Jewish community in Capernaum to Jesus to plead for help on his behalf. This practice of calling the local town leaders “elders” had its roots in the Old Testament. The book of Deuteronomy refers to the town leaders as elders (always conceived of in the plural). These town leaders were responsible for retrieving people from cities of refuge, for solving murders, for dealing with disobedient children, and so forth (Deut. 19:12; 21:1-9,18-21). Centuries later, elders continued to exercise rule within towns after the Jews returned from the Babylonian Exile (Ezra 10:14). It is this kind of elder the centurion seems to have employed in Luke 7.

Local Jewish synagogues, which probably originated during the Babylonian exile in the absence of the temple, were also governed by a plurality of leaders. The synagogues were where the

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<sup>19</sup>Herschel H. Hobbs, *What Baptists Believe* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1964), 85.

Jews gathered for worship and for common action. Ten adult males were required to have public worship at a synagogue. Various officers facilitated the work of synagogues, including the office of ruler.<sup>20</sup> The references to the Jewish elders all clearly indicate that they were a body of men.

When we turn to the New Testament, it is clear that the heavenly elders in the book of Revelation are plural. In fact, there are twenty-four of them. As for the Christian churches, on the other hand, someone might observe that Paul may have established churches with the help of several people, yet he clearly played a singular role as an apostle. Further, the young churches could not have financially supported a large number of elders. And Paul did not write to “the elders” of the church in Ephesus, but to Timothy alone. And Jesus did not write to the “angels” or “messengers” of the seven churches in Revelation 2 and 3, but to the “angel” or “messenger” (singular) of each church. Are all these indications that there was only one elder in each church in the New Testament?

With the twenty references to Christian elders in churches, the evidence suggests otherwise. The normal pattern in the New Testament is for a congregation to have more than one elder. One possible exception to this occurs in 2 and 3 John, where John refers to himself as “the elder.” Presumably, he was known by this title. But if he was writing to those outside his own congregation, the title may have suggested his widespread recognition, rather than his office. It is difficult to say on such slight information.

The other four New Testament authors who refer to Christian elders are James, Peter, Paul, and Luke, and each of them appears to assume a number of elders will be present in every congregation. James instructs his readers to “call the elders

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<sup>20</sup>Examples of the “rulers” of synagogues mentioned in the New Testament are Jairus in Mark 5:22 (plural rulers); Acts 13:15 (plural); Crispus in Acts 18:8 (singular).

[plural] of the church [singular] to pray over” a sick person (James 5:14).

Peter writes as an elder to the “elders [plural] among you” (1 Pet. 5:1). If 1 Peter 5:5 should be translated “elders” instead of “older men,” it would again appear Peter assumes a plurality of elders in a single congregation—or at least this assumption could not be ruled out.

Paul greets the bishops (plural) in the church (singular) at Philippi in his letter to the Philippians (Phil. 1:1). And he exhorts the elders of the church at Ephesus to be “bishops” (plural) to the “flock” (singular) that God had given them (Acts 20:28). Paul also mentions elders in writing Timothy and Titus. He reminds Timothy of the body of elders who laid their hands on him (1 Tim. 4:14). He then refers to the elders (plural) who direct the affairs of the church (singular) (5:17). Two verses later, he refers to accusations not against *the* elder, but against *an* elder—πρεσβυτέρου, used without an article. This would be consistent with Paul assuming that Timothy would have multiple elders in his congregation. Paul also exhorts Titus to “appoint elders [plural] in every town” (Titus 1:5).<sup>21</sup> So certainly the churches established by Titus in Crete were at least supposed to have a plurality of elders in each local congregation.

Luke records Paul’s sending for the “elders” (plural) of the “church” (singular) in Ephesus (Acts 20:17). At the end of Paul’s first missionary journey, Paul and Barnabas “had elders [plural] elected for them in each church [singular]” (14:23). And references to the elders of the Jerusalem church always occur in the plural. Neither multiple congregations nor house churches are referenced. A reference to meeting together is found in Acts 2:42, which occurs in the Temple courts. Luke never refers to “churches” in Jerusalem; he only refers to the congregation (singular).

<sup>21</sup>The NIVs “every town” (κατὰ πόλιν) is better translated distributively—“each town.”

On the other hand, he always refers to the elders in the plural.<sup>22</sup> In other words, any Baptist who argues a single group of elders should lead more than one house congregation is unwittingly making an argument for Presbyterianism, not for historic Baptist congregationalism. If one sharpens the point by arguing a single individual should lead a number of house churches, then he has stumbled into arguing for an episcopalianism by divine right, which not even the Episcopalians argue.

That is all the direct evidence in the New Testament. As best I can tell, it indicates that the common and expected practice in the New Testament church was to have a plurality of elders in each local congregation.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup>Acts 11:30; 15:2,4,6,22-23 (throughout the account of the Jerusalem council); 16:4; 21:18.

<sup>23</sup>The Anglican scholar and pioneer missiologist Roland Allen came to this same conclusion: "... it seems to be an irresistible conclusion that the elders appointed by St. Paul were definitely appointed with power to add to their number and thus to secure to new Churches a proper order and certainty of sacramental grace. Finally, St. Paul was not content with ordaining one elder for each Church. In every place he ordained several. This ensured that all authority should not be concentrated in the hands of one man." Roland Allen, *Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours* (London: Robert Scott, 1912), 138-139.

# TWO

## ELDERS IN HISTORY

- I. The Early Church and the Development of the Monarchical Episcopate
- II. Reformation Recoveries
- III. Baptist Elders in the Past
- IV. Current Influences in the Revival of Elders in Baptist Churches
  - a. Causes Unrelated to the Inerrancy Controversy
  - b. Causes Related to the Inerrancy Controversy



## ELDERS IN HISTORY

### *The Early Church and the Development of the Monarchical Episcopate*

If the New Testament church universally employed the plural-elder model, how and when did it change? That the immediate post-apostolic church changed rapidly and radically, few Protestants would deny. In everything from the rise of infant baptism to the belief in the efficacy of the sacraments and the role of works in salvation, the centuries following the departure of the last of Christ's apostles saw rapid doctrinal decay among the fledgling churches. It is no surprise that such changes should occur in matters of church organization and governance as well.

The shift from elder congregational leadership described in the New Testament to the full-blown episcopacy of the Roman Catholic church occurred over several centuries. In the early church document called the *Didache*, written in the late first or the early second century, the only church officers are elders and deacons. Yet as early as the second century, Ignatius, an early church father, refers to a council of elders, called to give counsel

to a chief pastor, or bishop. Ignatius uses the words presbyter (elder) and bishop distinctly from one another. This distinction is crucial for understanding the centralization of authority that occurred in the church of the second and third centuries.

During this time, leading pastors/elders of churches in the urban centers that experienced early evangelization seem to have become the informal arbiters of questions of orthodoxy. This development took place more slowly in some places than in others. Egypt, for instance, was notably slower in moving beyond its more informal associations and de-centralized structures of authority. But generally, it seems that competent and noted pastors like Ignatius of Antioch were gradually recognized not only as the first among equals, as Timothy at Ephesus or James at Jerusalem might have been; they came to assume a formal office that was eventually recognized as an episcopate distinguishable from local church eldership. Such bishops seem to have accrued authority not only in their own congregations, but also among congregations in their general area and sometimes even in wider regions, as in the case of the “metropolitan sees” of Jerusalem, Antioch, Alexandria, Rome, and, by the fourth century, Constantinople. These larger metropolitan sees eventually began vying for position against one another until finally the see of Rome became dissatisfied with its own informal authority over the other metropolitan bishops and insisted on its exclusive pre-eminence. As the bishop of Rome increasingly staked this claim to be the sole arbiter of matters of truth in the faith, the full flowering of the transition from congregational elder leadership to a centralized authority was complete.

It is not difficult to see how, in an era of vigorous church planting, rapid geographical expansion, ever-looming heresy, and celebrated martyrdoms, certain central locations and their noteworthy bishops began to acquire a respect and deference that would be extended to their successors. Cyprian of Carthage, one

century after Ignatius, insisted that the recognition of a single authoritative bishop was closely linked with the unity of the church in the world. Jerome, writing in the fourth century, admitted the identity of bishop and elder in the New Testament, but argued for the historical need to commit oversight to one person. In the struggle to identify orthodoxy amidst a sea of heresy, one can understand such centralizing tendencies in order to ensure conformity, even uniformity.<sup>24</sup>

### *Reformation Recoveries*

The Bishop of Rome managed to maintain an ecclesiological hegemony in the West for the better part of a millennium. This centralized authority was finally questioned at the time of the Protestant Reformation, when a number of thinkers and churchmen recovered the assumption that Scripture, rather than the mere antiquity of traditions, is sufficient for determining the doctrines of the church. As the critical gaze of the Reformers began to fall across their churches, they required some word of Scripture—at least some intimation or implication—to justify their doctrines and practices.

For early Anabaptists, Reformed, Congregationalists, and Baptists in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, offices in the church entered a state of flux. Even some of the magisterial reformers began to recover the identity of bishop and elder. The discovery that no biblical basis existed for an episcopacy not only destabilized the authority of Rome in western Europe; it also

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<sup>24</sup>For more on this, see Cyprian's famous *On the Unity of the Catholic Church*. For some of the earliest references, see Henry Bettenson and Chris Maunder, eds., *Documents of the Christian Church* 3rd ed. (London: Oxford, 1999), 68-90. A classic study of this topic is Hans von Campenhausen, *Ecclesiastical Authority and Spiritual Power in the Church of the First Three Centuries* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1969). Though von Campenhausen denies any intended complete presentation of church structure within the New Testament and would not seem to adhere to a Protestant understanding of the sufficiency of Scripture, the historical aspects of his work are careful and well repay time spent in the reading.

threatened the monarchs who had for centuries leaned upon the structures of the church for supplying everything from order to education to income. Thus, the Reformers' movements away from episcopal structures were at first piecemeal.

While Martin Luther declined in practice to interfere with the distinct extra-congregational role of the bishop, he repeatedly emphasized in his sermons and writings that bishops and elders or pastors were all the same office in Scripture. He denounced the bishop of Rome as a false prophet with whom no bishop should be in communion. He furthermore denied that the pope had a unique authority given him through succession from Peter, as the Catholic interpretation of Matthew 16 had long claimed. But for Luther and his successors, as long as the office of bishop or pastor was recognized, other external aspects of church organization within and among congregations were understood to be matters appropriately settled by human law, normally at the discretion of the state.

John Calvin, who was less encumbered by inter-princely politics than Luther, pushed even harder for the church's polity to be defined by Scripture. Calvin was zealously committed to what has been called the regulative principle, the idea that both a church's polity and everything done during its weekly gatherings should be explicitly or implicitly commanded in Scripture. He also recovered the single identity of the bishop and the elder, thus removing a level of authority above and apart from the local church. Calvin called for ministers of the Word, or what the New Testament describes as elders or pastors, in every congregation. But he drew a distinction between "elders" (what Presbyterian churches today call "ruling elders," that is, non-ordained elders) and "ministers of the Word and the Sacraments" (what Presbyterians call "teaching elders").

Calvin's careful scholarship in the early patristic period is rehearsed in Book IV, Chapter 4, of his famous *Institutes of the*

*Christitan Religion*: “In each city,” he wrote, “these [elders] chose one of their number whom they specially gave the title ‘bishop’ in order that dissensions might not arise (as commonly happens) from equality of rank. . . . The ancients themselves admit that this was introduced by human agreement to meet the need of the times.”<sup>25</sup> Following this example, the Reformed churches in Geneva, Germany, the Netherlands, and Scotland developed a series of inter-locking courts that would settle disputes of doctrine and discipline between congregations and foster the unity of the churches in an area with a reformed magistrate.

Anabaptists’ polity was fluid. They were “radically de-centralized,” as James Stayer puts it, “most of them making exclusivist claims and condemning the other [groups of Anabaptists].”<sup>26</sup> Various offices, including elder, proliferated among them. In the 1529 *Discipline of the Believers; How a Christian is to Live*, we find the statement, “The elders [*Vorsteher*] and preachers chosen for the brotherhood shall with zeal look after the needs of the poor, and with zeal in the Lord according to the command of the Lord extend what is needed for the sake of and instead of the brotherhood.”<sup>27</sup> A basic pattern of delegated leadership within a congregational structure emerged.

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<sup>25</sup>John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, in *Library of Christian Classics* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1977, 8th printing), IV.iv.2. Cf. Elsie Anne McKee, “Calvin’s Teaching on the Elder Illuminated by Exegetical History,” in Timothy George, ed., *John Calvin & the Church: A Prism of Reform* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), 147-155. John Owen, an early champion of congregationalism, defended the separate office of ruling elder. See John Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, vol. 16, ed. William Gould (London: Johnstone and Hunter, 1853), 42.

<sup>26</sup>James Stayer, “Anabaptists,” in *Oxford Encyclopedia of the Reformation*, vol. 1, ed. Hans Hillerbrand (New York: Oxford, 1996), 32.

<sup>27</sup>Werner O. Packull, *Hutterite Beginnings* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 312. Cf. Emir Caner’s summary in Gerald Cowen, *Who Rules the Church? Examining Congregational Leadership and Church Government* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2003).

In the Reformation period, then, a return to ancient patterns followed on the heels of an affirmation of the sufficiency of Scripture. Protestant churches began to give non-ordained members more responsibility, and many of them returned to the congregational election of officers. At the same time, Reformed groups and some Anabaptists recovered the idea of a plural eldership. The Church of Scotland, reformed through the preaching of John Knox and others, established the office of elder. In England, the Presbyterians, the Congregationalists, and the Baptists also recovered the office from the New Testament. And to the Baptists we now turn.

### *Baptist Elders in the Past*

“It’s not Baptist,” the lady protested when I advocated adopting elders in Baptist churches. Strictly speaking, she was not correct. I understand what she meant: in the churches she had known in the second half of the twentieth century, she had never seen or even heard of Baptist elders. But *other* Baptists had.

We have already mentioned the use of the word “elder” in Baptist statements of faith from the past. But was that word simply used synonymously with our modern word “pastor,” or even “senior pastor”? Did Baptists in the past understand that the New Testament recognizes a plurality of leaders called “elders” in one local congregation?<sup>28</sup> Let me present a sampling for you.

Throughout seventeenth-century England, Baptists affirmed the office of elder. In 1697, Benjamin Keach wrote of “Bishops, Overseers, or Elders,” clearly implying that these New Testament titles refer to one office.<sup>29</sup> Keach presented it as essential that a church have one or more pastors, but not that it have a plurality

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<sup>28</sup>See Greg Wills’ succinct summary of this in his article “The Church: Baptists and Their Churches in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries,” in *Polity*, 2nd edition, ed. Mark Dever (Washington, DC: 9Marks, 2004), 33-34.

<sup>29</sup>Benjamin Keach, *The Glory of a True Church*, in Dever, *Polity*, 65.

of them. He rejected the Presbyterian practice of having a separate group of ruling elders who do not teach, saying that if that practice was in the apostolic church, it was only temporary, because neither the qualifications nor the duties of the so-called ruling elder are laid out in the New Testament.<sup>30</sup>

In the eighteenth century, Benjamin Griffith wrote in favor of distinguishing ruling elders from the pastors or teaching elders.<sup>31</sup> Citing Exodus 18, Deuteronomy 1, 1 Timothy 5:17, 1 Corinthians 12:28, and Romans 12:8 as the basis for his argument, Griffith asserted that the distinction between the two offices is shown by the fact that the ruling elder would have to be ordained to become a teaching elder. The demarcation between ruling and teaching elders was common in the Philadelphia Baptist Association in the eighteenth century, but in this practice Griffith and his contemporaries disagreed with their English counterparts of the previous decades.<sup>32</sup> The Charleston Association's 1774 *Summary of Church Discipline* did not recognize a distinction between the two offices, but it did affirm that ministers of the gospel in the New Testament are "frequently called elders, bishops, pastors and teachers." The *Summary* also implied that there is sometimes within one local congregation a "presbytery."<sup>33</sup>

In the nineteenth century, Samuel Jones of the Philadelphia Association wrote, "Concerning the divine right of the office of

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<sup>30</sup>Ibid., 68-69. Cf. James Renihan, "The Practical Ecclesiology of the English Particular Baptists, 1675-1705: The Doctrine of the Church in the Second London Baptist Confession as Implemented in the Subscribing Churches" (Ph.D. dissertation, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 1997).

<sup>31</sup>Benjamin Griffith, *A Short Treatise*, in Dever, Polity, 98.

<sup>32</sup>Renihan writes, "The majority of the writers and churches did not recognize a distinct office of ruling elder" (200). Also, "The majority of particular Baptists were committed to a plurality and a parity of elders in their churches" (205). Renihan, "The Practical Ecclesiology."

<sup>33</sup>*Summary of Church Discipline*, in Dever, Polity, 120.

ruling elders there has been considerable doubt and much disputation.” Jones then summarized the arguments for and against ruling elders and essentially conceded that Griffith’s defense of ruling elders is weak. But he still argued the office is beneficial and not forbidden and left congregations free to keep ruling elders if they found them useful for assisting the pastor.<sup>34</sup>

Turning to the South, the first president of the Southern Baptist Convention, W. B. Johnson of South Carolina, wrote in his book *The Gospel Developed* that “each [New Testament] church had a plurality of elders.”<sup>35</sup> Concerning his present day, Johnson asserted, “A plurality in the bishopric is of great importance for mutual counsel and aid, that the government and edification of the flock may be promoted in the best manner.”<sup>36</sup> For several pages, Johnson then delineated the duties and benefits of a plurality of elders in a local congregation.<sup>37</sup>

In 1849, J. L. Reynolds, pastor of the Second Baptist Church of Richmond, Virginia, wrote that “the apostolic churches seem, in general, to have had a plurality of elders as well as deacons.”<sup>38</sup> Nevertheless, Reynolds maintained that “the number of officers, whether elders or deacons, necessary to the completeness of a church, is not determined in Scripture. This must be decided by the circumstances of the case, of which the party interested is the most competent judge.”<sup>39</sup> Reynolds competently and carefully dissected the arguments in favor of a distinct class of ruling elders.<sup>40</sup> And he devoted a whole chapter to defending the interchangeability of the terms “bishop” and “elder.”

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<sup>34</sup>Samuel Jones, *Treatise of Church Discipline*, in Dever, *Polity*, 145-146.

<sup>35</sup>W. B. Johnson, *The Gospel Developed*, in Dever, *Polity*, 192.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., 193.

<sup>37</sup>See *ibid.*, 189-195.

<sup>38</sup>J. L. Reynolds, *Church Polity or the Kingdom of Christ*, in Dever, *Polity*, 349.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., 350.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid.



In 1874, William Williams, a member of the founding faculty of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, wrote, “In most, if not all the apostolic churches, there was a plurality of elders.”<sup>41</sup> Williams then speculated that this was true perhaps because the early Christians could only meet in small groups, and each small group needed an elder to instruct them. Therefore, a plurality of elders was a product of temporary circumstances and should not be perceived as a continuing requirement for churches. Williams also disagreed with any idea of a separate office of ruling elder. In short, he placed the plurality of elders in the same category as deaconesses, the holy kiss, and the frequency of the Lord’s Supper. All are matters that should be left up to the “pious discretion of the churches.”<sup>42</sup>

I could go on. C. H. Spurgeon had a plurality of elders at the Metropolitan Tabernacle in nineteenth-century London.<sup>43</sup> J. L. Burrows, pastor of First Baptist Church, Richmond, for twenty years and chairman of the Foreign Mission Board for six years, wrote in his book *What Baptists Believe*, “Elders and deacons are the only officers [Christ] has instituted.”<sup>44</sup> It is indisputable that

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<sup>41</sup>William Williams, *Apostolical Church Polity*, in Dever, *Polity*, 531.

<sup>42</sup>*Ibid.*, 537. Though without citing Williams, Gerald Cowen has recently rehearsed this same argument in his book *Who Rules the Church?*

<sup>43</sup>“To our minds, the Scripture seems very explicit as to how this Church should be ordered. We believe that every Church member should have equal rights and privileges; that there is no power in Church officers to execute anything unless they have the full authorization of the members of the Church. We believe, however, that the Church should choose its pastor, and having chosen him, that they should love him and respect him for his work’s sake; that with him should be associated the deacons of the Church to take the oversight of pecuniary matters; and the elders of the Church to assist in all the works of the pastorate in the fear of God, being overseers of the flock. Such a Church we believe to be scripturally ordered; and if it abide in the faith, rooted, and grounded, and settled, such a Church may expect the benediction of heaven, and so it shall become the pillar and ground of the truth.” C.H. Spurgeon, “The Church Conservative and Aggressive” in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, vol. 7 (1862; repr. Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim Press, 1969), 658-659.

<sup>44</sup>J. L. Burrows, *What Baptists Believe* (1888), 14, cf. 12 and 16.

at the beginning of the twentieth century, Baptists either had or advocated elders in local churches—and often a plurality of elders. And they had done so for centuries. A. H. Strong, president of Rochester Theological Seminary and author of the influential 1907 *Systematic Theology*, summarized the position perhaps most Baptists in America held at the beginning of the twentieth century: “In certain of the N.T. churches there appears to have been a plurality of elders. . . . There is, however, no evidence that the number of elders was uniform, or that the plurality which frequently existed was due to any other cause than the size of the churches for which these elders cared. The N.T. example, while it permits the multiplication of assistant pastors according to need, does not require a plural eldership in every case. . . . There are indications, moreover, that, at least in certain churches, the pastor was one, while the deacons were more than one, in number.”<sup>45</sup>

### *Current Influences in the Revival of Elders in Baptist Churches*

Why has this office of elder been revived among some Southern Baptists in the latter part of the twentieth century? I have no extensive research for the comments that follow, only anecdotal experience and my own reflections. The “whys” are difficult questions to answer not only for historians; even those living in the midst of change can have difficulty discerning causation. I have been an elder at a Baptist church in England, and I have preached in Baptist churches in South Africa that had elders. But here in America, what is causing the re-evaluation that is indisputably occurring?

Let me suggest two factors unrelated to the inerrancy controversy in the SBC, and three factors related to the controversy, all

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<sup>45</sup>A. H. Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1907), 915-916.

of which may partly explain an otherwise surprising surge of interest in this ancient office.

**Causes Unrelated to the Inerrancy Controversy.** First, the idea of elders in local churches has been raised by *prominent advocates outside the Southern Baptist constituency*. John MacArthur, pastor of Grace Community Church in Sun Valley, California, has for many years advocated and practiced having a plurality of elders (of which he is one) lead the congregation. MacArthur has published a variety of writings that touch on this issue, but perhaps most widely read is his thirty-two-page booklet *Answering the Key Questions about Elders* (1984). In 1991, John Piper, pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church, a Baptist General Conference church in Minneapolis, Minnesota, also led his church to adopt a plural-elder model of leadership. He has written a sixty-three-page booklet, *Biblical Eldership* (1999).

Even more broadly, a number of widely-used contemporary systematic theologies testify to the New Testament evidence for a plurality of elders. Since its completion in 1985, Millard Erickson's *Christian Theology* has been perhaps the most widely used systematic textbook in Southern Baptist seminaries, and in many other evangelical schools as well. At its publication in the mid-1980s, few systematic theologies had gained such wide usage since Louis Berkhof's Dutch Reformed work in the 1930s. In Erickson's section on the church, he carefully lays out episcopal, presbyterian, and congregational polities, showing the strengths and weaknesses of each. He gingerly advocates congregationalism, though not with the vigor of earlier divine-right congregationalists like John Owen and Thomas Goodwin, nor even with the mildness that characterized writers in the American South in the nineteenth century, like W. B. Johnson and J. L. Reynolds. Erickson also makes two qualifying provisos: a more presbyterian form of government will probably be needed when the congregation becomes very large, or when it is filled with more immature Christians.

Wayne Grudem's popular 1994 *Systematic Theology*, also used in many Southern Baptist and evangelical seminaries, states, "There is quite a consistent pattern of *plural elders* as the main governing group in the New Testament churches."<sup>46</sup> Grudem points to two main conclusions from the New Testament evidence: "First, no passage suggests that any church, no matter how small, had only one elder. The consistent New Testament pattern is a plurality of elders 'in every church' (Acts 14:23)." And, "Second, we do not see a diversity of forms of government in the New Testament church, but a unified and consistent pattern in which every church had elders governing it and keeping watch over it (Acts 20:28; Heb. 13:17; 1 Pet. 5:2-3)."<sup>47</sup> When Grudem wrote his systematic, he was a member of a Southern Baptist church in Chicago with elders.

Second, the idea of elders in local churches has been raised recently due to more *internal and pragmatic considerations, namely, a frustration with current structures in our congregations*. Many Southern Baptist churches increasingly sense that the present structures are simply not working. Some churches led by a single pastor suffer under an authoritarian rule too much like the Gentile leadership Jesus forbade in Mark 10:42.<sup>48</sup> Other times, young pastors have gone into churches and found them ossified, effectively ruled by deacons, a nominating committee, a personnel committee, or some other group that has no biblical standard of maturity in understanding and teaching the Scriptures. And for those churches where our congregational heritage is still

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<sup>46</sup>Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 912.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid., 913.

<sup>48</sup>Mark 10:42-45: "Jesus called them together and said, 'You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.'"

rightly valued, that congregationalism is too often wrongly exercised with an anti-Christian individualism, rather than as part of the corporate responsibility we will bear before the Lord. Furthermore, where baptismal and membership ages plunge lower than driver's license, elementary-school, or even pre-school ages; where church membership generally requires nothing other than a one-time decision; and where regular attendance is not even required for membership, it cannot be surprising that meetings of members for church business become more and more ineffective. As John Hammett has argued, "Many Baptist churches have strayed so far from regenerate membership that they are incapable of responsible church government at the present time."<sup>49</sup> Congregationalism fades as membership expectations evaporate.

**Causes Related to the Inerrancy Controversy.** I believe the SBC's inerrancy controversy also produced some echoes, or unintended results, leading to a re-evaluation of church government and the prominence of the topic of elders in recent discussions. The least important of these echoes is the accelerated *larger cultural trend to be less attached to particular denominations*. Brand loyalty is down everywhere. Throughout much of the twentieth century, Southern Baptists assumed such loyalty would continue, and did not work to create or cultivate it. The inerrancy controversy led to a rupturing of the denominational womb that many Southern Baptists had lived in their entire lives. As a result of the intramural fighting, conservative Southern Baptists began looking outside the fold in a way their more liberal counterparts had done for decades. There they found a wide world that stretched from southern California megachurches to Chicago-based schools and publishers. Many of us in the 1970s learned that we could not depend on our Baptist Student Unions (mine had a

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<sup>49</sup>John Hammett, "Elder Rule in Baptist Church" (unpublished, 2003), 11.

female minister who denied the bodily resurrection). The books we read from “our” people sorely disappointed us. Dale Moody’s *The Word of Truth*, for instance, not only served as a poor guard against liberal mainline Protestantism; it more often advocated liberalism’s tenets. And the seminaries were increasingly untrustworthy. So John Hammett, quoted above, went to Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, and I went to Gordon-Conwell. Many others of our generation have similar stories.

All of this interaction with broader evangelicalism was multiplied by the rise of the Bible churches and Dallas Theological Seminary’s influence among conservatives. Gene Getz, longtime Dallas professor, advocated a plurality of elders. Interestingly, a 1977 paper from the Conservative Baptist Association of Oregon attempts to address the growing problem of elders in Baptist churches—and ascribes it entirely to the growth of the Bible churches.

Other denominations, too, became more familiar to us. Though the churches of Christ and the Brethren had long had elders, we never talked much with them. By the 1970s and 1980s many of the fastest growing churches around us were—of all things—Presbyterian! The Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), born in 1973, quickly began to raise questions about the old canard among some Baptists that Calvinism is anti-evangelistic. Now, thirty years later, PCA churches are full of former Southern Baptists, and it is not because these former Baptists have all been convinced of the validity of infant baptism. Many of those churches—even with their unbiblical practices of infant baptism and extra-congregational government—were out-evangelizing, out-teaching, and even out-disciplining our Southern Baptist congregations.

Through all of this, we were finding allies—even Anglicans like John Stott and J. I. Packer—with whom we had more in common than we had with many of those whose salaries we paid

to teach in our institutions. As these outside voices gained fresh respect, we gave more consideration to their arguments and practices. Subjects we had not discussed for a century or more once again became topics of conversation—like church government and the role of elders. This thawing of inter-denominational conversation was new for many in the more conservative circles of the SBC.

A second unintended consequence of the SBC's inerrancy controversy was that conservative Southern Baptists were forced to *reconsider our denominational identity, and that inevitably included studying our Baptist past*. And what we found in our past, among many larger and more important issues like inerrancy, confessions, and Calvinism, were elders aplenty! I am just old enough to remember that across from my grandmother's house in Kentucky lived an old, retired Southern Baptist minister who was called by the title of "elder."

A final explanation for this renewed emphasis on elders emerging from the inerrancy controversy is simply the *renewed emphasis on the inerrancy of the Bible itself*.

In defending the inerrancy of the Bible—fighting for it, and even firing over it—it is not surprising that people would open the revered book, would begin studying it afresh, and would ask questions about the plain meaning of texts. In the context of loosened loyalties and openness to redefinition, we can easily imagine that if none of these other factors had obtained—outside influences, inner frustrations—we still might find ourselves scratching our heads today, staring at the Bible, and saying, "Why don't we see elders in our churches like the ones in the early church?"

# THREE

## ELDERS IN BAPTIST LIFE

- I. The Significance of Matters of Polity
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## ELDERS IN BAPTIST LIFE

### *The Significance of Matters of Polity*

Americans tend to be impatient with anything that is not utterly essential. Yet in order to be faithful to God's revelation, we must realize that there are more gears in our transmission than "essential" and "unimportant." Some issues, though not essential to our salvation or our Christian identity, are nevertheless very important—and church polity is one of them.<sup>50</sup>

Polity is significant in that it is essential, or at least very useful, for protecting the corporate witness of the church. The differences between evangelical Episcopalian, Presbyterian, and Baptist churches can look pretty slight when they are all healthy and functioning well. But let some serious sin occur, and observe

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<sup>50</sup>The SBC was founded on exactly this type of non-salvifically essential distinctive. Yet the recent rejection of two manuscripts by Broadman & Holman (a press wholly owned by the SBC)—one on multiple elders within a congregational context, and one against the practice of infant baptism—both point to the need for a press that will explain and defend the biblical distinctives of our denomination.

what happens: the differences immediately begin to emerge. Some people have wondered why I published a book entitled *Polity* when three of the ten books that comprise it are taken up entirely with the practice of church discipline. For the same reason doctors study diseases when they are interested in health, how the church body deals with diseases shows us how the body works and how it acts when it is healthy. Who has the responsibility to deal with unrepentant sin in the church? The minister or the bishop? The elders? The congregation as a whole? And what is the ultimate court of appeal under God? The pope? The Southern Baptist Convention? The General Convention of the Episcopal Church or the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America? These issues matter. And if you have any doubt, look at how the Episcopal churches have suffered in the last few years because they have exported the responsibilities from their congregations to the unbiblical structures above them. Polity matters.

### *Elder Leadership in the Context of Congregationalism*

Under God, the final judicatory authority resides not with a pope or a convention, not with a national assembly or a pastor, not with a regional association or a state convention, and not with some committee or board, whether paid or unpaid. Final responsibility for the discipline and doctrine of the congregation, under God, lies not with the deacons or the elders. It lies with the congregation as a whole.

Congregationalism may or may not be attractive, efficient, well-understood, well-practiced, easy, universally loved, or impervious to distortion and corruption, but it is biblical. It is biblical in two senses: First, *only* the congregation is finally accountable to God for the church's actions in discipline and doctrine. No outside person or body is. Second, the *whole* congregation is so accountable. This is the picture that we find in the

New Testament. I confess that the evidence is slight and the specifics nearly non-existent, but the picture is consistent and the implications important.

**Dispute.** Jesus teaches his followers in Matthew 18 that the final court for matters of *dispute* between brothers is the congregation. So we read in verses 15 to 17 that the final step for resolving a dispute is to “tell it,” not to the elders, but to the ἐκκλησία, the church or the congregation.<sup>51</sup> Acts 6 provides an example of this. When a dispute arises between the Grecian and Hebraic Jews over the feeding of widows, the apostles tell the congregation to “choose seven men from among you” to wait on the needs of these poorer members in the Jerusalem church (v. 3). The proposal “pleased the whole group” (v. 5). The congregation then chooses seven individuals whom they present to the apostles for prayer.

**Doctrine.** Paul implicitly teaches the Galatians in Galatians 1 that the final court for settling disagreements in matters of *doctrine* is the congregation. Paul exhorts these young Christians in Galatia that even if he, an apostle, should come and preach a different gospel from the one they had already accepted, they should reject him. And so with any errant missionary. Interestingly, Paul says this to young Christians; he is not writing to the elders. And he is writing about the matter of the most theological importance—the gospel itself! Yet he places his trust in them. The gospel had saved them, and its cognitive, propositional content is more significant than even claims of apostolic calling, let alone succession. Paul assumes that that message of the gospel is perspicuous, even to young believers.

**Discipline.** Paul teaches the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 5 that the final court for settling matters of *discipline* is the congre-

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<sup>51</sup>In his translation of the Bible, William Tyndale translated ἐκκλησία as “the assembly.”

gation. Paul writes about a scandalous situation in the Corinthian church, and he writes not just to the pastor or leadership, but to the whole congregation. He tells the whole congregation they are to act, and to act by not associating with the offending party.

**Church membership.** Finally, Paul teaches the Corinthians in 2 Corinthians 2 that the final court for determining *church membership* is the congregation. He writes to them about a repentant sinner whom they had earlier excluded: “The punishment inflicted on him by the majority is sufficient for him. Now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. I urge you, therefore, to reaffirm your love for him” (vv. 6-8). Paul writes to the whole congregation about an action they had taken as a whole, urging them now to take a different course.<sup>52</sup>

Much more could be said about congregationalism, but I hope I have offered enough evidence to make clear that, according to the New Testament, it is the congregation as a whole that must finally take responsibility for its life together—for disputes, doctrine, discipline, and membership. The congregation may shirk that responsibility, but it will never lose it before God. The evidence, though slight, is consistent and clear.<sup>53</sup>

### *Elder Rule or Elder Leadership?*

What, then, is the responsibility of the elders in the context of congregationalism? It is important to distinguish *elder leadership within a congregational context* from an *elder rule* that does

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<sup>52</sup>An even more fundamental matter of polity than multiple eldership is the defense of a regenerate church membership.

<sup>53</sup>It is also matched by the evidence of the immediate post-Apostolic period. So Clement of Rome writes of elders being commissioned “with the full consent of the church,” in his “First Epistle to the Corinthians.” In *Early Christian Writings: The Apostolic Fathers*, trans. Maxwell Staniforth (New York: Penguin Books, 1968), 46.

not recognize the biblical role of the congregation.<sup>54</sup> A biblical elder-led congregationalism is distinct from presbyterianism because it does not appeal outside the congregation to another final backstop against sin and wrong, and it is distinct from the kind of elder-rule practiced in many independent and Bible churches because it recognizes that the final responsibility indeed rests with the congregation.

The difference between these two terms, “elder leadership” and “elder rule,” is an important one. The translators of the King James Version translated the Greek word *προεστῶτες*, describing the elder’s function in 1 Timothy 5:17, as “rule.” More modern translations have used “direct” or “govern.” Indeed, then, elders are certainly supposed to rule, direct, or govern.

Yet in our contemporary context, the phrase “elder rule” is typically used to mean resting final authority in the hands of the elders *as opposed to the congregation*. And that, as we have just seen, is what neither our Lord Jesus nor the Apostle Paul seemed to envision. Even in areas of indisputable elder responsibility, like orthodox teaching, the congregation does not lose its final responsibility. Thus in 2 Timothy 4, where Paul warns Timothy about the times of terrible teaching to come, he does not just blame the elders, as one might expect; he blames those who “gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their

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<sup>54</sup>The point here is not the distinction between the use of the phrase “elder led” as opposed to “elder ruled,” but the distinction between those congregations that do and do not recognize their biblical responsibility not only to obey (as in Heb. 13), but also on occasion to disobey (as in Gal. 1) their leaders. God will hold teachers accountable for what they teach (see James 3:1), but the congregations who sit idly listening to serious error are not, therefore, absolved of responsibility. They should refuse to follow such leaders. Congregations that teach they have no such responsibility, but assign the responsibility of discerning the truth solely to the elders, have abdicated a biblical responsibility. On the other hand, congregations that recognize that they should follow their leaders under normal circumstances, but that there are occasions in which they should not, reserve to themselves responsibilities recognized and taught in the Scriptures.

itching ears want to hear” (v. 3).

So a better word for summarizing the function of the elders in a local congregation than “rule” might be “direct” or “lead.” The word “rule” sounds final or ultimate; “lead” seems more appropriate for describing the normal God-given role of elders, who must be recognized but who may also be set aside by the congregation. In conclusion, the most biblical model seems to be a form of congregationalism in which the elders normally and regularly lead.<sup>55</sup>

### *Relationship of Elders to Others*

**To the Congregation.** What, then, is the relationship of elders to the congregation? By championing congregationalism, I am certainly not saying that the congregation is always right, that it is inerrant, and that the Holy Spirit so superintends the workings of each congregation that its actions and conclusions are always in accord with God’s will. No form of government in this fallen world, whether papal, congregational, or anything in between, is promised infallibility. We know that when Christ returns he will find faith on earth, because *he* is the one who has determined to build his church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it. Nevertheless, the best of congregations, like the best of men, can and do fail. So the congregation that fired Jonathan Edwards had every right to fire him, but I believe they were wrong in their decision to do so.

At the same time, the call to Christians to obey their leaders (Heb. 13:17) in no way implies the infallibility of leaders. Elders and pastors also make mistakes, and for those mistakes (speaking as an elder), we will have to give account to God (James 3:1).

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<sup>55</sup>Though I am happy to defend this as the biblical model, I would not suggest that a church without this model is not a true church. Nor would I suggest that the precise polity must be a matter of agreement between churches in order to cooperate together in missions, evangelism, and education.

Even so, we cannot ignore the call God gives us to lead his church. So we preach and teach, we study and pray, we evangelize and disciple, we examine and exhort, we deliberate and decide.

Ultimately, however, elders can act only by teaching and persuading the congregation. All of the duties, responsibilities, and obligations elders possess have been given to us by the congregation we serve. Certainly God must call us, and we expect an internal witness to this divine call. But that internally sensed call of God must be confirmed by a visible congregation, by a particular flock that asks us to shepherd them and follows us when we do. For this reason, an elder cannot be either installed or removed except by a vote of the congregation.

Once a congregation confirms an elder's call, the leadership of elders should normally be trusted, particularly on matters that are both significant and unclear. Elders have been recognized for exactly this sort of careful work.<sup>56</sup>

**To “the Pastor.”** A further longstanding concern among Baptists and other congregationalists has been how elders should relate to the one among them who is commonly called “the pastor.” Many Baptists wrestled with this question in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as they considered the role and place of ruling elders. What most Baptists finally and rightly concluded was that the distinction between ruling and teaching elders is not biblical. The authority elders accrue is to come through their ministry in the congregation, and particularly through their teaching and explaining of the Word.

The elder we usually refer to as *the* pastor these days—the person like me—is the one who is generally set apart to fill the pulpit on Sunday. He typically marries and buries. He is often

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<sup>56</sup>For more on the particulars of discerning in which matters the congregation should simply submit to the elders in trust, see my *Display of God's Glory* (Washington, DC: 9Marks, 2001), 40-42.

paid, either part-time or full-time. If the church is larger, he may be the one who hires and fires and who sets the direction for the church as a whole. In our congregation in Washington, D.C., I am recognized as an elder by virtue of my call as the senior pastor of the church. Anyone we hire to work in ministry will either be called an assistant or a pastor. The title “pastor” is reserved for those whom the congregation recognizes as an elder.

Among these elders, I have only one vote. Because of the leadership responsibility I have as the main public teacher, a special degree of authority is undoubtedly attached to my voice in elders’ meetings. But the other brothers who serve as elders at our church probably have a good assessment by now of where I am most helpful, and where I have less to contribute. Though formal authority between elders in a church is equal, there will always be those who garner special regard in one area or another.

**To the Staff.** What about the relationship of the elders to the staff? Many churches are large and prosperous enough to have multiple staff members. Should these members of the pastoral staff be regarded as elders in the church? Perhaps, but there are some challenges to this view. On the one hand, if all the elders in a church are also employees of the church, it frees up the elders’ schedules to work together more easily. On the other hand, it may discourage and hinder the development of leadership within the congregation. Also, employees can be dismissed more easily than elders who have well-developed and organic leadership ties to the congregation. In our congregation, the staff, most of whom are not elders, determines how to carry out the pastoral directions set by the elders.

**To the Deacons.** What about the relationship of the elders to the deacons? In many SBC congregations, deacons fulfill the role of plural, non-staff elder leadership; need we condemn this practice as unbiblical? We must recognize the significant difference in the qualifications Paul lays out for the two offices. Since



elders are required to be able to teach God's Word, while deacons are not, men may rightfully serve as deacons who are not qualified to serve as elders. Furthermore, the teaching ability Paul requires of elders almost certainly refers, in part, to a greater knowledge of Scripture. Such knowledgeable Christian brothers are exactly the ones we should most naturally acknowledge and trust as leaders in the church.<sup>57</sup>

In our own congregation in Washington, the deacons work to facilitate various services in the church—from pulling the budget together, to helping to prepare for baptisms and the Lord's Supper, to facilitating our care for those in financial need. The deacons do not act, as it were, as a second house of the legislature, a kind of House of Representatives to the elders' Senate. Their work is to care for the physical and fiscal needs of the church, to create unity in the body, and to support the work of the pastors and elders. The deacons should be the body's "shock absorbers."<sup>58</sup>

**To the Nominating Committee.** There is a final relationship we should notice, and one that I think presents one of the reasons we should most care about restoring the biblical practice of a plural eldership in our churches: the relationship of the elders to the nominating committee. In many of our churches, nominating committees have for decades led the congregation, directing it in some of the most crucial decisions for the ongoing ministry of the church. These committees, though sometimes full of fine Christian men and women, are not bodies required in Scripture. Their members do not need to meet any particular biblical requirements. Too often, their decisions are

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<sup>57</sup>Another difference is that many Baptists have historically recognized deaconesses (based particularly on 1 Tim. 3:11), but not elderesses (for which there is no biblical evidence).

<sup>58</sup>Thanks to Buddy Gray, pastor of Hunter Street Baptist Church, Birmingham, Alabama, for his own careful reflection and teaching on this matter conveyed to me in personal conversation.

motivated by worldly concerns, such as not disappointing a long-serving member or keeping a balance of ages, genders, or even family connections. Surely the nomination of servants and leaders in our churches is best left to the most mature among us, and to those who meet the basic biblical qualifications laid down for elders.

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A PERSONAL TESTIMONY

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## A PERSONAL TESTIMONY

Before writing this article, I gave one of our church's staff members a list of Southern Baptist churches with elders and asked him to track down any further church names that could be added to the list. Aside from the many churches within other Baptist denominations that have or are moving toward elder-leadership, he easily assembled a list of sixty SBC churches within a couple of days. I have little doubt that given more time he could double, triple, or even quadruple that list. The churches are all over the country. They are large and small. They are Calvinistic and not. Some have pastors who are well known, but most do not. The only two criteria required for inclusion on the list were having elders and belonging to the SBC. It may also be worth mentioning that our staff member reported that the pastors with whom he spoke again and again described at length the blessing their fellow elders had been to them in their mutual work of shepherding.

Some people assume that the SBC churches with elders are strange, perhaps overly-picky about doctrine, small and statistically unimportant outliers in the world of the Southern Baptist Convention. I am not so sure about that.

From Hayes Wicker in Naples, Florida, to Jeff Noblitt in Muscle Shoals, Alabama, pastors with elders are leading growing churches. An increasing number of Southern Baptist churches with a plural eldership have thousands attending, such as David Horner's Providence Baptist Church in Raleigh, North Carolina, and Buster Brown's East Cooper Baptist Church in Charleston, South Carolina. Dennis Newkirk, pastor of Henderson Hills Baptist Church in Edmond, Oklahoma, reported that his church regularly has 2,800 attending and is about to move into a new \$23 million building. And he loves having elders. Wade Burelson, current president of the Oklahoma Baptist Convention, also pastors a church with elders—Emmanuel Baptist Church in Enid, Oklahoma. Of course, many of us who have elders are middle-sized or smaller churches. But the move to plural eldership is a current trend within Southern Baptist churches, a trend that seems set to continue.

My own experience echoes the experiences of the pastors our staff member talked to on the phone. I first visited our congregation on Capitol Hill in the summer of 1993. I was open with the pulpit search committee about my belief in the Bible's teaching on a plural eldership. They were surprised, and, I think, a little put off. After teaching on the subject from time to time for a few years, we finally adopted a new constitution and our first set of elders in 1998. For the last six years, the brothers that I have been privileged to serve with have given thousands of hours of their time to prayer, discussion, discipling, teaching, and shepherding the flock along with me. They have made up for some of my deficiencies. They have encouraged and corrected me. They have made what could be a very lonely job into a joy and delight.

And I think our congregation has flourished in no small part, under God, due to their work.

Certainly some issues are more significant for Baptist identity these days. The practice of membership in most of our churches falls woefully short of the biblical picture. This, in turn, tarnishes our witness to the gospel and hinders our evangelism and discipling. Bloated membership lists, plummeting baptismal ages, irregular attendance, and the absence of church discipline mark too many of our churches. The changes needed for us to bear a distinct witness of life and light in our dark and dying day are great. One of the greatest helps we could give faithful pastors and ministers would be groups of godly men to serve as elders—men who are members of the church but largely not in its employ, who meet the biblical qualifications.

We can preach biblically faithful, culturally unpopular messages on the exclusivity of salvation through Christ alone. We can preach strong messages on the wrongs of divorce and abortion and sexual activity outside of marriage. But in most of our churches we would not even *know* if we had abortion doctors in the membership. And if we did, I fear too many of our churches would not know how to work to build a context of meaningful relationships that would give rise to appropriate church discipline in a case of unrepentant sin.

The problem in the Southern Baptist Convention was never most fundamentally in our seminaries. It was and is in our churches. In order to help Christians in this dark day turn our soaring sermons and thundering denunciations into more than just a bunch of hot air, but into incarnated corporate witnesses to the glory of Christ, we need help. And one crucial means of help God has granted his church that we ignore to our peril is the provision of multiple elders for giving careful, faithful, brave servant-leadership in days filled with both danger and opportunity.

It works and it is needed. It is biblical and it is Baptist.

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