

Baptist Polity and Elders

Mark E. Dever
Senior Pastor
Capital Hill Baptist Church
525 A St. NE
Washington, DC 20002

Introduction

Recently, John Bisagno, retired pastor of the First Baptist Church of Houston, Texas, said at the Tennessee Baptist Evangelism Conference that one of the two most divisive issues in Baptist churches today is church government. We no longer live in those ordered days that I grew up in, and that Louie D. Newton, pastor for decades of Atlanta's Druid Hills Baptist Church described so well 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 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."¹ Ah the confidence of mid-twentieth century corporate organization! Newton continued, "Stemming from this idea of the Pastor's Cabinet, all plans of evangelism, enlistment, stewardship and promotion are first discussed in this small, responsible

¹Louie D. Newton, *Why I Am a Baptist* (Beacon Press, 1957), 202.

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.”²

Would earlier Baptists have approved of such a plethora of unbiblical offices in our churches? Perhaps so. The *Philadelphia Baptist Confession* (1742) says in chapter 1 “Of the holy Scriptures”, section 6: “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.”

“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*” (emphasis mine).

Church government is a matter about which there is some latitude. Baptists have always realized this. Yet at the same time, Baptists have also always realized that there are some instructions in Scripture about our churches’ polity. This morning I want us to examine first, elders in the Bible, and then, at a little more length, elders in history, and then, spend the last part of our time on some more practical comments on elders in Baptist life today.

²Ibid., 203.

Elders in the Bible

Basic Usage

Baptists, perhaps more than any other historic Protestant group, go to the New Testament for the justification of our polity. The Roman Catholic Church, of course, did this, though without the pressing necessity of our doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture. They could relax into the authority of the magisterium of the church, content that dominical words were nice when they could be had, but entirely unnecessary, since Christ's Spirit continued to work through His vicar on earth, the successor to Peter in the chair of Rome.

Protestants, on the other hand, were all about the Bible. Luther and the Anabaptists, Zwingli, Tyndale, Calvin and Cranmer all turned and criticized their Roman Catholic inheritance saying that it had become not merely a *development* of what we see in Scripture, but a *distortion* of it, and therefore needed to be re-formed, according to Scripture. While the magisterial reformers were constantly limited by what the state would allow, the Baptists, having rejected infant baptism, and thus any hope of 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 they, and we, turn to the Bible, believing it to be sufficient to teach us even how to organize our churches.

I remember once when teaching on this topic of elders in a Baptist church, an older lady shot back "But it isn't Baptist!" While I did not say this to her, I certainly think that "Baptist" has always intended to mean ultimately faithful to Scripture. So the question we must begin with is, not 'is it Baptist?', but 'is it Biblical?' *Do we* find elders in the New Testament?

Words with the *πρεσβύτ* root occur 75 times in the NT. Nine of those occurrences refer to people of chronologically more advanced age.³ Four times it refers to those who have gone before.⁴ Twelve times in Revelation, John uses such words to refer to the heavenly elders.⁵ Twenty-nine times (all in the Gospels and Acts) the word is used to refer to the Jewish non-priestly leaders in the Sanhedrin, or in local synagogues. The other 20 times, the word refers to elders in churches: in the Jerusalem church,⁶ in Lystra, Iconium and Antioch,⁷ in Ephesus,⁸ in the towns of Crete,⁹ and other general references.¹⁰ John also refers to himself twice as “the elder,”¹¹ though whether this is a term of office or another designation attached to him personally, we cannot say. It is this last set of twenty occurrences that we are most interested in.

The Jews of Jesus’ day had lay-members of the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem that were called elders. Local synagogues also had bodies of ruling men, called elders. In Hellenistic cities, such ruling councils were called *gerousia*’s.

In the New Testament, references among Christians to elders, shepherds or pastors, and bishops or overseers are interchangeable. This is seen most clearly in Acts 20, when Paul meets with the elders *πρεσβυτέρους* of the church in Ephesus, as he calls them in Acts 20:17. In 20:28

³Luke 1:18; 15:25; John 8:9; Act  7; Phil. 9; 1 Tim. 5:1, 2; Titus 2:2, 3.

⁴Matt. 15:2; Mark 7:3, 5; Heb. 11:2.

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

⁶Acts 11:30; 15:2, 4, 6, 22, 23; 16:4; 21:18.

⁷Acts 14:21, 25.

⁸Acts 20:17.

⁹Titus 1:5.

¹⁰1 Tim. 4:4; 5:17, 19; James 5:14; 1 Pet. 5:1.

¹¹2 John 1; 3 John 1.

Paul says to these elders: ***Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers*** [or bishops ἐπισκόπους]. ***Be shepherds*** [or pastors (ποιμαίνειν)] ***of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.*** 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 there for “***pastor***” is ποιμένας, related to the word for “shepherd.” Also, in 1 Peter 5:1-2, Peter addresses the elders telling them to pastor or shepherd God’s flock, serving as overseers or bishops. In 1 Peter 2:25, Jesus is called the “shepherd and overseer of your souls.” That second word, or words related to it, with the ἐπίσκοπ root occur 11 times in the New Testament. In Titus 1, Paul gives a list of qualifications for a particular office similar to the one he gives to Timothy in 1 Timothy 3. In both places the officer being described is called an ἐπίσκοπον, that is, a bishop or overseer. But in Titus 1, Paul says in v. 5 that he left Titus in Crete so that he would make sure there were πρεσβυτέρους, ***elders*** in every town. He then, after giving some qualifications for such service in v. 6, goes on in v. 7 to refer to the same person as an ἐπίσκοπον, a bishop or overseer. Again, we conclude that in the New Testament, references among Christians to elders, shepherds or pastors, and bishops or overseers are interchangeable.¹²

This conclusion is not controversial. Baptists of the past knew this well. So, in chapter 26, paragraph 8 of the Second London Confession (1689) we read “the officers appointed by Christ . . . are Bishops or Elders and Deacons.” Though in so many ways, the *Second London Confession* was simply a re-affirmation of the *Westminster Confession*, and at a few other places of the *Congregationalist Savoy Declaration*, this section was wholly new, being authored by the

¹²So 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,” *The Baptist Preacher*, 137.

Baptist ministers assembling in 1677. In Article 13 of the *New Hampshire Confession* (1833 and 1853) we read that the church’s “only proper officers are Bishops or Pastors, and Deacons.” In Article 14 of Basil Manly, Jr.’s *Abstract of Principles* (1859) we read, “The regular officers of a church are Bishops or Elders, and Deacons.” In Article 12 of *The Baptist Faith and Message* (1925) we find the same language: “Its Scriptural officers are bishops or elders and deacons.” It is not until 1963 that this Biblical and historic word finally seems to drop out of official usage by the Southern Baptist Convention, when, in Article 6 of *The Baptist Faith and Message* (1963 and 2000), “Its Scriptural officers are pastors and deacons.” Even then, there was no change in understanding. Herschel Hobbs, who chaired the 1963 revision committee, wrote in 1964, “Pastor—this is one of three titles referring to the same office. The other two are ‘bishop’ and ‘elder.’”¹³

Single vs. Plural Question

We move on now to another question about the elders that we find in the New Testament. Do we find that in each local congregation there was one bishop or elder or pastor, or were there multiple ones?

The pattern in the Jewish towns of Palestine was to have multiple elders. Thus in Luke 7, the Centurion sent some elders of the local Jewish community there in Capernaum to appeal to Jesus for him. These town leaders are referred to in the Old Testament in Deuteronomy 19:12 in the discussion of cities of refuge, in Deuteronomy 21 in connection with actions to be taken in the case of unsolved murders and disobedient children. Centuries later, we find this same structure in Ezra 10:14 during the time of the return from the Babylonian Exile. It is these same kind of town elders that the Centurion seems to have encountered and used in Luke 7.

¹³Herschel H. Hobbs, *What Baptists Believe* (Broadman Press, 1964), 85.

The pattern in the Jewish synagogues was also of plural leadership. Arising, we think, during the Babylonian exile, synagogues functioned as the religious and civil gathering for instruction in God's law, and, consequently, for leading the community. Ten adult males were required to have public worship at a synagogue. There were various officers, including the ruler (ex., Jairus in Mark 5:22; cf. Acts 13:15; 18:8).

As for the New Testament evidence for the plurality of elders, it's clear that the heavenly elders in the book of Revelation are plural. In fact, we even know that there are 24 of them. It's also clear that the references to the Jewish elders all indicate that they were a body of men.

But what about in Christian churches? Paul would usually have those who labored with him in establishing churches, but he clearly had the lead role. He was also an apostle. Certainly, if there were multiple elders in young churches, we could not expect them all to be fully financially supported. Paul wrote not to the elders of the church in Ephesus, but to Timothy alone. The Lord Jesus addressed His letters to the seven churches in Revelation 2-3 to the "angel" or "messenger" [singular] of each church. So would any or all of these be 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 would tend to say that the normal pattern in the New Testament is for there to be more than one elder in each congregation. It should be noted that John referring to himself as "the elder" in 2 and 3 John may be a contrary indication to this. Certainly he seems to have been known by this title. But if he was writing to those outside his own congregation, this title may have suggested not so much an office, but a widely recognized designation. 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. James (5:14) instructs the Christians he writes to "call the elders [plural] of the

church [singular] to pray over him.” Peter, in the verses in chapter 5 already mentioned, writes as *an* elder to the “elders [plural] among you.” If 1 Peter 5:5 should be translated “elder” instead of “older men,” then it seems that Peter would be assuming that there would be plural elders in a single congregation. It certainly would not be ruled out. Paul greets the bishops [plural] in the church [singular] at Philippi when writing to them (Phil. 1:1). And he exhorts the elders of the church at Ephesus in Acts 20:28 to be “bishops” [plural] to the flock [singular] which God had called them. Paul mentions elders in writing to Timothy and Titus. To Timothy he reminds him of the body of elders (in 1 Tim. 4:14) that had laid their hands on him. And then in 1 Timothy 5:17, Paul refers again to the elders [plural] who direct the affairs of the church [singular]. 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 one congregation. In Titus 1:5, Paul exhorts Titus to “appoint elders [plural] in every town [*κατὰ πόλιν* that’s distributive, in *each* town] as I directed you.” So certainly the churches established in Crete at least *were* to have a plurality of elders in each local congregation. We see from Luke’s account in Acts 20:17, noted above, that the church [singular] in Ephesus had elders [plural]. If we look at the end of Paul’s first missionary journey in Acts 14, it seems in 14:23 that Paul and Barnabas “had elders [plural] elected for them in each church [singular].” And then, repeatedly in the book of Acts, the church in Jerusalem is represented as having a plurality of elders. No multiple congregations are referenced, no house churches. The reference to meeting together is found in Acts 2:42, and there it is all together in the Temple courts. Never are “churches” in Jerusalem referred to; only the congregation [singular]. On the other hand, the elders are referred to—always in the plural—in Acts 11:30; 15:2, 4, 6, 22-23; 16:4; 21:18. Therefore, any Baptist making an argument for one group of elders leading many

house congregations is making a good argument for Presbyterianism, but not for historic Baptist congregationalism. Should that argument be sharpened to one *individual* leading all of those house churches, then it is more an argument for divine-right episcopalianism, and even the Episcopalians do not make that argument.

That is all the direct evidence in the New Testament, and, as best I can tell, it seems to indicate that the common and even expected practice was to have a plurality of elders in each local congregation.¹⁴

Elders in Church History

Early Church: Development of the Monarchical Episcopate

If this universal practice was, in fact, the case in the early church, how and when did it change? That the immediate post-apostolic church changed both rapidly and radically, few Protestants would deny. In everything from the rise of infant baptism, to the efficacy of the sacraments, to the role of works in salvation, the centuries immediately after the departure of the last of Christ's apostles saw rapid decay among the fledgling churches. It is no surprise that such changes should occur in matters of church organization and governance as well.

In the *Didache* (dating from the late first or the early second century) the only church officers are elders and deacons. But as early as the second century, Ignatius would refer to a council of elders, called to give counsel to a chief pastor, or bishop. Ignatius uses the words presbyter (elder) and bishop distinctly. This separation is crucial for understanding the changes that went on in the church of the second and third centuries, as authority was centralized. By the

¹⁴The 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

middle of the second century, leading pastors/elders of churches in the urban centers that had first been evangelized seem to have become the informal arbiters of questions of orthodoxy. This development seemed to take place more slowly in some places than others. Egypt was notably slower in losing its more informal associations and de-centralized structures of authority. But generally, it seems, competent and noted pastors, like Ignatius of Antioch, were elders who were first among equals—perhaps as Timothy had been at Ephesus, or James at Jerusalem—but that function became an office, and that office seems to have grown in authority until the episcopate is understood to be a separate office from the eldership. Such bishops seemed to accrue authority not only in their own congregations, but throughout the area, and sometimes—in the case of the “metropolitan sees” that arose—over much wider regions. It was eventually one of these—the see of Rome—which became dissatisfied with the informality of its own authority over the other metropolitan bishops (Jerusalem, Antioch, Alexandria and, by the fourth century, Constantinople) and insisted on his exclusive preeminence. Thus, the full flowering of the move from congregational elder leadership to more centralizing authority was the claim of the Bishop of Rome to be the single arbiter of matters of truth in the faith.

One can see how in a day with vigorous church planting, rapid expansion, many heresies and celebrated martyrdoms, that certain central locations and the successors of certain noted pastors began naturally to acquire respect and even deference. Cyprian of Carthage, a century after Ignatius, closely links recognition of single, authoritative bishops with the unity of the church. Jerome, writing in the fourth century, admitted the identity of bishop and elder in the New Testament, but realized the historical need to commit oversight to one person. In the struggle to identify orthodoxy amidst a sea of heresies, one can understand the tendency to

authority should not be concentrated in the hands of one man,” Roland Allen, *Missionary Methods: St. Paul’s or Ours*, 138-139.

centralize and work to ensure conformity, and even uniformity. For more on this, see Cyprian's famous *On the Unity of the Catholic Church*.¹⁵

Reformation Recoveries

Proceeding on historically, we find a great re-thinking at the time of the Reformation. With the assumption that Scripture is sufficient, the mere antiquity of traditions was no longer seen as sufficient for their continued practice. Rather, some word of Scripture, at least some intimation or implication was required as the searching gaze of the Reformers began to fall across the practices of their churches.

For early Anabaptists, Reformed, Congregationalists and Baptists throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, offices in the church were in a state of flux. Even some of the magisterial reformers began to recover the identity of bishop and elder. Realizing that there was no biblical basis for an episcopacy, though, was a destabilizing factor not only for the authority of Rome in western Europe, but also for the monarchs who had for centuries leaned upon the structures of the church for supplying everything from order to education to income. Thus, moves away from episcopal structures at first were piecemeal.

Luther declined to interfere with the distinct, extra-congregational role of the bishop in practice. He did, however, repeatedly emphasize that bishops and elders or pastors were all the same office in Scripture. He also wanted it recognized that the Bishop of Rome was a false prophet, and that therefore no bishop should be in communion with him. Furthermore, he denied the unique authority for the Bishop of Rome as the successor of Peter from Matthew 16 that

¹⁵For some of the earliest references see Henry Bettenson & Chris Maunder, eds., *Documents of the Christian Church*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 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* (1969). Though von Campenhausen denies any intended complete presentation of church structure within the New

Rome had long claimed. To Luther and his successors, as long as the office of bishop or pastor is recognized, other external aspects of church organization within congregations and between them are understood to be matters appropriately settled by human law.

Calvin, being more zealously committed to the regulative principle, and less encumbered by inter-princely politics than Luther, pushed for even more normative definition in Scripture of church polity. Calvin, too, recovered the identity of the bishop and the elder, thus removing the level of authorities above and apart from the local church. His careful scholarship in the early patristic period is rehearsed in Book IV, chapter 4 of the *Institutes*. Calvin said, “In each city 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.”¹⁶

Calvin’s concern was to have ministers of the Word in each congregation. These ministers were those described in the New Testament as elders or pastors. In Calvin’s own thinking, the “elders” were what would now be called “ruling elders” that is, non-ordained elders, with the teaching elders being called “ministers of the Word and the Sacraments.” The Reformed churches in Geneva, Germany, the Netherlands and Scotland developed a series of inter-locking courts which would settle disputes of doctrine and discipline between congregations and foster the unity of the churches in an area with a reformed magistrate.

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.

¹⁶John T. McNeill, ed. *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol. 2, in Library of Christian Classics, vol. 21 (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), 1069. 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* (Philadelphia: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), 147-155. John Owen, an early champion of congregationalism, defended the separate office of ruling elder (see Owen, *Works*, vol. 16, p. 42).

Anabaptist polity was fluid. They were “radically de-centralized,” as James Stayer has recently put it, “most of them making exclusivist claims and condemning the other” [groups of Anabaptists]¹⁷. Various offices (including that of elders) proliferated among them. In the 1529 *Discipline of the Believers; How a Christian is to Live*, we find this 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.”¹⁸ A basic pattern of delegated leadership within a congregational pattern emerged.

In the Reformation period, then, a return to ancient patterns followed an affirmation of the sufficiency of Scripture. The non-ordained church-members began to be given more responsibility. Congregational election of officers was widely recovered among Protestants. And at the same time, there was a recovery of the plural eldership, among the Reformed groups and some Anabaptists. The Church of Scotland was reformed through the preaching of John Knox and others, and established the office of elder in the churches there. In England, the Presbyterians, the Congregationalists, and the Baptists also recovered the office from the New Testament. And it is to them—the Baptists—that we now turn.

Baptist Elders in the Past

“It’s not Baptist” said the older lady, objecting to my advocating the adoption of elders in Baptist churches. She was not strictly correct. I understand what she meant—in the churches she

¹⁷James Stayer, “Anabaptists”, Oxford Encyclopedia of the Reformation, ed. Hans Hillerbrand, (Oxford, 1996) I.32.

¹⁸Werner O. Packull, *Hutterite Beginnings* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 312. Cf. Emir Caner’s summary in Gerald Cowen, ed., *Who Rules the Church?* (Broadman & Holman, 2003).

had been used to in the second half of the twentieth century, *she* hadn't seen or even heard of such a thing. 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 simply a word which was synonymous with our modern pastor, or even senior pastor? Did Baptists in the past understand that the New Testament recognized a plurality of leaders called "elders" in one local congregation?¹⁹ Let me present a sampling for you.

Throughout the seventeenth century in England, Baptists had affirmed the office of elder. In 1697, Benjamin Keach wrote of "Bishops, Overseers, or Elders" clearly implying that these New Testament offices were one.²⁰ Keach presents it as essential that a church has one or more pastors, but *not* that it have a plurality of them. He rejects 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 we have neither their qualifications nor their duties laid out in the New Testament.²¹

In the eighteenth century, Benjamin Griffith wrote in favor of ruling elders distinct from the pastors or teaching elders.²² He cited Exodus 18, Deuteronomy 1, 1 Timothy 5:17, 1 Corinthians 12:28 and Romans 12:8 as his basis for this. The ruling elder's distinction from the teaching elder's position is shown by the fact that he would have to be ordained should he shift

¹⁹See Greg Wills' succinct summary of this in his article "The Church: Baptists and Their Churches in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries," in Dever, ed., *Polity*, 33-34.

²⁰Benjamin Keach, *The Glory of a True Church*, in *Polity*, ed. Mark Dever (Washington, DC: 2001), 65.

²¹Keach, in Dever, ed., *Polity*, 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," (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation: Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 1997).

²²Benjamin Griffith, *A Short Treatise*, in Dever, ed., *Polity*, 98.

to becoming a teaching elder. Griffith's practice of having such ruling elders was common in the Philadelphia Baptist Association in the eighteenth century. In this practice, however, Griffith and his contemporaries were disagreeing with their English counterparts of the previous decades.²³

The Charleston Association's 1774 *Summary of Church Discipline* ignores any idea of a separate group of ruling elders but affirms the fact that in the New Testament, ministers of the gospel are "frequently called elders, bishops, pastors and teachers." The *Summary* also implies that there is sometimes within one local congregation a "presbytery."²⁴

In the nineteenth century, Samuel Jones of the Philadelphia Association wrote, "Concerning the divine right of the office of ruling elders there has been considerable doubt and much disputation." Jones then goes on to summarize the arguments for and against, essentially conceding that Benjamin Griffith's defense of ruling elders was weak, but arguing that the office is beneficial and not forbidden, and therefore congregations are free to keep it if they find it a useful office to assist the pastor.²⁵

Turning to the South, W. B. Johnson of South Carolina, and the first president of the Southern Baptist Convention wrote of the New Testament churches that "each church had a plurality of elders."²⁶ "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."²⁷ For

²³"The majority of the writers and churches did not recognize a distinct office of ruling elder," (200). "The majority of particular Baptists were committed to a plurality and a parity of elders in their churches," (205). Renihan, "The Practical Ecclesiology."

²⁴*Summary of Church Discipline*, in Dever, ed., *Polity*, 120.

²⁵Samuel Jones, *Treatise of Church Discipline*, in Dever, ed., *Polity*, 145-146.

²⁶W. B. Johnson, *The Gospel Developed*, in Dever, ed., *Polity*, 192.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 193.

several pages of his book, *The Gospel Developed*, Johnson goes on delineating the duties and benefits of a plurality of elders in a local congregation.²⁸

J. L. Reynolds, pastor of the Second Baptist Church of Richmond, Virginia, wrote in 1849 that “the apostolic churches seem, in general, to have had a plurality of elders as well as deacons.”²⁹ Nevertheless, he 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.”³⁰ Reynolds competently and carefully dissected the arguments in favor of a distinct class of ruling elders.³¹ Reynolds devotes an entire chapter to defending the interchangeability of the terms “bishop” and “elder”.

William Williams, one of the founding faculty of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, wrote in 1874 that “In most, if not all the apostolic churches, there was a plurality of elders.”³² Williams went on to speculate that this was perhaps the case because Christians could only meet in small groups and therefore each smaller group needed an elder to instruct them. He suggests that such a plurality of elders was only due to the circumstances of the time, and need not be a continuing requirement for churches. Williams also disagrees with any idea of a separate office of ruling elder. He places the plurality of elders in the same category as deaconesses, the

²⁸See Johnson, in *Polity*, 189-195.

²⁹J. L. Reynolds, *Church Polity or the Kingdom of Christ*, in Dever, ed., *Polity*, 349.

³⁰Reynolds, in Dever, ed., *Polity*, 350.

³¹*Ibid.*

³²William Williams, *Apostolical Church Polity*, in Dever, ed., *Polity*, 531.

holy kiss, and the frequency of the Lord's Supper—all now to be left up to the "pious discretion of the churches."³³

I could go on. C. H. Spurgeon had a plurality of elders at the Metropolitan Tabernacle in London.³⁴ J. L. Burrows, (pastor of FBC Richmond for 20 years, and chairman of the Foreign Mission Board for 6 years) in his book *What Baptists Believe* wrote, "Elders and deacons are the only officers [Christ] has instituted."³⁵ It is indisputable that by the beginning of the twentieth century, Baptists had either had or at least advocated elders—and often even a plurality of elders—in local churches, and that they had done so for centuries.

A. H. Strong, president of Rochester Theological Seminary, and author of his influential 1907 *Systematic Theology*, perhaps summarizes the positions most Baptists in America seemed to hold 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 New Testament 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.³⁶

³³Williams, 537. Though without citing Williams, Gerald Cowen has recently rehearsed this same argument in his book *Who Rules the Church?*

³⁴"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: containing sermons preached and revised*, vol. 7, (Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim Publications), 658-59.

³⁵J. L. Burrows, *What Baptists Believe, and other discourses* (Baltimore: H. M. Wharton, 1887), 14.

³⁶A. H. Strong, *Systematic Theology*, 915-16.

Current Influences in the Revival of Elders
in Baptist Churches

Why in the latter part of the twentieth century, and even among Southern Baptists, has this office of elder begun to be revived? I have no extensive research for the comments that are to follow on this point, other than anecdotal experiences, and my own reasoning and reflecting. ‘Why?’s are not only difficult questions for historians to answer; even for those living in the midst of change, causation is often difficult to discern. I have been an elder at a Baptist church in England, and have preached in Baptist churches in South Africa with elders. But here in America, what is causing the re-evaluation that is indisputably going on?

Let me suggest two factors which were present regardless of the controversy in the SBC, and three others which have resulted from the controversy, and which may, in part, explain this otherwise surprising sudden surge of interest in this ancient office.

The first reason that I would suggest is that the idea of elders in local churches has *prominent advocates and proponents from outside our Southern Baptist constituency*. John MacArthur, pastor of Grace Community Church in Sun Valley, California, has for many years practiced and advocated having a plurality of elders lead his congregation. He is himself one of those elders. He has published a variety of things that touch on this, but perhaps most widely used is his little 1984 booklet *Answering the Key Questions about Elders*. 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, and has also written a booklet on this, *Biblical Eldership* (1999).

Even more broadly, Wayne Grudem’s popular 1994 *Systematic Theology* used in many of our seminaries states clearly that “there is quite a consistent pattern of *plural elders* as the main

governing group in the New Testament churches.”³⁷ His conclusions are that “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) 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).”³⁸ I should just add that when Grudem wrote this he was a member of a Southern Baptist church in Chicago with elders. Since its completion in 1985, Millard Erickson’s *Christian Theology* has been perhaps the most widely used textbook in Southern Baptist seminaries, and in many other evangelical schools. At its publication in the mid-1980’s, there had been few systematic theologies that gained wide usage published since Louis Berkhof’s Dutch Reformed work in the 1930’s. In Erickson’s section on the church, he carefully lays out Episcopalian, Presbyterian and Congregational polities, showing strengths and weaknesses. He gingerly advocates Congregationalism, though not with the vigor of such defenses by earlier divine-right Congregationalists like John Owen and Thomas Goodwin, nor even of the milder variety which inhabited the south in the nineteenth century—like W. B. Johnson and J. L. Reynolds. He also makes two qualifying statements that a more Presbyterian form of government will probably be needed either where the congregation becomes very large, or is filled with those who are more immature as Christians.

The second reason that I would suggest is more internal and pragmatic. There is and has been for some time, I think, a *frustration with current structures* in our congregations. Many of our churches have the sense that things are simply not working. Some churches led by a single

³⁷Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Downers Grove: Zondervan, 1994), 912.

³⁸Ibid., 913.

pastor suffer under an authoritarian rule that is too much like the Gentile leadership Jesus forbade among us in Mark 10:42. Other times, young pastors have gone into churches and found them ossified, effectively ruled by either deacons, a nominating committee, a personnel committee, or some other group which has no Biblical standard of maturity in understanding and teaching the Scriptures. And for those churches where our congregational heritage is still valued, it is valued too often as an expression of a wrong, 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 licenses, middle school or even pre-school, and where church membership (even of adults) requires nothing other than a one-time decision—no regular attendance, nor even communication—it cannot be surprising that meetings of members for church business become more and more ineffective. As I hope we will hear John Hammett explain tomorrow morning, “many Baptist churches have strayed so far from regenerate membership that they are incapable of responsible church government at the present time.”³⁹ Congregationalism fades as membership expectations evaporate.

There are also some echoes, some unintended results, I think, of our own inerrancy controversy that have led to this re-evaluation of church government. The least important of these reasons would be the acceleration of the larger cultural *trend to be less attached to particular denominations*. Brand loyalty is down everywhere. Throughout much of the twentieth century, Southern Baptist pragmatism assumed such loyalty, rather than creating it or cultivating it. The disease in Zion that caused such unease in Zion 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

³⁹John Hammett, “Elder Rule in Baptist Church” (Unpublished paper, Summer, 2003), 11.

southern California megachurches to Chicago-based schools and publishers. Many of us in the 1970s learned that we couldn't depend on our BSU's (mine had a woman as a minister, and denied the bodily resurrection). The books we would read from "our" people sorely disappointed us. So Dale Moody's *The Word of Truth* served as a poor guard from liberal mainline Protestantism; instead it more often advocated its tenets. And the seminaries were untrustworthy—so John Hammett went to Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, and I went to Gordon-Conwell; others likely have similar stories.

All of this inter-traffic with broader evangelicalism was multiplied by the rise of the Bible churches, and Dallas Theological Seminary's influence among conservatives. Gene Getz advocated a plurality of elders. In fact, I have a paper from the Conservative Baptist Association of Oregon from 1977 in which they attempt to address the growing problem of elders in Baptist churches, and they ascribe 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 didn't talk too much to them.

But Jay Adams, an Orthodox Presbyterian from Westminster Seminary spoke at our counseling conferences. By the 1970s and 1980s many of the fastest growing churches around us were—of all things—Presbyterian! The PCA had been born in 1973, and 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 they have all been convinced of the validity of infant baptism! Many of those churches—even with their unbiblical infant baptism and confusing extra-congregational government—were out-evangelizing, out-teaching, and even out-disciplining our Southern Baptist congregations.

Through all of this, we were finding allies, those with whom we had more in common—even with Anglicans like John Stott and J. I. Packer—than we had with many of those whose salaries we paid to teach in our institutions. It naturally follows, then, that as fresh respect came to these outside voices, more consideration was given to their arguments and practices, and topics that we had not needed to discuss 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 among the more conservative circles in the Southern Baptist Convention.

Another way the controversy in the convention opened up modern Southern Baptists to reconsider the role of elders in our churches was it forced us to *reconsider our denominational identity, and an inevitable part of that included looking at our Baptist past*. And what we found in our past, among many larger and more important issues—like inerrancy, confessions, Calvinism—were elders aplenty! I’m just about old enough to remember it. I can just remember that across from my grandmother in Kentucky lived an old, retired Southern Baptist minister who was referred by the title of “elder.”

A final explanation for this renewed emphasis on elders is simply the *renewed emphasis on the inerrancy of the Bible itself*. It shouldn’t surprise us—indeed, it should encourage us—that in looking for us to come to the stalwart defense of the inerrancy of the Bible—to be willing to fight, and even fire over it—we would find that people would open the revered book, and begin studying it afresh, and asking questions about the plain meaning of texts. In the context of the loosened loyalties, and openness to redefinition, it really cannot be too great a surprise 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 this?”

Elders in Baptist Life Today

Significance of Polity Questions

Though there are certainly important issues than church polity, this issue is not unimportant. As Americans, we are impatient with anything that is not utterly essential. But, in order to know faithfulness to God’s revelation, we must realize that there are more speeds than either essential or unimportant. There are some issues that are not essential to our salvation, to our Christian identity, but which are nevertheless very important. Our denomination is founded on just such non-salvifically essential distinctives. It, therefore, particularly behooves us to become more practiced at carefully considering Biblical matters in which no eternal issues are at stake, but which are, nevertheless, of some significance.⁴⁰

We must realize polity is significant, in that it *is* essential, or at least very useful, for protecting the corporate witness of the church. When they’re all healthy, and doing well, the differences between an evangelical Episcopalian church, an evangelical Presbyterian church and a Baptist church can look pretty slight. But let some serious sin occur, and see what happens. The differences immediately begin to come out. Some people have wondered why I published a book entitled *Polity* when three of the ten books within 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 body deals with diseases shows us how the body works and how it acts when we are healthy.

⁴⁰The recent rejection of two manuscripts by Broadman & Holman—one on multiple elders within a congregational context, and one against the practice of infant baptism—both point to the need for a press, which will explain and defend the Biblical distinctives of our denomination.

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 of that, look at how the Episcopal churches even now are suffering from having exported the responsibilities from their congregations to unbiblical structures above them. Polity matters.

Context of Congregationalism

Under God, such responsibility to be the final judicatory authority resides not with a Pope or a Convention, not with a national Assembly or with a pastor, not with a regional association or a state convention, nor with some committee or board, whether paid or unpaid. Such responsibility for the discipline and doctrine of the congregation, under God, lies not with the deacons or the elders, but with the congregation as a whole.

Congregationalism may or may not be attractive, efficient, well understood, well practiced, easy, universally loved, impervious to distortion or corruption, but it is biblical. It is biblical in two senses: first, ONLY the congregation—no outside person or body—is finally accountable to God for its actions in discipline and doctrine. Second, the WHOLE congregation is so accountable. This is the picture that we get in the New Testament. I confess that the evidence is slight, the specifics are nearly non-existent, but the picture is consistent, and the implications important.

Jesus taught His followers in Matthew 18 that the final court for matters of *disputes* between brothers was the congregation. So we read in Matthew 18:15-17 that the final step is to “tell it” he said, not to the elders (as I humorously told one Presbyterian translator I had when

preaching one time in Brazil) but to the ἐκκλησία that's the church, or the congregation, as Tyndale translated it, the assembly. So when the apostles wanted men to serve in waiting on the needs of some poorer members among the church in Jerusalem, in Acts 6, Luke notes that the proposal the apostles made “*pleased the whole group.*” Luke proceeds in Acts 6:5 to list the people to fulfill these duties, and the people were chosen by the church.

Paul implicitly taught the Galatians in Galatians 1 that the final court to settle disagreements in matters of *doctrine* is the congregation. Paul exhorted these young Christians in Galatia, that even if he—an apostle!—should come and preach a different gospel than the one they had already accepted, then they should reject him, or whoever the errant missionary is. It is interesting that Paul said this to young Christians—he was not writing to the elders. And he was writing about the matters of the most theological importance—the gospel itself! And yet, he resided his trust in them. They knew the gospel that had saved them! The cognitive content of the gospel is more significant than even claims to apostolic call, let alone succession! And Paul assumes that that message is perspicuous, even to young believers.

Paul taught the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 5 that the final court to settle matters of *discipline* is the congregation. Paul writes about the 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 that they are to act, and to continue to act in not associating with this man.

And finally on this point of congregationalism, Paul taught the Corinthians in 2 Corinthians 2:6-8 that the final court to determine *church membership* is the congregation. He wrote 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.” Paul writes to the whole congregation about an action they had taken as a whole, urging them now to take a different course.⁴¹

Much more could be said about this context of congregationalism, but I hope enough has been said to distinguish elder *leadership* within a congregational context from elder *rule* which does not recognize the Biblical role of the congregation. So this Biblical elder-led congregationalism is distinct from Presbyterianism, because it will never appeal outside of the congregation to find another final backstop against sin and wrong. The congregation may shirk that responsibility, but it will never lose it. Furthermore, this Biblical elder-led congregationalism is distinct from the kind of elder-rule we see in many independent and Bible churches because it recognizes that finally it must be the congregation as a whole who takes responsibility for its life together—for disputes and doctrine, for discipline and membership. The evidence is slight, but consistent and clear.⁴²

Elder Rule or Elder Leadership?

So, inside the local congregation, are there to be elders? Yes. The Bible says so. The New Testament evidence is clear. Do they rule? Well, there it depends on what is meant by “rule.” I have just given you examples where the congregation as a whole in the New Testament is taught that it bears responsibility. What, then, is the responsibility of the elders. In one sense they must rule. The translators of the King James Version translated the Greek word *προεστῶτες* in 1 Timothy 5:17 as “rule”. More modern translations have used “direct” or “govern”. So, certainly

⁴¹An even more fundamental matter of polity than multiple eldership is the defense of a regenerate church membership.

elders are to do that. But in our modern context, when most people say “elder rule” they mean as opposed to the congregation having the final authority. And that, we have just seen, neither our Lord Jesus, nor Paul seems to envision. Even when there are areas of indisputable elder responsibility—like the orthodoxy of the teaching—even there the congregation is not without its responsibility. So in 2 Timothy 4, when Paul is warning Timothy of the times of terrible teaching to come, he does not just blame the elders, as one might expect, but he blames those who ***“gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear”*** (2 Tim. 4:3). So a better word for summarizing all the elders do would be this word “direct” or, “lead.” The most Biblical model seems to be elder-led congregationalism.⁴³

Relationship of Elders to Others

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, that the Holy Spirit so superintends the workings of each congregation that our actions and conclusions are always in accord with God’s will and that our churches are never wrong. No form of government—whether Papal or congregational or anything in between—in this fallen world 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 that the gates of Hell will not prevail against it. Nevertheless, the best of congregations—like the best of men—can and do fail.

⁴²It 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 (trans. Staniforth), 46.

⁴³Although I am happy to defend this as the Biblical model, I would not suggest that a church without this is no 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.

So the congregation that fired Jonathan Edwards had every right to do it, but they were wrong in their decision.

At the same time, the call to Christians to obey their leaders (found in Heb. 13:17) in no way implies the infallibility of leaders. We as elders and pastors, too, make mistakes. And for those, James 3:1 tells us, we will have to give account to God. Even so, we cannot ignore the call God gives us to lead His church. And so we preach and teach, we study and pray, we evangelize and disciple, we examine and exhort, we deliberate and decide.

Ultimately, elders can only act by teaching and persuading the congregation. All of the duties elders have (all responsibilities and obligations) have been given us by the congregation we serve. Certainly God must call us; and we would 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 would call us to shepherd them, and would follow us when we do. Particularly on matters that are both significant and unclear, elders should normally be trusted. It is for just such careful work they have been recognized.⁴⁴

There are further questions for us to ask on this matter of elders in Baptist churches. One of the most longstanding questions among Baptists (and other Congregationalists) has been, **how are these elders to relate to one among them who is commonly called “the pastor”?** This was the question that many Baptists were wrestling with in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as they considered the role and place of ruling elders. What Baptists finally, largely and rightly—I think—concluded, is that there can be no distinction between ruling and teaching in the eldership. The authority that is to accrue to elders is to come through their ministry in the congregation, and particularly through their teaching and explaining the Word.

⁴⁴For 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, D.C.: Center for Church Reform, 2001), 40-42.

The elder that we usually refer to as “the” pastor—the person like me—is, these days, the one who is generally set apart to fill the pulpit on Sunday. He is the one who marries and buries. He will often be paid—either part-time or fully. 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, I am recognized as an elder by virtue of my call as the senior pastor of the church. Anyone whom 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, there is undoubtedly a special degree of authority that attaches to my voice in elders’ meetings, but the other brothers probably have by now a pretty good assessment of where I am most concerned and most helpful, and where I have less to contribute. On an eldership, though formal authority between the members is equal, there will always be those who garner special regard in one area or another. An elder cannot be either installed or removed except by a vote of the congregation.

A related question for Baptist churches today would be, what about the **relationship of the elders to the staff**? Many churches are large and prosperous enough to have multiple staff members. Are these members of the pastoral staff to be regarded as the elders of the church? Perhaps, but there are some challenges to that position. If all the elders are employees of the church on the one hand, it frees up their schedules so that they can work together more easily. On the other hand it may discourage the development of leadership within the congregation. Employees may be dismissed more easily than a well-developed leadership within the congregation. In our congregation, the staff deliberates how to carry out the pastoral directions set by the elders.

A couple of more questions about the relationship of the elders to other groups in the church need to be addressed. What about **the relationship of the elders to the deacons**? Can we not just recognize the fact that deacons fulfill the role of plural, non-staff leadership in most of our congregations?

We certainly could simply recognize the deacons as elders—whether or not we call them that—but we must note the significant difference in the qualifications that Paul lays out for the two offices. And that difference is essentially that an ability to teach God’s word to others is required for the elders, and it is not for the deacons. This means that men may rightfully serve as deacons who are not qualified to serve as elders. Some distinction must, then, be made between the two offices. Furthermore, this difference is particularly important because that aptness to teach almost certainly reflects a greater knowledge of Scripture. Such knowledgeable Christian brothers are exactly the ones that we would and should most naturally acknowledge and trust as leaders in the church.⁴⁵ In our own congregation, the deacons work to facilitate various services in the church—pulling together the budget, preparing for baptism and the Lord’s Supper, and facilitating our care for those in financial need. The deacons do not act as a kind of 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 are to be the body’s “shock absorbers.”⁴⁶

One last relationship we should notice, and one which I think is one of the reasons we should most care about restoring the Biblical practice of a plural eldership in our churches: **the**

⁴⁵Another 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).

⁴⁶Thanks 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.

relationship of the elders to the nominating committee. In so many of our churches, nominating committees have for decades led the congregation, directing it in some of the most crucial decisions for the on-going ministry of the church. These committees, though sometimes full of fine Christian men and women, are not bodies required in Scripture. Their members need meet no particular Biblical requirements. Too often, their decisions are motivated by more worldly concerns of not disappointing a long-serving member, keeping a balance of ages or 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.

Personal Testimony

In preparation for this address, one day last week I gave one of our church's staff members a list of Southern Baptist churches with elders, and I asked him to make some phone calls and see if he could add to my list. Besides the many Baptist churches of other Baptist denominations which have or are moving toward elders, within a couple of days he easily assembled a list of sixty churches. I have little doubt if I gave him the time to continue, that list could double, triple, quadruple or more. The churches are all over the country. They are large and small. They are Calvinistic and not. Some have pastors who are well known, most do not. The only thing they all had in common was having elders and being Southern Baptist. One other note: Ryan, the staff member who made the phone calls, said that pastors again and again went on and on about the blessing that having elders along side them has been in their work.

The assumption on the part of many about churches with elders is that they 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. Dennis Newkirk, pastor of Henderson Hills Baptist Church in Edmond, Oklahoma, said that they regularly have 2,800 attending, and are about to move into their new \$23 million building. And he loves having elders. And speaking of Oklahoma, I understand that Wade Burelson, current president of the Oklahoma Baptist Convention, pastors a church with elders—Emmanuel Baptist Church in Enid, Oklahoma. From David Horner’s Providence Baptist Church in Raleigh, North Carolina, to Buster Brown’s East Cooper Baptist Church in Charleston, South Carolina, a growing number of Southern Baptist churches have both thousands attending and a plural eldership. Of course, many of us who have elders are middle-sized, or are smaller churches. But it seems certain that a move to plural eldership is a current trend within Southern Baptist churches, a trend that seems set to continue.⁴⁷

My own experience would echo that of the pastors Ryan talked to on the phone. I first visited our congregation on Capitol Hill in the summer of 1993. I told the pulpit search committee openly of my belief in the Bible’s teaching on a plural eldership. They were surprised, and a little put off, I think. After teaching on it 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 five years, the brothers that I have been privileged to serve with have given thousands of hours of their time in prayer, discussion, discipling, teaching and shepherding the flock along with me. They have made up for some of my deficiencies and have encouraged and corrected me. They have made what could be a very lonely job into a joy and delight. And I think in no small part, under God, due to their work, our congregation has flourished.

⁴⁷The Southern Baptist churches we have found after minimal effort in the winter of 2004 are in the following states, followed by the number of SBC churches with elders we’ve found: Alabama (3); California (2); Colorado (2); Connecticut (2); District of Columbia (1); Florida (6); Georgia (3); Illinois (1); Indiana (1); Kansas

There are more significant issues 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 almost entirely absent church discipline mark too many of our churches. The changes needed for us to bear a distinct witness of life and light to our dark and dying day are great. One of the greatest helps I could imagine for faithful pastors and ministers to be given would be groups of godly men—members in the church, but largely not in the pay of it, men meeting the Biblical qualifications of and being recognized as elders.

Friends, we can preach Biblically faithful, culturally unpopular messages on the exclusivity of salvation through Christ alone, on the wrongs of divorce and abortion and of sexual activity outside of marriage, but in most of our churches we would not even *know* if we have abortion doctors in the membership. And if they were, I fear too many of our churches would not know how to work to build a context of meaningful relationships, and even to exclude the person from membership if they did not repent. 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 to 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 given His church we continue to ignore to our peril—the provision of multiple elders to give careful, faithful, brave servant leadership to our churches in days filled with danger and opportunity.

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

(2); Kentucky (1); Louisiana (1); Michigan (1); Mississippi (1); New Mexico (1); North Carolina (6); Ohio (2); Oklahoma (7); South Carolina (2); Tennessee (4); Texas (5). For a complete listing, check the 9marks.org website.