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BIBLICAL CHURCH LEADERSHIP

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What kind of leadership does a healthy church have? A congregation, committed to Christ, gifted to serve? Yes. Deacons who are models of service in the affairs of the church? Yes. A pastor who is faithful in preaching the word of God? Yes. But biblically, there is something else as well that is part of the leadership of a healthy church: elders.

As a pastor, I pray that Christ will place within our fellowship men whose spiritual gifts and pastoral concern indicate that God has called them to be elders or overseers (the words are used interchangeably in the Bible; e.g., Acts 20). I pray that God will grow and gift such disciples for the work of the pastoral oversight of our congregation and its teaching. If it becomes clear that God has so gifted a certain man in the church, and if, after prayer, the church rec-

The Biblical
Office of Elder

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Brief History
of Elders

ognizes his gifts, then he should be set apart as an elder.

All churches have had individuals who performed the functions of elders, even if they've called them by other names. The two New Testament names for this office were *episcopos* (overseer) and *presbuteros* (elder). When evangelicals hear the word "elder," many immediately think "Presbyterian," yet the first Congregationalists back in the sixteenth century taught that eldership was an office in a New Testament church. Elders could be found in Baptist churches in America throughout the 18th century and into the 19th century. In fact, the first president of the Southern Baptist Convention, W. B. Johnson, wrote a treatise in which he called for the practice of having a plurality of elders to be recognized as biblical and to be followed in more Baptist churches. Johnson's plea went unheeded. Whether through inattention to Scripture, or the pressure of life on the frontier, where churches were springing up at an amazing rate, the practice of cultivating such textured leadership declined. But Baptist papers' discussion of reviving this biblical office continued. As late as the early twentieth century, Baptist publications were referring to leaders by the title of "elder."

The
Congregation
is the Final
Authority

Baptists and Presbyterians have had two basic differences in their understandings of elders. First and most fundamentally, Baptists are congregationalists. That is, they understand that the final discernment on matters rests not with the elders in a congregation (or beyond, as in the Presbyterian model) but with the congregation as a whole. Baptists, therefore, stress the consensual nature of church action. So, in a Baptist church, elders and all other boards and committees act in what is finally an advisory capacity to the whole congregation.

A further note is in order about the authority of the assembled congregation. Nothing other than the local, assembled congregation is the final court of appeal under

Christ. Again and again in the New Testament, we find evidence for what seemed to be an early form of congregationalism. In Matthew 18 when Jesus was teaching his disciples about confronting the sinful brother, the final court is not the elders, nor a bishop or pope, nor a council or convention. The final court is the congregation. In Acts 6, the apostles gave the decision for the deacons over to the congregation.

In Paul's letters, too, we find evidence of this assumption of the congregation's final responsibility. In I Corinthians 5, Paul blamed not the pastor, elders or deacons, but the congregation for tolerating sin. In II Corinthians 2, Paul referred to what a majority of them had done in disciplining an erring member. In Galatians, Paul called on the congregations to judge the teaching they had been hearing. In II Timothy 4, Paul reproved not just the false teachers, but also those who paid them to teach what their itching ears wanted to hear. Elders lead, but they do so, biblically and necessarily, within the bounds recognized by the congregation.

The second disagreement is over elders' roles and responsibilities. Presbyterians have tended to stress Paul's statement to Timothy in I Timothy 5:17, "The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching." The last phrase, some argued, clearly suggested that there would be elders whose main job was not to preach or teach, but rather to govern or rule. This is the origin of the distinction between "ruling elders" (lay elders) and "teaching elders" (ministers) among Presbyterians.

But "especially" is a questionable translation of the word *malista*, which in this context is better rendered "certainly" or "particularly." Earlier in I Timothy 4:10, we read, "We have put our hope in the living God, who is the Savior of all men, and especially (*malista*) of those who believe." Paul

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seems to be saying that as many people will be saved without believing as will direct the affairs of the church without preaching and teaching: in other words, none.

Baptists have tended to stress the interchangeability of the terms "elder," "overseer," and "pastor" in the New Testament, and have pointed out that in I Timothy 3:2, Paul clearly told Timothy that elders must be "apt to teach." And he wrote to Titus that an elder "must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it" (Titus 1:9). Baptists, therefore, have often denied the appropriateness of having elders who are not capable of teaching Scripture.

Plurality of
Elders

What eighteenth-century Baptists and Presbyterians often agreed upon, however, was that there should be a plurality of elders in each local church. Though it never suggests a specific number of elders for a particular congregation, the New Testament clearly refers to "elders" in the plural in local churches (e.g., Acts 14:23; 16:4; 20:17; 21:18; Titus 1:5; James 5:14). My own experience confirms to me the usefulness of following the New Testament practice of having, where possible, more elders in a local church than simply a lone pastor, and having them be people rooted in the congregation. This practice is unusual among Baptist churches today, but there is a growing trend--and for good reason. It was needed in New Testament churches, and it is needed now.

Distinct Role
of the Pastor

This does not mean that the pastor has no distinctive role. There are many references in the New Testament to preaching and preachers that would not apply to all the elders in a congregation. So in Corinth, Paul gave himself exclusively to preaching in a way that lay elders in a church could not (Acts 18:5; cf. I Corinthians 9:14; I Timothy 4:13; 5:17). Preachers seemed to move to an area expressly to preach (Romans 10:14-15), whereas elders seemed to be

already part of the community (Titus 1:5). (For more on this distinction, see *A Display of God's Glory*, (CCR: 2001)

We must, however, remember that the preacher, or pastor, is also fundamentally one of the elders of his congregation. This means that decisions involving the church, yet not requiring the attention of all the members, should fall not to the pastor alone, but to the elders as a whole. While this is sometimes cumbersome, it has the immense benefits of rounding out the pastor's gifts, making up for some of his defects, supplementing his judgment, and creating support in the congregation for decisions, leaving leaders less exposed to unjust criticism. It also makes leadership more rooted and permanent, and allows for more mature continuity. It encourages the church to take more responsibility for its own spirituality and helps make the church less dependent on its employees.

Benefits of a
Plurality of
Elders

Many modern churches have tended to confuse elders with either the church staff or the deacons. Deacons, too, fill a New Testament office, one rooted in Acts 6. While any absolute distinction between the two offices is difficult, the concerns of the deacons are the practical details of church life: administration, maintenance, and the care of church members with physical needs. In many churches today, deacons have taken some spiritual role; but much has simply been left to the pastor. It would be to the benefit of the church to again distinguish the role of elder from that of deacon.

Confusion of
Elders and
Deacons

Eldership is the biblical office I hold as a pastor: I am the main preaching elder. But all the elders should work together for the edification of the church, meeting regularly to pray and to discuss, or to form recommendations for the deacons or the church. Clearly, this is a biblical idea that has practical value. If implemented in our churches, it could help pastors immensely by removing weight from their shoulders and even their own petty tyrannies from

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their churches. Indeed, the practice of recognizing godly, discerning, trusted laymen as elders is another mark of a healthy church.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Read Matthew 18:15-17. Who does Jesus recognize as the final court of appeal in the judgment of an offending brother? Now read Acts 6:1-4. Who do the apostles charge with choosing the seven deacons? Read also II Corinthians 2:6. By whom was the punishment of this man inflicted? What do these passages seem to imply about where final authority over church matters rests?

2. Read Titus 1:5. Understanding that final authority in the church rests with the assembled congregation, why do you think Paul nevertheless thought it wise to have elders in every church?

3. In I Timothy 3:1-6, Paul gives a list of the qualifications for an elder. Spend some time thinking about why those character traits are important in the leader of a church. Who in your church fits these qualifications?

4. Read Acts 6:1-4. What is the difference between the role of a deacon and the role of one who oversees the affairs of the church? Does your church recognize that difference in its government?

5. From Acts 6 we learn that the task of the deacons was to take care of the physical needs of the church, thus freeing the overseers of the church (apostles, elders, pastors) to attend to prayer and the ministry of the word. What are some of the ongoing physical needs of your church that