

## **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 wasn’t strictly correct. I understand what she meant—in the churches she 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.

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.” “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.” For 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.

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.” 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.” Reynolds competently and carefully dissected the arguments in favor of a distinct class of ruling elders. And Reynolds has a whole chapter defending the interchangeability of the terms “bishop” and “elder”.

C. H. Spurgeon had a plurality of elders at the Metropolitan Tabernacle in London. 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* [1888] (p. 12, 16) wrote that “Elders and deacons are the only officers [Christ] has instituted,” (p. 14). 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.

## **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?

I would suggest is 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 32-page 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 63-page booklet on this, *Biblical Eldership* (1999).

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.” 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; I Peter 5:2-3).”

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 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. Many Baptist churches have strayed so far from regenerate membership that they are incapable of responsible church government at the present time. Congregationalism fades as membership expectations evaporate.

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 can't 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?”

### **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've 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 *proestotes* in I Timothy 5:17 as “rule”. More modern translations have used “direct” or “govern”. So, certainly 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, 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 II Timothy 4, when Paul is warning Timothy of the times of terrible teaching to come, he doesn't 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,” (II Tim. 4:3). So a better word for summarizing all the elders do would be this word “direct” or, “lead.” The Biblical model is elder-led congregationalism

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