

## **Church Government: A Case for the Plurality of Elders in SBC Churches**

by Eric “Gunny” Hartman, pastor of Providence Church in Garland, TX

“Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you.” (Heb 13:17)<sup>1</sup>

This verse raises the question, who are the leaders in the church? To whose authority are people called to submit? Who are these men who watch over the church who must give an account? In short, who are the leaders in the church that are to be obeyed?

### **Examination of Biblical Data**

NT churches were governed by a plurality of elders who were assisted by deacons who were appointed to serve the church in various ways. The pastor was an elder, but not all elders were pastors, in the vocational sense of being the primary person responsible for preaching. For example, 1 Tim 5:17 notes that “The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching.” It may help to see “elder” as an office and “pastor” as a spiritual gifting (Eph 4:11). In other words, the pastor is an elder with that particular gifting.

Presbyters (also translated “elders”) and bishops (also translated “overseers”) were apparently the same individuals; the two terms were synonymous. For example, we note Titus 1:5 (“appoint elders”) which is followed by v. 7 (since an overseer “must be blameless”). The fact that the sentence in v. 7 begins with a “since” shows a connection: bishops are elders. Otherwise, why would Paul mention the qualifications of a group that were not whom Titus should appoint? In Acts 20:17 Paul calls the “elders of the church” of Ephesus together for a final meeting. Then, in v. 28 he addresses them as “overseers” (or bishops). Thus, any passage that deals with bishop is equally applicable to elders.

The consistent pattern in the NT is that each church (singular) had elders (plural). Note the following texts (where either elder or bishop is used):

Acts 11:30--elders at the church of Antioch

Acts 14:23--Paul and Barnabas appoint "elders in every church"

Acts 15:2, 4, 6, 22, 23; 16:4--elders at the church in Jerusalem

Acts 20:17, 28--elders/bishops at the church of Ephesus (v. 17--"elders of the church")

Acts 21:18--elders at the church in Jerusalem

Phil 1:1--the church at Philippi has bishops and deacons

1 Tim 3:1-7--Paul tells Timothy, the Pastor, the qualifications for elders

1 Tim 5:17--elders at the church of Ephesus

Titus 1:5--Titus is to “appoint elders” in every town (The early church had but one church in each city or town. Hence, Paul's instruction to Titus is to appoint multiple elders in every church.)

James 5:14--"the elders of the church"

1 Pet 5:1-2--"the elders among you"

In every one of these texts the plain implication is that each church had more than one elder. The evidence is overwhelming and most SBC church governments miss the NT mark where a church

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 International Bible Society.

had multiple elders. The pastor would have been counted among them, but was not automatically over them (i.e., a pastor is an elder, but elders are not necessarily pastors).<sup>2</sup>

### **Examination of Historical Data**

Although we are a church that affirms *Sola Scriptura*,<sup>3</sup> it is worthwhile to examine the issue of church government from a historical perspective.

First, the first London Baptist Confession of Faith (1644/46) dictates that each local church is to choose qualified “elders and deacons” for the “feeding, governing, serving, and building up” of the church. The second London Baptist Confession of Faith (1689) notes that the officers of the church are “bishops or elders, and deacons.” We next look at the first SBC creed, the Abstract of Principles (1858), which is still the doctrinal statement of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary (Louisville, KY) and Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary (Wake Forest, NC). In it the officers of the church are elders and deacons. The first edition of the SBC Baptist Faith and Message (1925) noted that the officers of the church were elders and deacons. It’s not until the 1963 edition that we note a change to “pastors and deacons” as the officers of the church.

Historically, we can see that, at least as far as Baptists go, the absence of elders is a relatively recent phenomenon. It should also be noted that this change is observed not at the height of the denomination’s fidelity to biblical doctrine, but rather at a time when the conservatives were very much *not* in control. It was not until the late 70s and early 80s that a conservative resurgence of faithfulness to biblical inerrancy began to impact SBC life positively.

### **Examination of the Present State of Affairs in the SBC**

The fact of the matter is that SBC ecclesiology is as varied as each individual church. However, a cursory examination of SBC churches in general reveals that the majority of SBC churches do not have an office labeled as elder, although many of them would label their pastor as their lone elder. One problem with that concept is that a plurality of eldership is lost and you may have a benevolent dictatorship, since the pastor is the only elder and it is the elders who govern the church. Or the church may be led by a body other than the elders (e.g., deacons, the congregation, or an ambiguous combination of various rulers), contrary to Scripture.

As more and more churches shift back to a more biblical Christianity<sup>4</sup> we are also seeing a rise in popularity of the plurality of elders in SBC churches. They two may or may not be related, but my contention is that the promotion of biblically inerrancy and a prioritization of Scripture over tradition are fueling this trend.

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<sup>2</sup> However, some who practice and/or promote a plurality of elders will refer to the (senior) pastor as the primary elder, whereby he is one among equals but specifically tasked as being a leader among leaders.

<sup>3</sup> Latin for “Scripture Alone.” See *The Cambridge Declaration* (1996) for elaboration, but the following is an excerpt: “We reaffirm the inerrant Scripture to be the sole source of written divine revelation, which alone can bind the conscience. The Bible alone teaches all that is necessary for our salvation from sin and is the standard by which all Christian behavior must be measured.”

<sup>4</sup> E.g., more and more Texas SBC churches leaving the more moderate/liberal BGCT and joining the more conservative/fundamentalist SBTC.

### **Suggestions for SBC Church Polity**

In most SBC churches there is great ambiguity with regard to how decisions are made. For example, it is often unclear which decisions are to be made by the pastor, which decisions were to be made by the deacons, and which were to be made by the congregation at a business meeting. Is the church a strict democracy or is it run by “God’s man” who dictates what the church ought to do? Is the church governed by a deacon board who sees its primary responsibility as keeping the pastor in line?

My suggestion is for churches to examine their polity in light of Scripture and to see in our Baptist tradition the legitimacy of governance by a plurality of elders. Scripture should be enough, in theory, but the reality is that arguments against this model are typically that it is “not Baptist,” which is patently false. It’s the minority report now, but the novel or trendy move has been one to a single elder model. Making the transition would not necessarily be smooth or easy, but nobody said following Christ was easy.

A church can only go where the leaders take it. Thus, it is crucial to have a church led by spiritually qualified men who meet the biblical qualifications of elder<sup>5</sup> and seek to serve and follow the “owner” of the organization, the Lord Jesus Christ.

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<sup>5</sup> E.g., 1 Tim 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9