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ELDERS in the **LIFE** of the **CHURCH**

Rediscovering the Biblical Model
for Church Leadership

PHIL A. NEWTON
MATT SCHMUCKER

 Kregel
Ministry

Elders in the Life of the Church: Rediscovering the Biblical Model for Church Leadership

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This is a comprehensive update of the previous edition, *Elders in Congregational Life*, © 2005 by Phil A. Newton.

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For Karen,
in honor and celebration
of our life together!

For Eli,
whom I love
"Absolutely!"

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FOREWORD

The church is a reflection of God’s Son. That’s why leadership of the church is of utmost importance. The church is how the great hope—eternity with God in Christ—is to be seen. In the time between Christ’s ascension and His return, Christians in covenant with one another—loving and caring, encouraging and sharing, correcting and bearing over the years—present the clearest picture of God’s love that this world can see.

The Lord’s church, His bride, is comprised of not merely a list of individuals who are redeemed and being sanctified. Rather, in the society of the saints is something that seems more human than in the life outside of it. Furthermore, its radiance should shine out of our life together.

That was the plan from the beginning. From eternity past, God enjoyed full fellowship with Himself—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In the fullness of His love, He made this world, and then came Himself to redeem it. Those redeemed from the mass of this fallen world are ultimately to be with God forever.¹ In that great assembly, our union with Christ will know new depth, richness, and permanence. It will sparkle and shine, it will irradiate and warm, it will add passion and understanding that we can scarcely dream of now.

When speaking of leadership of the church—that is, the local church—is it any wonder, then, that *who should lead the church and how* is so critical? Phil Newton is the right man to write on this subject. He is a humble and joyful Christian who knows what it means to be united with Christ. More than that, he has decades of practice in leadership as a husband and father, and as a pastor of his own local church in Memphis. His understanding of God’s Word is even deeper than his voice—a considerable statement, if you’ve ever talked with Phil or heard him preach! He’s lived out the experience of leading a church as a single elder-pastor,

¹ See 1 Thessalonians 5 and 2 Thessalonians 2 for some early words of Paul on this great reality.

and leading it through the transition to elder plurality. I, too, am a pastor who has led a church and lived through such a transition. For that reason, I salute Phil and commend his work to you.

Perhaps you have questions about leadership. Perhaps you're a deacon and you're worried about the ideas your pastor has been sharing. Maybe you're a member of many years, and you wonder how you should think about your church's structure. Perhaps you're a pastor, and through study of Scripture, your own experience, or from watching other churches, you question the way your church is being led. You'll find help in this book, where biblical wisdom and pastoral warmth meet and give you the help you need. The answers and suggestions offered come with plenty of biblical and personal examples.

While many objections to having elders in a church can be imagined, this book addresses three superbly.

Is it Baptist? You might be thinking that this whole idea of having elders just "isn't Baptist!" When our church was considering the change, an older member said that very thing to me in front of a large Sunday school class.² If you share that concern, Phil's first chapter should be of interest to you. It looks at Baptists in history—in both England and America—and in particular at the question of having multiple elders in one local church. Phil cites primary sources to show that Baptists from their earliest times have acknowledged that pastors are elders (in that sense, Baptists have always had elders) and that Baptists have frequently preached, taught, and written in favor of having multiple elders in one local congregation. So, while it's true that other groups—Presbyterians, Dutch Reformed, Bible churches, Churches of Christ, and so on—have advocated having elders, Baptists too have so believed and taught. While it has certainly become a minority position among Baptists—and Phil even investigates this interesting fact—it has always been present, and today seems to be undergoing a renaissance. After reading this book, you'll see that having elders, indeed, "is Baptist."

Is it biblical? Others reading this book couldn't care less about whether eldership is Baptist. Perhaps you're in an Evangelical Free church, an independent church, or some other church, and you're in the process of reconsidering your structure. For you, the abiding concern is not one of denominational identity,

² I've written a short booklet that addresses this concern head on: Mark Dever, *By Whose Authority?* (Washington DC: 9Marks, 2005). For a short summary of the Bible's teaching on elders, see Mark Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, 3rd edition (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013). For a look at how elders work in conjunction with Baptist polity more broadly, see Mark Dever, *A Display of God's Glory* (Washington DC: 9Marks, 2001).

but of biblical faithfulness. That's really the concern of the best Baptists—and the best Presbyterians, Methodists, Congregationalists, Episcopalians, and Lutherans as well! Christians understand the Bible to be God's revelation of Himself and His will for us, and as such, the Bible is the touchstone for our faith and practice. The Bible is how we learn to approach God both individually and in our churches. The Bible tells us how to run our lives, and the Bible tells us how God's church is to be ordered. So if you're concerned if eldership is biblical, you'll find this book a great help.

Elders in the Life of the Church is full of careful, balanced, informed consideration of Scripture. Chapter 3 surveys the evidence in the New Testament, looking at the various titles that are used for church leaders and addressing the question of multiple elders in a single congregation. Chapter 5 considers the examples in the book of Acts. The whole of part 2 focuses on four central texts—Acts 20, the record of Paul's meeting with the Ephesian elders; 1 Timothy 3, Paul's list of qualifications for holding the office of elder; Hebrews 13, the words to the leaders of congregations; and 1 Peter 5, Peter's words about being an undershepherd of God's flock. In all three parts, Scripture is regularly both referred and deferred to. Phil not only knows the Bible but he intends to obey it. As a pastor himself, he has gone through the difficulties of leading a congregation to change. Why would he do that? He did it because of his belief in the sufficiency of Scripture, and his commitment to be ruled by it, both in how he approaches God and in how he leads his church to do the same. After reading this book, you'll come to agree with Phil, and you'll see that having elders is, in fact, biblical.

Is it best? Finally, your concern may be a more practical one. You may be concerned not so much about your denominational identity, or the deep debates on specific texts of the Bible. Perhaps you think that having a plurality of elders does seem the most biblical way to lead a church, but you wonder, *Is it really best?* Is it the best thing for your church at this time? How would you go about it? Perhaps your pastor is promoting the idea right now. Maybe he gave you this book to read. (Don't you love the way pastors give you books to read, like you don't have anything else to do?) Maybe you're part of a church leadership team studying together on this subject. Maybe you're a pastor who's convinced of having elders in your church, but have no idea of how you would actually do it. Take heart, my friends, you've found the right book!

I know of no other book that gives such particular and practical consideration for transitioning to plural elders. The whole of part 3, "From Theory to Practice," is a wonderfully practical guide for evaluating elders, presenting them, and begin-

ning to have them function in your church. By the wealth of information in these chapters, it's obvious that Phil has lived through the process, and he's willing to share his own experiences—good and bad—in order to help us have even better experiences in our churches. If you read this book, you'll see that having elders is, without doubt, the best way to lead your church.

One more word of testimony: I'm enthusiastic about this book because I'm excited about what having elders has meant to me as a senior pastor. Since 1994 I've had the privilege of serving Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington, DC. This church, founded in 1878, had grown large in the early part of the twentieth century, but declined in number during the last half of the century. In the early months and years of my stewardship of this very traditional (and senior) Baptist congregation, I openly taught on having elders—and I didn't mean just more staff members. I meant understanding that Christ gives His church teachers, some of whom may be financially supported by the church, others who are not. I was convinced that it was consistent with Baptist history, that it was biblical, and that it was simply best that we move to having a plurality of elders.

These elders, I taught, would help me guide the flock. I taught from 1 Timothy and Titus, from 1 Peter and from Acts 20, from Hebrews 13 and Ephesians 4. When I had opportunity, I instructed the congregation. I used John MacArthur's booklet on elders,³ circulating multiple copies of it in the congregation. We had the privilege of D. A. Carson coming to our church, and teaching on this very topic. I cited the example of other well-known Baptist pastors—from C. H. Spurgeon to John Piper—who had elders.

Finally, after two years of careful, committee-filled consideration, the congregation voted to adopt a new constitution with the plurality of elders. Only one member voted against it; at this writing six years later, he's still a happy member of the church in regular attendance. What has been the result? Six years of improved pastoral care, wisdom in decision-making, help in difficulties, and joy for me as I've seen mature, godly men give sacrificially of their time and lives to lead the congregation that God has given them. It's been a wonderful time.

As you read this book, I pray that God will make it useful to you, and that you will experience as did I the goodness and care of God through the order that He has established for His church. If God has deliberately instructed us, let us give ourselves to hear and heed His word on every point—even down to having elders recognized in the church.

³ John MacArthur, Jr., *Answering the Key Questions about Elders* (Panorama City, CA: Grace to You, 1984).

Authority is a good gift of God to us. In both exercising and submitting to authority, we come to know God better. And especially because this gift of authority is so little understood and so often misused in our churches, I pray that through this book God will help you and your church.

MARK DEVER
Capitol Hill Baptist Church
Washington, DC

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The first edition of this book, *Elders in Congregational Life*, came together through the support and help of numerous colleagues and friends: The members of South Woods Baptist Church in Memphis where I've served since 1987; my fellow elders—Jim Carnes, Tommy Campbell, and Tom Tollett; friends who loaned me a quiet place to write—Richard and Ginger Hamlet; friends that read the manuscript and offered invaluable suggestions to improve it—Suzanne Buchanan, Mark Dever, Ray Pritchard, Danny Akin, Tom Ascol, Matt McCullough, Randy McLendon, and Todd Wilson; and friends who gave me the opportunity to teach on elders—the late Stephen Olford and David Olford. My debt to all of these dear friends can never be repaid!

The present volume builds on the significant influence of those just noted with the addition of several more. Teaming with my long-time friend Matt Schmucker as he contributes insights from many years of experience as an elder, gives the book a new level of application *and* color! Thanks Matt! Jonathan Leeman and Bobby Jamieson of 9Marks have added editorial skills and ecclesiological insight to sharpen the book's usefulness. Thanks brothers!

In addition to the three elders serving with me when the original volume came to print, Dan Meadows and Chris Wilbanks have joined the fellowship of elders, who along with the others already mentioned add many layers to my understanding of the ministry of elders. One of my greatest joys in ministry is serving with these men who pray for me, encourage me, and spur me toward more love for Christ. They help to shoulder the load of shepherding the flock. I love you brothers dearly!

Over the past few years, the Lord has given our church a wonderful group of present and former pastoral interns. They've asked so many important questions that have woven their way into this book. Thanks Drew Harris, Rich Shadden, Mike Beaulieu, Chris Spano, Mike Collins, Steven Hockman, Matt Gentry, and

James Tarrance! Matt Sliger, formerly an intern and now one of our pastors, has helped me in countless ways, as has our administrative assistant, Debbie Jones. I love serving with all of you!

Several of my professors at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary have honed my understanding of the subject in this book, especially John Hammett, Andreas Köstenberger, Bruce Ashford, and Alvin Reid. I'm thankful for their investment in me. My PhD cohort members Cris Alley, Dale South, Josh Laxton, Louis Beckwith, and Jason Mitchell have joined together in many long hours of talks about ecclesiology, polity, and leadership—all sharpening my grasp of these important subjects. Thanks for being iron sharpening iron!

My family has been encouraging throughout the writing and editing process. My wife Karen is an incomparable helper and joy to me! She has listened to so much of my rambling about my research and writing, and has done so with patience and encouragement. Karen, you are my love! My children and their spouses have gladly listened to my chatting about this book and never acted exasperated! Thanks Kelly and Adam, Andrew and Jessica, John, Lizzy, and Stephen. And thanks to my mother, Jane Newton, who never tires of asking me about how the writing is coming along. I've also written this book so that my grandchildren's generation might have a stronger leadership foundation as they mature in their grasp of the gospel and Christ's church. Addie, Olivia, Spence, Clara, Stratton, Lyla (d. 2011), and Tripp remind me that the heritage that follows me needs good roots in biblical polity.

Thank you for taking the time to read and think on the subject of elder plurality and church polity. May the Lord give each of us more passion to follow His design for the church!

Phil A. Newton
November 28, 2012

In the fall of 1984 the Lord graciously intervened and rescued me from a sure damnation, breathing life into me through the new birth found only in Jesus Christ. His love is evidenced by his provision and is inextricably tied to one church and a few people without whom I would have lacked the knowledge and heart to write the words found in this book. My story is their story.

Capitol Hill Baptist Church has been my spiritual home since 1991. They welcomed a green, energetic young man (not an elder!) and patiently prodded and pulled me to new levels of dedication and love for Christ's church.

The elders of Capitol Hill Baptist Church have been a source of wisdom and encouragement since we first gathered in the winter of 1998/99. I have loved serving with you guys and apologize for all the times my confusion or stubbornness extended our already late meetings.

Jonathan Leeman who is, no doubt, editing even this paragraph, has been the best of friends and a constant reminder of godliness in word and conduct. Karen Race, Josh Coover, Kevin Hsu, Andrew Sherwood, Marcus Glover, Tim Gosselin, Katy Winsted, Bobby Jamieson, Justin Leighty, John Pastor, Paul Alexander, Paul Curtis, Scott Gurley, Susan Gwilliam, Brooke Santamaria, Zach Moore, Tosan Ogharaerumi, and Samuel Jindoyan have in one way or the other lent their hearts and minds to the cause of building healthy churches through 9Marks. Special thanks to Ryan Townsend, the new executive director of 9Marks, for supporting this project. I pray the Lord blesses all your plans.

Since 1994 Mark Dever has been my friend, pastor, next-door neighbor and fellow elder. Together we have buried dear friends, seen other friends walk away from the faith, labored to protect sheep under attack, seen many baptized and attended what seems like a thousand weddings. Mark has believed the best about me when the evidence was lacking, modeled generosity with his words and gifts, and by his example helped me to believe heaven and the One who sits enthroned will be worth the wait. By nature I'm a pessimist. By experience I've become a bit of an optimist largely because of my friendship with Mark.

I asked a fruitful, loyal, faithful, pretty blonde girl with a nickname of "Eli" to marry me in August of 1987 and she said, "Absolutely!" Her resolve, dedication and love have not wavered in 25 years of marriage, despite my wave-making. I'm not surprised to see those same qualities reproduced in my favorite people on the planet, my children: Chelsea, Jason, Lauren, Katie, and Joanna. I'd rather be with you all at our kitchen table than anywhere else in the world! If I'm qualified to write about being an elder, it is because the six of you have supported me in "managing my household" and filled our home with the aroma and love of Christ.

Matt Schmucker
September 19, 2012

INTRODUCTION

“**W**hy elders?” The question was posed to me as our congregation journeyed through the transition to elder leadership. Elders seemed odd to my denomination’s thinking at the time. A good look at Scripture, church history, and practical implications changed the way that we thought. But that was over 20 years ago.

Since first publishing *Elders in Congregational Life* (2005), the discussions on the subject have grown. Matt Schmucker and I have fielded countless phone calls, emails, and visits where new and seasoned pastors and church leaders quizzed us about introducing the subject of elders to their churches. Some asked for biblical reasons for changing their polity. Others asked how to reconcile their way of governing with church history. Most seemed concerned to know how a church functioned with a group of elders leading the congregation. How could they transition their churches to healthy elder plurality? Could they do it without splitting their churches? How would they recognize the men qualified to serve as elders? Many still ask the same questions. That’s why we wrote this book.

But before we get into the nuts and bolts of elder plurality, let me tell you a little about my own story of transitioning to elder leadership.

Three primary elements moved me into the direction of a plurality of elders: Scripture, Baptist history, and practical issues of church life. While delivering sermons that dealt with biblical texts teaching elder plurality, I experienced numerous uncomfortable moments—uncomfortable because I softened or ignored the teaching due to my own pastoral context. References to elders abound throughout the New Testament, so it is impossible to not encounter these texts while preaching consecutively through books of the Bible. I adopted the superficial explanation that equated the early church elders with today’s pastoral staffs. This satisfied my audience but it was clear to me that I imposed a modern perspective on the ancient text. Before continuing to offer this explanation to my congregation, I had to

be sure that this common interpretation was true to the biblical text. If, through studying the Scripture myself, I was not convinced that this interpretation was biblical, how could I convince my congregation? The more I studied the biblical texts, the less support I found for simply equating elders with the modern church staff. Biblical integrity called for a change in the way that I addressed these texts.

History played a vital role in affecting my thought as well. When I was a teenager, I discovered that my home church recognized elders in its early history. The first few pastors were identified as Elder Gibson, Elder Hudson, and Elder Jennings. Why were they called *elder* in the nineteenth century if, indeed, they were pastors? The answer to that question came many years later when a friend sent me a copy of W. B. Johnson's address, "The Rulers of a Church of Christ" from his *The Gospel Developed through the Government and Order of the Churches of Jesus Christ* (1846). Johnson, the first president of the Southern Baptist Convention, clearly set forth the biblical and practical necessity for a plurality of elders in Baptist life. Johnson's notoriety as a leader among early Southern Baptists made his address no small historical marker for elders in congregational life. If the congregational life of some, or perhaps even many, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Baptists included the practice of elder leadership, then why did Baptists in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries transition to a leadership structure of a single pastor, staff, and deacons?

Lastly, practical concerns gave much reason for questioning the common authority structure in Baptist churches. I had experienced my share of church conflicts, disheartening business meetings, poorly qualified deacons, and power struggles in congregational life. I witnessed firsthand the discontinuity between pastor and deacons that affected the unity and viability of a church. Was this just the way things had to be if you were a Baptist? Many thought so. Yet how would I answer the Lord of the church if I acquiesced to conflict and confusion in church leadership?

Knowing my accountability to the Lord for the way that I led the church I served, I also knew that I had to take a higher road—even if the price were also high. Is there a better way—a more biblical way—to conduct church life? That's the question that I faced in the late 1980s, and one that many are currently facing. The necessity for change must not be ignored, but the methodology need not cause knee-jerk reactions that upset the equilibrium of congregations. Church leaders and congregations must labor, however, to discover God's revealed will in the Scriptures and, then, faithfully obey it.

Elders in the Life of the Church takes a look at elder plurality from the same three angles: historically, biblically, and practically. While Matt and I have written out of our experiences as Baptists transitioning to elders, both of us have talked with plenty of non-Baptists about the same need for establishing healthy church polity.

While most of our examples come out of our Baptist backgrounds, we believe that churches from other traditions will find the historical, biblical, and practical recommendations to be equally useful in aiming toward a healthy church polity.

The historical section, part 1, is the briefest of the three but particularly helps those from Baptist backgrounds—my own denominational heritage—to see how Baptist churches with plural elder leadership are not really so odd after all. The biggest question that I’ve received regarding the history of elders in Baptist life focuses on what happened to shift Baptist thinking away from elder plurality. Why did Baptists commonly practice elder plurality in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and well into the nineteenth centuries, but moved away from it—at least in the United States—in the 20th century? I think the historical section will help to answer that important question—and others—and demonstrate that elders fit quite well with being Baptist.

Part 2 turns to Scripture. I take a look at four key biblical texts, working through them expositively to show the biblical teaching on elder leadership. These same texts made me squirm early in ministry because I feared that the churches that I served had no intention of embracing them, yet I had the responsibility to expound upon them. If it’s not biblical then we certainly do not need to go through the potential trouble to transition to elder polity! But if it is biblical, then we are compelled to reconsider the way that we govern and lead our churches in light of God’s Word. This reconsideration ultimately leads to change.

Part 3 takes us from the theoretical to the practical: How do we move from the biblical text to actual practice of plural elder leadership? How does this reshape the way that we conduct church life? Here’s where I caution church leaders to move slowly, deliberately, and gently. No leader should read a book on elder plurality and suddenly announce the change to his congregation! That could be disastrous! Yet he should begin the careful process of teaching, training, and directing his congregation toward a healthier way of church leadership. The questions that I’ve received from pastors, leaders, and seminary students over the years weave their way into the chapters in this section—at least my attempt to answer them. I’ve tried to consider many of the pitfalls and objections along the way to transitioning the church’s polity. I encourage you to read these chapters carefully before launching into massive change in your church.

Church leadership remains important regardless of the size or location of the church. That’s why I added chapter 21, “Leadership Development in Hard Places: Missionaries, New Churches, and Elders.” My discussions with mission leaders and nationals led to some serious reflection on how to establish elder leadership when the missionary has only a brief chance to do it, especially where persecution

seems the norm. For those engaged in cross-cultural work, you may find this chapter particularly helpful. It may also help congregations involved in mission work to be more sensitive to the challenges that our missionaries face.

The best change to this book came with the addition of Matt Schmucker's candid chapters! Matt has been a friend since the mid-'90s when we met at a conference. We've talked a lot of family, sports, gospel, church polity, and life since that time. We've prayed together and shed tears together. I love his forthrightness and passion for Christ's church! You will find plenty of examples of this in his chapters. His narrative of the Capitol Hill Baptist Church's restoration to vibrant health will give you hope and encouragement, as well as insight into your own setting.

We both pray that this book will serve Christ's church and the faithful leaders who seek to shepherd the flock purchased by His blood (Acts 20:28).

ABBREVIATIONS

- ANF Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds. *Ante-Nicene Fathers*. Repr. 1885. 10 vols. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004.
- BDAG Frederick W. Danker. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. 3rd ed. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000.
- CrChr Philip Schaff, ed. David S. Schaff, rev. ed. *The Creeds of Christendom with a History and Critical Notes*. 3 vols. 6th ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1993.
- EMQ *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*
- ESV *English Standard Version*
- LKGNT Fritz Rienecker. *A Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament*. Cleon L. Rogers Jr., ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1980.
- NAC *New American Commentary*. Nashville, TN: B&H.
- NASB *New American Standard Bible*
- NICNT *New International Commentary on the New Testament*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.
- NIGTC *New International Greek Testament Commentary*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.
- NTC *New Testament Commentary*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker.
- TDNT Geherd Kittel, ed. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. Trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley. 10 vols. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964.
- WBC *Word Biblical Commentary*. Waco, TX: Word. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson.

PART ONE

WHY ELDERS?

CHAPTER ONE

WHY *BAPTIST ELDERS* IS NOT AN OXYMORON

Old photos of old men raised questions in my young mind. They were the portraits of the pastors who had served my home church during the nineteenth century, and they piqued my teenage curiosity whenever I walked by them in the hallway. Each one had the caption “Elder” under the man’s name.

I knew that Presbyterian and Church of Christ congregations had an office called “elders,” but I had never heard of an elder in a Baptist church.

Yet the pictures were not lying. My church, the First Baptist Church of Russellville, Alabama, had once recognized elders. The church had been founded by congregations from neighboring towns in 1867 “with Elders R. J. Jennings and Mike Finney constituting the presbytery.”¹

My church was not unique. In previous centuries, Baptist churches often referred to their pastors as elders. Not only that, they often possessed a plurality of elders, including men who were not paid by the church. Some even called these non-ordained elders “ruling elders.”² For instance, J. H. Grimes, writing around the turn of the twentieth century, frequently refers to pastors as *elders*. He identifies Elder John Bond in Statesville as “only a licensed minister at this time, but

1 Boyce Broadus, *Baptists of Russellville, Alabama, 1867–1967* (Birmingham, AL.: Banner Press, 1967), 3. Miss Broadus was the granddaughter of noted Southern Baptist theologian John Broadus.

2 Gregory A. Wills, *Democratic Religion: Freedom, Authority, and Church Discipline in the Baptist South, 1785–1900* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 51, 155 n. 4. Wills derives this conclusion from several eighteenth- and nineteenth-century historical records of Baptists in Georgia.

was regularly ordained by Union Church AD 1820, by a presbytery consisting of Elders Joshua Lester and David Gordon.”³ Bond subsequently served as a pastor, but he was called “elder” before entering the pastorate. Within Tennessee Baptist churches, Grimes identified the men involved in pastoral leadership who did not draw a salary as “lay elders.”⁴

ELDER PLURALITY AMONG AMERICAN BAPTISTS

Many Baptist churches in America were led by a plurality of elders, both paid and unpaid.

For instance, David Tinsley, a prominent Baptist serving in Georgia in the late eighteenth century alongside Jesse Mercer’s father,⁵ Silas Mercer, was ordained four times: first to the office of deacon, then to the office of ruling elder, then to the office of gospel preacher, and finally to the office of evangelist.⁶ As an unpaid non-staff elder, he was part of the plural eldership in his church. His service with the noted leader Silas Mercer demonstrates the prominence given to plural eldership among Baptists.⁷

Ample evidence for plural elder leadership can be found in the minutes of the leading association of Baptists in the colonial period, the Philadelphia Baptist Association. In 1738, for instance, the association considered whether if a ruling elder who had already been set apart by the laying on of hands “should afterward be called by the church, by reason of his gifts, to the word and doctrine [i.e., as pastor], must be again ordained by imposition of hands.” The answer was simple: “Resolved in the affirmative.”⁸ Indeed, it appears to have been the norm in the Philadelphia Association to distinguish between ruling elders and those who regularly ministered the word.⁹ Plurality was their practice.

3 J. H. Grimes, *History of Middle Tennessee Baptists* (Nashville: Baptist and Reflector, 1902), 158.

4 Ibid. Admittedly, the terms *ruling elders* and *lay elders* are not New Testament titles. The distinction in these titles resembles, however, some of the common titles used in modern churches, e.g., *senior pastor*, *associate pastor*, *pastor of education*, and *executive pastor*. All are considered to be serving in pastoral roles but not all have the same function within the local church setting. The adjective qualifies the role just as it has done with the *ruling elder* and *lay elder* titles. I’m indebted to Dr. Daniel Akin for raising questions about this important historical distinction (personal correspondence, July 24, 2003).

5 Jesse Mercer, also a prominent Baptist minister, was the founder of Mercer University.

6 David Benedict, *General History of the Baptist Denomination in America and Other Parts of the World* (Boston: Manning and Loring, 1813), 176.

7 Wills, *Democratic Religion*, 31, identifies Silas Mercer in Georgia and Isaac Backus of Massachusetts as “Revolutionary War-era leaders” among Baptists. So Tinsley’s service in plural eldership took place within a prominent church.

8 A. D. Gillette, ed., *Minutes of the Philadelphia Baptist Association 1707–1807: Being the First One Hundred Years of Its Existence* (1851; repr.; Springfield, MO: Particular Baptist Press, 2002), 39.

9 Ibid., 102.

So, too, in Kentucky's Elkhorn Baptist Association. In the minutes from the 1790 meeting, Cooper's Run Church asked, "Whether the office of elder, distinct from that of minister, is a gospel institution or not?" The Association responded, "It is the opinion of the Association it is a gospel institution." These eighteenth-century Baptists recognized non-staff elders as part of the elder plurality in their local churches.¹⁰

The Charleston Association also recognized that ministers are called "elders" and suggested that churches were led by "presbyteries" which contained a plurality of "ministers" or "elders."¹¹

In short, the practice was not universal, but many Baptist churches of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries practiced plural leadership. Baptist historian Greg Wills observes, "These elders assisted the pastor as necessary in preaching and administering baptism and the Lord's Supper. They were leaders of the congregation by their wisdom, piety, knowledge, and experience. Such churches recognized the gifts and calling of all elders among them."¹² For a while, many Baptists distinguished between "ruling elders" and "teaching elders." Ruling elders focused on the administrative and governing issues of church life, while the teaching elders exercised pastoral responsibilities, including administering the ordinances. By 1820 the title of "ruling elder" had faded, and some contended that the pastor and deacons constituted the eldership. Not all agreed, including the first president of the Southern Baptist Convention, W. B. Johnson, who "taught that Christ strictly required each church to have plural eldership."¹³

AMERICAN BAPTIST DECLINE IN ELDER PLURALITY

It is often asked why Baptists gave up the practice of elder plurality. The late theologian Stanley Grenz identifies Isaac Backus (1724–1806) as one major reason for the decline. Backus, one of the most significant Baptist leaders in the eighteenth century, is best known in our day for his politically oriented work, even meeting with members of the Continental Congress. Yet Backus also widely promoted evangelism and church planting through extended evangelistic preaching

10 Basil Manly Jr., "History of the Elkhorn Association," accessed February 9, 2011; <http://baptist-history.page.com/elkhorn.assoc.his1.manly.htm>1.

11 In "A Summary of Church Discipline," in Mark Dever, ed, *Polity*, 120, and plural reference to ministers on 125.

12 Greg Wills, "The Church: Baptists and Their Churches in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries," in *Polity: Biblical Arguments on How to Conduct Church Life*, ed. Mark Dever (Washington, DC: Center for Church Reform, 2001), 33–35.

13 *Ibid.*, 34. Wills summarizes Johnson's view.

tours and assisting with establishing new churches. As a prolific writer and gifted orator, he influenced his generation and beyond. He grew up as a Congregationalist and pastored a New Light church in Titicut, Massachusetts starting in 1748, before adopting Baptist views in 1756. He then served as pastor of the First Baptist Church of Middleborough, Massachusetts for fifty-two years until his death.

Backus' family suffered at the hands of the religious hierarchy in the colonies, so he rightly reacted against any kind of religious tyranny or hierarchical heavy-handedness. He deplored any polity that depreciated the common individual in the church. Many Baptist churches practiced elder plurality at that time, probably due to the influence of the Philadelphia Association. But Backus' emphasis on individualism, coupled with his hyper-congregationalism, led to a denigration of elder plurality in churches under his influence. Grenz explains, "Backus favored a very 'weak' clergy, with the real power lying in the church members themselves."¹⁴ Consequently, Backus limited the churches that he helped start to only one elder.¹⁵

Baptist minister John Leland (1754–1841) then picked up Backus' mantle on both religious liberty and polity through his own writing and oratory. Both men had been shaped by the developing colonial culture's emphasis on the individual and had relegated the church to a secondary position relative to the individual.¹⁶ As one historian notes, Backus called for an "unmitigated congregational polity" that best suited individualism, while Leland "equated congregationalism, polity, and Christianity," probably leaning more on Thomas Jefferson than Scripture to solidify his views.¹⁷ Both Baptist leaders feared any ecclesiastical structure that might remove power from the congregation. This led them to denigrate the idea of plural elder leadership, even if those elders led under the congregation's final authority (as with churches in the Philadelphia Baptist Association).

The emphasis on individualism and the decline of elder plurality continued into the mid-nineteenth century with the prolific writing of Francis Wayland. Wayland, along with Edward Hiscox and John Newton Brown, shaped what would be regarded as Baptist orthodoxy for generations.¹⁸ Wayland treated different church polities as historical accidents. He did not believe the New Testament presented

14 Stanley Grenz, *Isaac Backus—Puritan and Baptist: His Place in History, His Thought, and Their Implications for Modern Baptist Theology* (NABPR Dissertation Series, 4; Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1983), 278–279.

15 *Ibid.*, 279.

16 Edwin S. Gaustad, "The Backus-Leland Tradition," in *Baptist Concepts of the Church: A Survey of the Historical and Theological Issues Which Have Produced Changes in Church Order*, Winthrop S. Hudson, ed. (Chicago: Judson Press, 1959), 106.

17 *Ibid.*, 122–123.

18 Norman H. Maring, "The Individualism of Francis Wayland," in *Baptist Concepts*, Hudson, 135.

a normative organizational structure, so he argued that decisions on church government could vary from church to church, each adopting what it deemed most helpful. Although favoring congregational polity, he carried no torch for it. He instead emphasized individual liberty. This continued emphasis on individualism chipped away at both the corporate nature of the local church and the leadership structure of elder plurality.¹⁹

In the same era, the emergence of Landmarkism catered to the same growing individualism. Its emphasis on a strict democracy in churches further eroded the leadership pattern established in the New Testament.²⁰ So the Landmarkist J. M. Pendleton, in his 1893 *Baptist Church Manual*, argued that “pastors and deacons are the only permanent Scriptural church officers.”²¹

Despite this diversity, modern Baptists seeking to embrace plural eldership have a viable heritage as a foundation.²² This heritage radiates clearly through some of the polity documents of earlier Baptists. Two final examples: First, Benjamin Griffith, in “A Short Treatise Concerning a True and Orderly Gospel Church” (1743), clearly taught elder plurality, pointing to ruling elders as those gifted “to assist the pastor or teacher in the government of the church.”²³ He further explained, “The works of teaching and ruling belong both to the pastor; but in case he be unable; or the work of ruling too great for him, God hath provided such for his assistance, and they are called ruling elders.”²⁴ Griffith saw the elders coming alongside the pastor who labored at the ministry of the Word, strengthening his hands for the demands of Christian ministry. They were to be helpful “in easing the pastor or teacher, and keeping up the honor of the ministry.”²⁵

In 1798, the Philadelphia Baptist Association charged Samuel Jones (1735–1814), the influential pastor and scholar in the middle colonies, to revise the disciplines of the Philadelphia Confession of Faith. He did this later in 1805. In his work, Jones admitted that much disputation took place among Baptists on

19 Ibid., 152–158, 165–166.

20 See Robert G. Torbet, “Landmarkism,” in *Baptist Concepts*, Hudson, 170–195 for a helpful survey of early Landmarkism influence.

21 J. M. Pendleton, *Baptist Church Manual* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1966), 24, 32.

22 I’m indebted to Shawn Wright, at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, for research and comments that helped to clarify this point (personal correspondence, January 24, 2003).

23 Benjamin Griffith, “A Short Treatise Concerning a True and Orderly Gospel Church” (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Baptist Association, 1743), in Mark Dever, ed., *Polity: Biblical Arguments on How to Conduct Church Life* (Washington, DC: Center for Church Reform, 2001), 98.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.

the legitimacy of “ruling elders.” He thought it best that local churches decide for themselves whether to include this particular office in their respective congregations, so he offered arguments in favor of and against the practice. Positively, he asserted that the ruling elder might help “ease the minister of part of his burden,” as also deacons do. He said it might deflect “some hard thoughts and ill-will” among members of the congregation that can arise in leadership decisions. He further explained that not all ministers have gifts for leading the business of the congregation, and that others might better handle those responsibilities. Therefore, the congregation needs to allot such men the authority to serve in such capacities.²⁶ Although I prefer not to make the distinction of “ruling elder,” as is common in Presbyterian circles, Jones’ argument surely indicates that early Baptists recognized elder plurality as a necessary part of the church’s polity.

ENGLISH BAPTISTS

The practice of including elders in Baptist life did not begin in America. Plural eldership was common in England during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Pointing to several examples of lay elders in Baptist churches,²⁷ historian A. C. Underwood notes that early Baptists not only recognized elder plurality, but also distinguished the functions of elders within local churches. He mentions the seventeenth-century Broadmead Church in Bristol, which had a pastor, ruling elders, deacons, and deaconesses.²⁸

Yet Baptist elders differed from Presbyterian elders. The former “recoiled at the prospect” of the elders in one church functioning as elders in another. Hence, they never would have considered the idea of a synod or presbytery outside of the local church. Authority belonged in the local church. The only exception appears to have occurred when the elders of one church would, for necessity’s sake, help to ordain officers or administer the ordinances in another church. In such cases, the elders functioned as ministers of the gospel, but without pastoral authority in the other church.²⁹

26 Samuel Jones, “A Treatise of Church Discipline and a Directory (1798),” in Dever, *Polity*, 145–146.

27 My use of *lay elders* by way of explaining the historical practice of plural eldership is not an endorsement of the term for modern usage. A better distinction might be *non-staff elders* serving with the elders that constitute the church staff. This assumes that, unlike staff elders, the non-staff elders receive no compensation from the church for their service.

28 A. C. Underwood, *A History of the English Baptists* (London: Carey Kingsgate Press, 1947), 130–31.

29 In James M. Renihan, “The Practical Ecclesiology of the English Particular Baptists, 1675–

Most of the English Baptists of this era, unlike Presbyterians, rejected the idea of “ruling elders” as a distinct from “teaching elders.” The Devonshire Square Church in London, where William Kiffin pastored, recognized “a parity within the eldership”; each elder shared responsibility and authority within the church. Likewise at a church in Kensworth, Bedfordshire in 1688, “three men were chosen jointly and equally to officiate [*sic*] . . . in breaking bread, and other administration of ordinances, and the church did at the same time agree to provide and maintain [*sic*] all at there [*sic*] one charge.”³⁰ The renowned Benjamin Keach also rejected the idea of ruling elders as a distinct position, but allowed that the church might “choose some able and discreet Brethren to be *Helps in Government*,” presumably either as a separate alliance or more likely as members of plural eldership.³¹ However, a few Baptist churches did make a distinction between teaching and ruling elders. In such cases, “The pastor was the chiefe [*sic*] of ye Elders of ye Church,” while the ruling elders shared oversight with him.³²

Certainly not all of the English Baptist churches of this era followed elder plurality but “the majority of the Particular Baptists were committed to a plurality and parity of elders in their churches,” believing that a plurality of elders were “necessary for a completed church.”³³

Elders were never to lord their position over their churches. They were “stewards responsible to their Master, and servants to their people.” Their duties, according to Nehemiah Coxe in a 1681 ordination sermon, were “prayer (leading worship), preaching and the exercise of discipline; and the private duties as visiting the flock, encouraging, exhorting and rebuking them.”³⁴ Hanserd Knollys, another remarkable leader among seventeenth-century English Baptists, described the duties of plural eldership:

The Office of a *Pastor, Bishop, and Presbyter, or Elder* in the Church of God, is to take the Charge, Oversight, and Care of those Souls which the Lord Jesus Christ hath committed to them, to feed the Flock of God; to watch for their Souls, to Rule, Guide and Govern them . . . according to the laws, Constitutions and ordinances of the Gospel.³⁵

1705: *The Doctrine of the Church in the Second London Baptist Confession as Implemented in the Subscribing Churches*” (Ph.D. diss., Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 1997), 196.

30 Ibid., 201.

31 Benjamin Keach, *The Glory of a True Church and Its Discipline Display'd* (London: n.p., 1697), 15–16 (emphasis Keach), quoted in Renihan, “Practical Ecclesiology,” 202.

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid., 205.

34 Ibid., 210, summarizing Coxe’s comments.

35 Ibid., 210; quoting Hanserd Knollys, *The Word That Now Is* (London: Tho. Snowden, 1681), 52.

BAPTIST CONFESSIONS

Confessional documents and statements on church polity among early Baptists in England and the United States substantiate the practice of plural eldership. The London Confession of 1644 affirmed,

That being thus joyned [*sic*], every Church has power given them from Christ for their better well-being, to choose to themselves meet persons into the office of Pastors, Teachers, Elders, Deacons, being qualified according to the Word, as those which Christ has appointed in his Testament, for the feeding, governing, serving, and building up of his Church, and that none other have power to impose them, either these or any other.³⁶

Similar to the London Confession of Baptists, the 1658 Savoy Declaration—the Congregationalist confession that contained much of the substance of later Baptist confessions—identified “Pastors, Teachers, Elders, and Deacons” as “the officers appointed by Christ to be chosen and set apart by the church.”³⁷

The Baptist Confession of 1688 (the Philadelphia Confession) followed the language of the Savoy Declaration with a change only in the offices identified as “bishops or elders and deacons.”³⁸

The New Hampshire Confession of 1833—the foundational document for the Southern Baptist Convention’s 1925 *Baptist Faith and Message*—identifies the local church’s only scriptural officers as “Bishops, or Pastors, and Deacons, whose qualifications, claims, and duties are defined in the epistles to Timothy and Titus.”³⁹

The Abstract of Principles (1858)—the confession still used at the Southern and Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminaries—stated, “The regular officers of a Church are Bishops or Elders, and Deacons.”

Although the 1925 *Baptist Faith and Message* of Southern Baptists identifies the office of elders, both the 1963 and 2000 *Baptist Faith and Message* revisions eliminate the titles *bishop* and *elder*: “its Scriptural officers are pastors and deacons.” The change demonstrates how plural eldership fell out of use in Baptist practice.⁴⁰

36 John Piper, “Biblical Eldership: Shepherd the Flock of God Among You”, app.1; accessed March 29, 2003; www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/seminars/biblical-eldership-part-1a. See also John Piper, *Biblical Eldership* (Minneapolis: Desiring God Ministries, 1999).

37 *CrChr*, 3:725.

38 *Ibid.*, 3:739.

39 *Ibid.*, 3:747.

40 Paul Burleson in a sermon, “An Historical Study of Baptist Elders—1 Peter 5:1–4,” at Trinity

Admittedly, these confessional statements are somewhat vague, making room for both those who affirm elder plurality and those who object to it. Not all of the English and colonial Baptist churches practiced plural eldership. By some accounts, only a minority did so. Yet the presence of plural eldership among notable leaders and in strong churches contradicts the notion that eldership is an anomaly among Baptists.

W. B. JOHNSON AND SOUTHERN BAPTISTS

As a founder of the Southern Baptist Convention and its first denominational president, W. B. Johnson left a legacy of biblical fidelity and passion for the gospel. His work on church polity, “The Gospel Developed through the Government and Order of the Churches of Jesus Christ” (1846), remains a generally trustworthy guide for encouraging Baptist churches to be faithful to the Word of God. After outlining the biblical evidence of plural eldership in the first century churches, Johnson explained that each elder (or “bishop” or “overseer,” as he called them) brought “a particular talent” to the needs of the church. He added, “The importance and necessity of a bishopric for each church, embodying gifts for various services, is thus most obvious for the accomplishment of one of the great ends for which Christ came into the world, and for which, when he ascended up on high, he received gifts for men” (see Eph. 4:7–16).⁴¹ In a plurality, each elder brings a different set of gifts and abilities so that the whole body profits from their shared ministry. Johnson states, “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.”⁴² In reviewing the scriptural teaching on elders, Johnson explains, “These rulers were all equal in rank and authority, no one having a preeminence over the rest. This satisfactorily appears from the fact, that the

Baptist Church in Norman, Oklahoma; accessed November 21, 2002; <http://www.hhbc.com/webpages/baptist1.htm>, offers three reasons for the decline of elders in Baptist life in the late 1800s to 1900s. First, in the expansion of Baptist churches into the west, the single pastor/church planter often served as a circuit-riding minister, handling the bulk of church duties with plural eldership fading in the process. Presumably, qualified male leadership was scarce in the early days. Second, the rise of Landmarkism, with its emphasis on “democratic rule with no elder rule” had profound influence on Southern Baptist life and practice. Third, “the rise of the Campbelites” [sic]—now called the Church of Christ, who “used the word elder exclusively”—caused Baptists to react and reject the name *elder*, using only the word *pastor* for those involved in church ministry and leadership.

41 W. B. Johnson, “The Gospel Developed through the Government and Order of the Churches of Jesus Christ” (Richmond: H. K. Ellyson, 1846); in Dever, *Polity*, 193.

42 Ibid., 192–193.

same qualifications were required in all, so that though some labored in word and doctrine, and others did not, the distinction between them was not in rank, but in the character of their service.”⁴³ He identified equality among elders regardless of their particular function or role in the church.

Johnson was also realistic. While acknowledging that the Scriptures require elder plurality, he noted that some churches might not be able to establish a plurality immediately: “In a church where more than one [elder] cannot be obtained, that one may be appointed upon the principle, that as soon as another can be procured there shall be a plurality.”⁴⁴ Further, Johnson distinguished between elders and deacons. The elders’ office is spiritual, while the deacons’ is temporal. “Whatever of temporal care the interests of the church require, *that* care falls upon the *deacons*, as the *servants* of the church.”⁴⁵ Of course, deacons function in plurality as well.

Did all Baptist churches of the past have a plurality of elders? Obviously not. But many believed it was the New Testament model. Pastor John Piper, after surveying historical Baptist confessions, drew the same conclusion: “The least we can say from this historical survey of Baptist Confessions is that *it is false to say that the eldership is unbaptistic*. On the contrary, the eldership is more baptistic than its absence, and its disappearance is a modern phenomenon that parallels other developments in doctrine that make its disappearance questionable at best.”⁴⁶

RECENT DEMISE IN ELDER PLURALITY

The past two hundred years have witnessed the demise in elder plurality among Baptists. Pastors have begun to resemble CEOs rather than humble New Testament shepherds. Their staffs are hired for their business skills. And their churches are run like big businesses, requiring the corporate structures of a successful company.

A candid look at polity in churches at large today raises questions regarding our diligence to conform to Scripture. Specifically, how well are Christians in the West doing in being different than the world around them? Are we acting as salt and light in our communities? Are our “family values” appreciably different from our neighbors? Connected to these questions regarding the holiness of the church are the polity questions: Are our congregations nurtured and disciplined like their New Testament counterparts? Are our membership rolls inflated, and

⁴³ Ibid., 191.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 194.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 196–197.

⁴⁶ Piper, “Biblical Eldership,” app.1.

could this be contributing to our worldliness? Are pastors and staff members held accountable to anyone besides themselves? Might the alarming rate of immoral behavior among ministers be connected to the disconnect between church staff and a plurality of godly elders, both lay and staff? To put it plainly, I believe recent experience teaches what Scripture at least implies—that the holiness of a church is tied to its polity, just as faith is tied to order.

Our Baptist forebears sought to anchor their church structures and practices in the teaching of Holy Scripture. These stalwarts did not conform their churches to the popular designs of the day, but applied the truths of Scripture to forge a path for their heirs. In the end, whether or not Baptists historically practiced plural eldership is secondary. The primary focus for church leaders today must be to understand what God's Word teaches, and then to order their churches accordingly. History merely serves to affirm the veracity of Scripture.

REFLECTIONS

- What part does history play in one's understanding of modern church life?
- Did all of the early Baptist churches practice elder plurality?
- What were the positions of Benjamin Griffith, Samuel Jones, and W. B. Johnson's on plural eldership?
- What influence did Isaac Backus, John Leland, and Francis Wayland have on Baptist church polity?
- Why was there a movement away from elder plurality among nineteenth- and twentieth-century Baptists?