

Elder Rule and Southern Baptist Church Polity

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After years of neglect, church polity has become, once again, the topic of discussion in recent days and in many circles of concern. Preachers and other church leaders are discussing this important subject as they review the polity-related issues of the day. This is occurring in numerous churches and in the seminary setting as ministers, church leaders, students and professors are searching for answers to the leadership questions involving Baptist church polity. John L. Dagg, the noted Baptist theologian of another day, considered church polity an issue worth exploring. Noting that church order is not as important as winning people to Christ, he nevertheless stated that Christ gave commands on the subject in the Scriptures; therefore, one has no other recourse than to explore the issue of government in the local church.¹

The revival of interest in Baptist church polity has been fueled by the concern of many in conforming, and/or returning, to a more biblical form of church governance. The problem that occurs within the framework of all this discussion is the discovery of the proper form of church governance. More than a few leaders are questioning whether Southern Baptists have been practicing the right method of church governance (pastor, deacons, and congregational authority)

¹Mark Dever, ed., *Polity: Biblical Arguments on How to Conduct Church Life* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Church Reform, 2001), v.

since their beginning in 1845. A major concern surfaces when the discussion centers around the topics of elders, elder rule, and the congregational form of church government.

Since the early 1970s and 1980s, books have been published on elder leadership, most of which have been written by leaders outside the Southern Baptist tradition.² In the 1990s a plethora of elder leadership material from other faith groups have continued to lead some Southern Baptists to begin reexamining their ideas of church polity.³ In 2001, Mark Dever edited a book on polity in which he presented a collection of 10 historic, out of print, Baptist documents addressing church leadership and the elder issue.⁴ In 2002 a dissertation was written which addressed elders and Southern Baptist churches because of a concern for the direction in which some Southern Baptist leaders are taking their churches in reforming their style of doing church.⁵ In 2003 Gerald Cowen wrote a book entitled: *Who Rules the Church?* in which he sought to examine congregational leadership and church government. His book also addressed the matter of elder leadership in a Southern Baptist context.⁶ Even among independent Baptist leaders, there

²Robert Saucy, *The Church in God's Program* (Chicago: Moody, 1972); Gene A. Getz, *Sharpening the Focus of the Church* (Chicago: Moody Bible Institute, 1975; reprint, Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1984), and John MacArthur, *Answering the Key Questions About Elders* (Panorama City, CA: Grace to You, 1984).

³John MacArthur, *The Master's Plan for the Church* (Chicago: Moody, 1991); Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership: An Urgent Call to Restore Biblical Church Leadership*, revised & expanded, (Littleton, Colo.: Lewis & Roth, 1995); Lynne and Bill Hybels, *Rediscovering Church: The Story and Vision of Willow Creek Community Church*, Willow Creek Resources Series (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995); Gene A. Getz, *Elders and Leaders: God's Plan for Leading the Church* (Chicago: Moody, 2003).

⁴Dever, *Polity*.

⁵Robert A. Wring, "An Examination of the Practice of Elder Rule in Selected Southern Baptist Churches in the Light of New Testament Teaching" (Ph.D. diss., Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary, 2002).

⁶Gerald P. Cowen, *Who Rules the Church?: Examining Congregational Leadership and Church Government* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2003).

is published material that deals with the elder issue as it relates to leadership concerns within the context of the local church.⁷

In order for Southern Baptists to understand adequately what the elder issue is all about as it relates to church polity, one must approach the subject by addressing several questions: 1) What does the New Testament say about elders and congregationalism? 2) What is the testimony of Baptist history in general, and Southern Baptist history in particular? 3) What are the reasons for and against practicing elder rule in a Southern Baptist church? 4) What are some influences encouraging a movement toward the practice of elder leadership in the church governance style of a Southern Baptist church? 5) Does it really matter what kind of church polity Southern Baptists practice?

What Does the New Testament Say About Elders and Congregational Church Government?

Beginning in Acts 11:30 Christian elders are mentioned in the New Testament with no explanation. It is within the framework of the New Testament whereby we discover who elders are, what their job description is, and what their biblical qualifications are. The elders in the first century New Testament church were different from the Old Testament elders, as well as differing from those of the synagogue which was not of divine origin. The early Christians chose the title of elder for their ministers because they were familiar with the term from its use in the Greek Scripture. Also, in the early stages of the church's existence, authority resided in the hands of the older and more senior members of the church.⁸ Beyond this, there is little resemblance between Jewish elders and those found in the early Christian churches.

⁷See Robert J. Sargent, *Elder Rule In A Baptist Church?* (n.p., 2004) and David Cloud, *The New Testament Church*, Way of Life Literature Advanced Bible Studies Series (Port Huron, MI: Way of Life Literature, 2002).

⁸A. E. Harvey, "Elders," *Journal of Theological Studies* 25, New Studies, no. 2 (October 1974): 328.

There are three Greek words, however, that are used interchangeably in several New Testament passages that expresses the idea of elder leadership which was practiced in the early stages of church development. These are: πρεσβύτερος, ἐπίσκοπος, and ποιμήν. The English equivalent is elder, bishop, and pastor. Also, there is biblical evidence for practicing a congregational style of church governance in the local church, rather than one of elder rule such as practiced by the Presbyterian church.

The congregational model was widely practiced in the first century New Testament church, apparently by theological design.⁹ This was the only form of government practiced among primitive Christians until the second century when changes began to be made in church polity.¹⁰ The elder and deacons could make their voice heard in any matter pertaining to the church's welfare, but they did not have exclusive governmental prerogative. Under Christ, the whole congregation was the final court of appeal.

In the Book of Acts, many important decisions were made by individual congregations. It was the entire church that chose the first deacons in Acts 6:5. In Acts 13:1-4, the whole church sent out Barnabas and Saul to do mission work, and in Acts 15, the Jerusalem Council included the messengers from at least one local congregation from Antioch (15:23), as well as the believers in the Jerusalem assembly. Paul instructed the Corinthian church to be responsible believers and take charge of their own affairs. The local congregation at Corinth was admonished to correct the problem of internal strife among its fellowship, to do what was necessary to ensure the proper observance of the Lord's Supper, and to take action in exercising discipline in order to

⁹Stanley Grenz, *The Baptist Congregation: A Guide to Baptist Belief and Practice* (Judson, 1985; reprint, Vancouver, B.C.: Regent College, 2002), 54.

¹⁰J. L. Waller & R. R. Lillard, eds., *The Western Baptist Review*, vol. 3 (Frankfort, KY: A. G. Hodges, 1848), 333.

preserve the purity of its church membership (1 Cor. 1:10; 11:33-34; and 5:3-5, 12-13).¹¹ Neither the elders nor the deacons interfered with the exercise of a congregational church government.

Several New Testament passages tell us who the elders were in the early church. In Acts 20:17, Paul called for a meeting of the elders of the church in Ephesus, and in verse twenty-eight of the same chapter, he calls them bishops and pastors. In Titus 1:5 elders are ordained in every city, and in verse 7 they are addressed on a personal note as the bishop. The same is true in 1 Timothy 3. In 3:1 Paul used the word bishop (singular) with reference to elders (plural). Then he calls the bishops “the elders” in chapter 5, v. 17. Again, in 1 Peter 5: 1 the leaders of the church are called elders, and then in v. 2 they are encouraged to pastor their flocks as bishops by “taking the oversight thereof.”

In the first Peter passage, the word feed in verse two is translated as “tend.” This word is a pastoral term. Deriving from ποιμάνετε, which is the aorist imperative active form of ποιμαίνω, it means “to shepherd,” or “to take up the task of shepherding.” This is the pastoral function of every pastor/bishop/elder. Simply put, all elders are pastors, and all pastors are elders. They are men called into the ministry of being the pastor of a local church. The word επισκοποῦντες is in its present active participial form of ἐπισκοπέω. The phrase means “to oversee.”¹² This participle introduces the ἐπισκοποι (bishops) which is the other designation for elders in this passage.¹³

It is very obvious that there is an interchangeable correlation between these three words in the biblical passages cited. These words tell us that the men who are indiscriminately called elders, bishops and pastors in the early New Testament churches were the same man; thus they

¹¹Grenz, *The Baptist Congregation*, 54.

¹²Cleon L. Rogers Jr., and Cleon L. Rogers III, *The Linguistic Exegetical Key to the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 578.

fulfilled the same office. The word elder expressed the dignity of the office,¹⁴ bishop was a term denoting the elder's work that he performed,¹⁵ and the word pastor described the elder's function which involved his role as a shepherd in guiding, feeding, and protecting the church under his charge.¹⁶

When Paul wrote his letter to the congregation making up the Philippian church, he addressed it to the saints with the bishops and the deacons. No other ecclesiastical order was mentioned because it was not necessary to do so. Elders and pastors were included in the term bishop: "If there had been "elders" and "pastors" in that church distinct from the 'bishops,' Paul would be addressing only a part of the officials of the church—an unlikely supposition."¹⁷

When James instructed the sick in the church to call for the elders to pray over them (5:14), he does not mention bishops or pastors. Again, it was not necessary to do so because they were distinctly one and the same church officer in the congregations to which James was addressing in his letter.

According to Presbyterian pastor and professor of church history, Thomas Witherow, it would have been a needless repetitive statement for the biblical writers to mention bishops and elders in the same verse when only one term was used in alluding to the same New Testament church officer: "If the two terms be only different names for the same office, then to speak of

¹³R.C.H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Epistles of St. Peter, St. John and St. Jude* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1996), 218.

¹⁴R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's epistles to the Galatians, Ephesians and Philippians* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1961), 701.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶H. Harvey, *The Church: Its Polity and Ordinances* (Philadelphia: American Baptist, 1879), 71.

¹⁷Henry Clarence Thiessen, *Introductory Lectures in Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949), 418.

bishops and elders would be a violation of the laws of language—it would be tautology—it would be the same thing as to speak of presbyters and elders, or of bishops and bishops.”¹⁸ The fact that bishops and elders refer to the same New Testament office accounts for the reality that in some verses they are never mentioned together when referring to this same officer. Plainly, one term was sufficient to indicate the intended office-bearer being mentioned or discussed, whether the word elder or bishop is used in either case. Any other supposition would make the language of the New Testament Scriptures lack coherence and plain sense when one is discussing the first-century elder/leaders of the church.

In Titus 1:7 the elder is called “the steward of God.” This word relates to the elder’s task as both a minister and preacher of the Word of God. The New Testament elders were men who were called and ordained to the pastoral office of a local New Testament church. All elder/pastors were men who preached and taught the Bible. There is no biblical indication that some elders were preacher/teachers and some simply rulers of the church.

These men were not laymen who operated as a board of governors in the early church, nor did they rule the congregation by legislative means along with a teaching/preaching elder, the majority of them being lay-elders. As a matter of fact, one searches in vain to find biblical support for a “board of ruling elders” in the New Testament scriptures, nor are there any biblical qualifications for such an office called “ruling elders.”

Some well-meaning scholars see a division in the eldership according to 1 Timothy 5:17: “Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially they who labor in the word and doctrine.” This verse is pivotal in one’s thinking concerning elders. For those who divide the eldership into two distinct offices (one teaching elder and three or more ruling elders)

¹⁸ Thomas Witherow, *The Apostolic Church: Which Is It?* (First pub. 1856, n.p.; reprint, Glasgow, England: Free Presbyterian, 1990), 26.

this verse provides a major foundation for their argument. Thus, verse 17 “has proven to be the most controversial and misunderstood verse relat[ing] to church offices.”¹⁹

It is in this verse that the idea of ruling elders rises or falls, depending upon one’s interpretation of 1 Timothy 5:17. All other passages used to support elder rule fail if it can be proved that v. 17 does not support this theory of a ruling eldership.²⁰ The right interpretation of this verse is determined by the Greek adjective *μάλιστα*. Instead of “especially” the word should be translated as “that is”²¹ or as “most of all.”²² Verse 17 should read: “Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honor, that is, they who labor in the word and doctrine.” In this way, *μάλιστα* is making a distinction of emphasis between individuals of the same elder class, and not a division into different classes of elders as some suppose. It is a distinction of service and not one of rank.²³

The elders who “rule well” are the same ones who are the elders “who labor in the word and doctrine.”²⁴ Since this is the case, there can be no lay-elders²⁵ who rule but do not teach in the church, nor can there be a board of ruling elders charged with making all the major decisions of the church. The contemporary practice of lay-coleadership “isn’t based on Scripture as so

¹⁹Clayton Cloar, “The Office of Bishop in the New Testament,” unpublished Ph.D. paper, 21.

²⁰Henry M[artin]Dexter, *Congregationalism: What it is; Whence it is; How it Works. . .* (Boston: Nichols & Noyes, 1865), 112.

²¹George W. Knight III, *The Pastoral Epistles: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary Series, I. Howard Marshall & W. Ward Gasque, eds. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 232.

²²Dexter, *Congregationalism*, 113.

²³Elder Cushing Biggs Hassell, *History of the Church of God*, rev. & completed by Elder Sylvester Hassell (Middleton, NY: Gilbert Beebe’s Sons, 1886; reprint, McDonough, GA: Old School Hymnal, 2002), 305.

²⁴Samuel Davidson, *The Ecclesiastical Polity of the New Testament Unfolded and Its Points of Concidence or Disagreement with Prevailing Systems Indicated*, 2d ed. (London: Jackson & Walford, 1854), 144-48.

²⁵Dexter, *Congregationalism*, 114.

many have been led to think.”²⁶ The uniform New Testament teaching is that the “double function of ruling and preaching belonged to all presbyters.”²⁷ No man could be an elder unless he was “apt to teach” and he could “take care of the church” according to the elder qualifications in 1 Timothy 3:2,4,5 and Titus 1:9.

Also, teaching and ruling were combined duties in Acts 20:20-35 where Paul gives an example from his own ministry experience as an illustration of spiritual oversight and public/private teaching (see also Heb. 13:7, 17 and 1 Thess. 5:12). The New Testament elders ruled in the church in two ways: 1) By their teaching/preaching ministry, and 2) By their example.

To read *μάλιστα* in v. 17 as making a division of elders into two different groups would disrupt the analogy of its use in the other New Testament passages where this word is used. In the twelve times it is used, *μάλιστα* simply adds energy to the assertion which is being made in three instances; and in the other eight (this passage being excluded), it introduces details about a subject which are included in the general mention of the first member of the sentence.²⁸ According to this argument, there is no basis for having a church polity that includes lay-elders. The elders who rule well are the same ones who labor in word and doctrine and are denominated as elder/bishop/pastor.

The twofold model for the official ministry in the first century New Testament church was always pastor/bishop/elder and deacons, which was a uniform pattern found throughout the

²⁶Malphurs, *Planting Growing Churches for the Twenty-first Century*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 145.

²⁷H. Harvey, *Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles: First and Second Timothy and Titus, and the Epistles to Philemon, an American Commentary on the New Testament*, ed. Alvah Hovey (Philadelphia: The American Baptist Publication Society, 1890), 65.

²⁸Dexter, *Congregationalism*, 113.

New Testament period.²⁹ Even the church historian Edward Gibbon noted that the established ministers of the church were indiscriminately named bishops or presbyters (elders) in the very beginning of the history of the church.³⁰ Few scholars would dispute this fact. A third office was not discovered until the second century when there was a gradual movement away from, and a corruption of, the elder/bishop/pastoral office.

In the New Testament there is an indication that in the early church there was a plurality of elders, although there is no scriptural command for a church to have more than one elder in one church. A church could have as many elder/pastors as were needed, or they could have one elder to pastor their church. Rex Koivisto has convincingly demonstrated how the first-century New Testament church existed and functioned in the early days of its existence. He noted that the church met at two levels in their worship experience.³¹ In some areas the believers could meet together as a large group, or city gatherings, and they no doubt had many elder/pastors that would minister to the needs of the congregation. One elder/pastor would lead the church and the other elders would be his helpers. In other places, however, the believers met together in small house church settings, and each congregation could support only one elder/bishop/pastor, and they needed only one as their shepherd/elder/leader/pastor. Although the plurality of elders can be found in the majority of biblical references, scholars have not been able to prove satisfactorily

²⁹David J. McLeod, "The Primacy of Scripture and the Church," in *Understanding the Church: The Biblical Ideal for the Twenty-first Century*, ed. Joseph M. Vogl and John H. Fish III (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux, 1999), 41.

³⁰Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, vol. 1, 180 A.D. to 395 A.D., the Modern Library Series (New York: Random House, 1962), 418.

³¹Rex A. Koivisto, *One Lord, One Faith* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1993), 25.

whether a multiplicity of elders were uniform in each church. Aubrey Malphurs concluded that “the city-churches had a plurality of elders, each of whom pastored a house-church.”³²

According to A. H. Strong, the mention of a plural number of elders may have been an incidental matter when the New Testament discusses the early church.³³ Moreover, he believed correctly that a plurality of elders were assistant pastors who would assist, and be helpers to, the main pastor who was entrusted with the charge of a local congregation. He cited numerous passages that offered support for his contention that there was, in some cases, one pastor and several deacons in one church.³⁴ Strong further argued that the size, scarcity, and needs of the congregations contributed to the demand for a plurality of elders in many cases.³⁵

The testimony of archeology is that the small house churches were big enough to have room for no more than 20 to 40 persons meeting together for worship and fellowship. Many times Paul went from house to house spreading the gospel, and he encouraged believers to do the same. One cannot discount the fact that the church was made up of these small house congregations with their elder/bishop/pastor leadership.³⁶

What Is the Testimony of Baptist History in General, and Southern Baptist History in Particular?

Any thorough examination of the evidence concerning early Baptist polity will reveal a knowledge of elders and the matter of ruling elders. In most Baptist churches, the term elder was

³²Aubrey Malphurs, *Planting Growing Churches for the Twenty-first Century*, 144.

³³Augustus Hopkins Strong, *Systematic Theology*, 3d vol. (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1907), 915-16.

³⁴Acts 12:17; 15:13; 21:28; Gal. 1:19; and James 2:12. These verses indicate that James was the pastor of the Jerusalem body of believers, a contention that has support from tradition. See also, Strong, 916; Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, trans. C.F. Cruse (Grand Rapids: Baker, n.d.; reprint, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1998), 111.

³⁵Strong, *Systematic Theology*, 915-16.

a word which was used as a title when addressing the pastor of the church. Ruling elders were nominal officers in a small number of the early Baptist churches. It was a name which was a misnomer that has created a lot of unnecessary confusion about local church leadership on the part of church leaders throughout the history of Baptist churches in America. Some churches had them, but the majority did not because of two very important reasons: 1) They were deemed unnecessary because the churches had pastors and deacons to do ministry and to lead the spiritual and temporal affairs of the churches, and 2) many Baptists discovered that there is no description given in the Bible as to their qualifications, job description, or their duties.³⁷

The office of ruling elder did not exist among the early Baptists of New England.³⁸ When Isaac Backus drew up the Confession of Faith for the newly constituted Baptist church in Middlesborough, Massachusetts in 1756, he stated that the officers of the church are Bishops or Elders, and deacons.³⁹ He did not mention ruling elders because he did not believe in their office. It found its way into some of the Baptist churches in Virginia through the influence of zealous Separate Baptists who borrowed this polity structure from the Puritans who favored a more Presbyterian-style of church government. Because many studious early Baptists saw no place for the office of ruling elders in Baptist church polity, the churches “were constantly perplexed to know what to do with it.”⁴⁰

³⁶Wring, 59-67.

³⁷Lemuel Burkitt & Jesse Read, *A Concise History of the Kehukee Baptist Association from Its Original Rise Down to 1803*, rev. Henry L. Burkitt, American Theological Library, Evanston, PA (Philadelphia: Lippincott, Grambo, 1850), 181 microfiche.

³⁸J. H. Spencer, *A History of Kentucky Baptists from 1769 to 1885*, vol. 1 (Cincinnati: n.p., 1886), 485.

³⁹Alvah Hovey, ed., *A Memoir of the Life & Times of the Rev. Isaac Backus* (Harrison, VA: Gano, 1991; reprint), Appendix B, 337. See also Stanley Grenz, *Isaac Backus—Puritan & Baptist*, Dissertation Series, no. 4, National Association of Baptist Professors of Religion (Macon, Ga.: Mercer, 1983) 279; and Edwin S. Gaustad, ed., *Baptists, the Bible, Church Order and the Churches* (New York: Arno, 1980), 136-37.

⁴⁰Spencer, *A History of Kentucky Baptists from 1769 to 1885*, 485.

The Elkhorn Association took a year to study this subject, and in 1790 decided that ruling elders was a gospel institution. However, no opinion was ever given which defined the purpose of this so-called institution. Many associational advisory councils discussed the proper functions of the office from year to year, but there is no record that they ever stated their purpose or reason for existence.

New Liberty Baptist church took up the subject in 1806 and concluded that ruling elders should be appointed and stated what work they should perform. John Scott was the influential pastor of this church. He had been raised a strict Presbyterian which influenced his ideas concerning the ruling eldership.⁴¹ This writer has discovered numerous accounts of some early Baptists who have either come out of the Presbyterian tradition and have retained the idea of a ruling eldership, or they have been influenced in their polity by the Presbyterian form of church governance found in the writings and practices of the Puritans and others which included the office of lay ruling elders. In the history of Baptists in New Jersey, there is strong evidence of a Presbyterian influence on the church polity of some Baptist congregations in that state. By the 1800's, however, ruling elders were beginning to disappear from the scene altogether.⁴²

From time to time the matter would be queried in the Philadelphia Association, but what was said about the issue was very little. Most Baptist churches in the North and in the South had one ruling elder besides the pastor who was either a helper to the minister, or he fulfilled a limited pastoral role when a church was without a pastor. He could preach but he could not administer baptism or the Lord's Supper. These men were laymen who, when given charge of a church, were ordained to the gospel ministry and then they became the pastor of the church that

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²Norman H. Maring, *Baptists in New Jersey* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1964), 84-85.

ordained them.⁴³ In many ways, their duties were not much different from those performed by the deacons.

Morgan Edwards believed that a church should have three ruling elders in a Baptist church, according to his manual on church polity. He had hoped that the Philadelphia Association would adopt his handbook on church governance and make it the official statement of church polity for all the Baptist churches in this Association. One year, the Welsh Tract churches made a query asking if this was so, since it was an assumption among many churches. Isaac Backus and three other ministers were assigned the task of addressing this issue and reporting back to the association. After much consideration, these men determined that Edward's church manual never was, and never would be, used as an official document adopted by the Philadelphia Association in determining Baptist church polity for all the churches belonging to the association.⁴⁴

One will search in vain in the annals of early American Baptist church history to find ruling elders operating as a board of administrator/rulers with one preaching elder and the rest laymen who do not minister the Word and preach.

Since their beginning in 1845, every major Southern Baptist writer, minister and other leaders have consistently argued that a Baptist church has only two biblical church officers. These are pastors and deacons. There is very little, or no discussion at all, concerning ruling elders by Baptist writers after 1845. This is evidenced in church history documents; including church constitutions, and Associational records, as well as in church manuals, books on distinctive Baptist principles, and confessional statements. The terms elder and pastor have been

⁴³Ministers were laymen before they were called into the Gospel ministry.

⁴⁴A. D. Gillette, *Minutes of the Philadelphia Baptist Association 1707 to 1807*, Philadelphia Association Series, Tricentennial Edition (Springfield, MO: Particular Baptist, 2002), 141.

consistently recognized as titles that refer to the same man and to the same office (the ministerial leader of a Baptist church).

The first president of the Southern Baptist Convention, William Buelin Johnson, discussed elders in his day, and some would argue that he was in favor of having lay ruling elders, but the matter needs some clarification. Johnson never favored a board of ruling elders in a Baptist church. Instead, he preferred to call his elders overseers who performed ministerial duties. His idea of the Bishopric (his words) included, but was not limited to four ministers: 1) a presiding elder who would regulate the affairs of the church by giving advice, admonition, and rebuke; 2) a teaching elder who would explain scripture and give exhortations and visit the church members; 3) another would superintend Sunday School; and 4) a fourth would be a preacher of the Gospel.⁴⁵

In theory, Johnson's elders might be laymen as well as ministers. In reality, however, his contentions prove otherwise. A close review of his arguments will reveal that Johnson indeed argued in favor of the ministerial elders. He saw a plurality of elder/pastors over every church in the apostolic age, and their authority to govern each congregation was ministerial and executive in scope, rather than legislative. All this points to a biblical differentiation between the preacher and the layman as ruler/ministers of the local church.

Also, Johnson's plurality of elders resembles the pastor and staff relationship which is found in most Southern Baptist churches in the twenty-first century. His bishops were a ministry team made up of those men who have been called into the preaching/teaching/pastoral ministry. This conclusion is further evidenced in his description of the duties these men were to perform:

⁴⁵W[illiam] B[uelin] Johnson, *A Church of Christ with Her Officers, Laws, Duties, and Form of Government: A Sermon* (New York: William J. Baner, 1848); and "The Gospel Developed through the Government and Order of the Churches of Jesus Christ, in *Polity: Biblical Arguments on How to Conduct Church Life* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Church Reform, 2001), 193.

Governing as examples to the flock; watching for souls, warning and admonishing them; and teaching the Word of the Lord, laboring in word and doctrine by preaching the Word.⁴⁶ These are the descriptions of the pastoral duties of ministers, or preachers. Elders are pastors and pastors are elders, according to Johnson.

The office of ruling elders is really a recent development in Southern Baptist thinking which has begun to take root and grow at an alarming rate since the early 1990s. The idea of having ruling elders in a Baptist church in modern times is confusing, especially when those favoring having elders in their churches refer to them as elder leadership, rather than elder rulers. Whatever name is given to this group of leaders in a Baptist church, the truth of the matter is, elder rule is not necessary. It does not have biblical support, nor does it have strong historical Baptist precedence.

What Are the Reasons For and Against Practicing Elder Rule in a Southern Baptist Church?

Those who favor having ruling elders argue that a church should have them because the office is based on biblical evidence. James Emory White argued otherwise. He rightly stated that elder rule exists in tension with the biblical materials and that it is a stranger to Southern Baptist polity.⁴⁷ Actually, elder rule and congregational church polity are odd bedfellows. It is a presby-gational polity which is difficult to maintain. Many times, “church members can make recommendations to the elders, but in the final analysis decisions in relation to the church are made by the elders who are the final court of appeal and the rule-makers in the church.”⁴⁸

⁴⁶Johnson, *Polity*, 192.

⁴⁷James Emory White, unpublished manuscript, 12.

⁴⁸Slayden Yarbrough, *The Oklahoma Baptist Chronicle*, vol. 37, no. 1 (Spring 1994): 16.

Another reason that has been stated for having ruling elders in a Southern Baptist church is specific instances in Baptist history. In the majority of cases, Baptists have consistently practiced a church government that has excluded ruling elders and that have embraced a polity which includes a pastor (with helpers) and a body of deacons.

A third reason is the creation of a convenient, protective barrier between the pastor and the congregation. According to Lawrence A. Justice, some Southern Baptists have a genuine desire to shield their pastor from unjust criticism and undeserved interference as he attempts to lead the local church.⁴⁹ These things, however, are a necessary part of the pastor's ability to minister to his congregation. In leading the church, the pastor is involved in personal relationships with his people. He ministers to them through his preaching and through the influence of his personal example as he fleshes out his sermons in their midst. Besides, the deacons can perform the task of protecting their pastor just as well by standing behind him and supporting his ministry.

This trend is taking place for a fourth reason. Because of the lack of emphasis on Baptist distinctives, some are leaning toward the adoption of the elder system. In modern times people have become members of Southern Baptist churches who do not know what it means to be a Baptist. They have entered into our Baptist churches from other faiths and have brought with them their beliefs and teachings from other church systems which are in conflict, many times, with Southern Baptist doctrine. This is especially true when someone comes from a Presbyterian or non-denominational background.

There are three main reasons, however, for not having an elder-rule type of church polity. First of all, Scripture does not separate the office of elder from that of pastor. The conclusive

⁴⁹Laurence A. Justice, "Should a Baptist Church Have . . . Elders?" (Hillcrest Baptist Church, n.d.), 10, photocopied.

testimony of the New Testament is that elder/bishop/pastor were titles used when referring to the same pastoral leader of the church. That leader is the man of God who is called into the ministry. He is the minister who is not a layman, but a preacher. Secondly, elder rule is constantly in tension with congregational church polity which is the normative form of church government specified in the New Testament. Elder rule dilutes the democratic process found in congregationalism, or it outrightly abandons it altogether.⁵⁰

Thirdly, elder rule is a violation of the priesthood of every believer. Authority within the local church rests with the individual members of the congregation as they meet corporately. No matter what kind of polity Southern Baptist leaders choose to use, no one has the right to exercise any other kind of authority independently of, or contrary to, the wishes of the people who have chosen them as their leaders. The priesthood of the believer makes the entire church the proper decision-making body capable of making decisions that affect their community lives.⁵¹ Grenz argued that the final authority in the church resides in the corporate membership. The principle of democratic congregationalism works well in the local church because it is the natural outworking of the priesthood of all believers within the parameters of the local church.⁵² The pastor, deacons, and other leaders work together as a team in helping the congregation in seeking the will of Christ as they meet together in doing the business of the church. Elder rule usurps the priesthood of the believer role because it denies the church members their right and privilege as believers to make decisions affecting the welfare of the church.

⁵⁰Grenz, *The Baptist Congregation*, 56, 57.

⁵¹Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology* 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 1091.

⁵²Grenz, *The Baptist Congregation*, 56.

Influences Encouraging Movement toward the Practice of Elder Leadership in the Church Governance Style of a Southern Baptist Church

Those leaders who are buying into the idea of elder rule as the proper form of church governance in a Southern Baptist church are being influenced by several factors. First of all, they are following in the footsteps of men like John MacArthur, John Piper, Richard Mayhue, Alexander Strauch, Mark Dever and others who favor the elder-style of church polity. According to Rob Norris, Director of the Denver Baptist Association in the state of Colorado, pastors and church leaders in that association are being influenced by Saddleback Church and Willow Creek Community Church whose leadership style is the practice of some form of elder leadership, or elder rule.⁵³ At the Willow Creek Community Church, pastored by Bill Hybels, there are eight ruling elders who operate the church like a corporation.⁵⁴ The elders are the ultimate decision-making body in the Willow Creek church.⁵⁵

MacArthur's church is purely an elder-ruled church, and it is not of the Southern Baptist persuasion. The only thing that the congregation votes on is who the next pastor will be when MacArthur is no longer there. In a pamphlet he published in 1984, MacArthur stated that he believed that scripture implies that everyone in the church except the ruling elders is at a lower level of leadership in the decision-making process and should be under the authority of the elders.⁵⁶ By this definition the congregation, deacons, and others, are at a level of leadership whereby whatever they do must be approved by the elders before anything they do is

⁵³Rob Norris, director of the Denver Baptist Association, Colo., telephone conversation with author, 29 May 2002.

⁵⁴Lynne Hybels & Bill Hybels, *Rediscovering Church: The Story and Vision of Willow Creek Community Church*, Willow Creek Resources Series (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 210.

⁵⁵Mary Hybels, telephone conversation with the author, 30 May 2002.

⁵⁶John MacArthur Jr., *Answering the Key Questions about Elders* (Panorama City, CA: Grace to You, 1984), 30.

accomplished in the church. There is no higher court of appeal in MacArthur's Grace Community Church than that of the ruling elders.

In the Shepherd's Conference at MacArthur's Grace Community Church, Mayhue has taught a seminar every year on how to move a congregationally-ruled church to one that is elder-ruled. His purpose was to get preachers out of the mess they were in regardless of their present polity practice, and move them to a peaceful and productive way of doing business.⁵⁷ This advice denies the role that pastors and deacons play in leading the church to make informed decisions that lead to a peaceful and productive business meeting. Mayhue and others at The Master's Seminary do not see a congregational form of church polity, or government, or leadership in the New Testament.⁵⁸ He downplays the spiritual maturity of new believers to the point that he views the ruling elders as being more spiritually mature and more religiously capable of making decisions that affect the affairs of the church because they are more biblically-centered in their thinking. This is not the proper way of treating any member of the church. While the level of spiritual maturity may differ in the lives of every believer, no one has the right to deny them the privilege of exercising their spiritual privilege. They also are biblically-centered in their thinking.

Piper's church is not Southern Baptist either. In a tape and handout given to participants in his leadership seminars, he stated that his eldership model was based on four criteria: Scripture, culture, history, and local church dynamics. Piper saw a very small amount of clear Bible teaching on the subject of church government and he put more emphasis on culture and history than he did on biblical support. His movement toward elder rule is simply a pragmatic concern at best. Piper's "Council of Elders" creates whatever ministry bodies seem to be helpful

⁵⁷Richard Mayhue, *From Congregational to Elder Rule*, audiotape 01SC-54 of Shepherds Conference at Grace Community Church (Sun Valley, CA: Mobiltape, Valencia, Calif., 2001).

⁵⁸Ibid.

in the church and the elder board “can abolish these tomorrow if they want to. The elders are the church leaders who govern the church.”⁵⁹ Piper presently has eighteen elders which are a mixture of ordained pastors and laymen (who are in the majority on the elder board). Some are rulers, the others are teachers. The congregation has a limited involvement in the decision-making process of the church.

Strauch is anti-preacher in his idea of elders. In theory he teaches against elder rule; but in reality the elder leadership he proposes is actually an elder rule type of church government. He called his Shepherd-elders a “council of men” who function “as the official oversight body of the local church.”⁶⁰ To him, any male member of the church can be an elder if he is biblically qualified. He also referred to these elders as God’s household managers who have been given the authority to govern the local church.⁶¹

Dever’s church is a mixture of elder rule and congregationalism; which makes his church government structure a presby-gational polity; although he argues against the Presbyterian type of church government structure. The eldership of Capitol Hill Baptist Church includes the pastor and at least three laymen who are not in full-time employment of the church. The elders of this church determine a person’s fitness to become a church member and handle discipline-matters, the supervision of the ministry, and the resources of the church. The majority of church-related business passes through their attention, and there is a limited amount of congregational participation and authority.⁶²

⁵⁹John Piper, *Biblical Eldership*, audiotape 1 (Minneapolis: Desiring God Ministries, 1999).

⁶⁰Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership* (1988) edition, 12.

⁶¹Strauch, *Biblical Eldership* (1995) edition, 291.

⁶²Capitol Hill Baptist Church, Washington, D.C., “Constitution of the Capitol Hill Baptist Church,” Washington, D.C.” (Washington, D.C.: Capitol Hill Baptist Church [1998]), photocopied.

Second, some leaders are being influenced by a culture that has a “board” mentality. In the secular world, it is not uncommon for a business to be run by a group of men who dictate what will or will not happen in the workings of the business structure. This may work well in a secular world, but it is not the way to operate a church. Adrian Rogers correctly stated that Christ is the Head of the church, the Pastor is the leader, the deacons serve the church, it is run by committees, and the church is congregationally-approved.⁶³

Third, some are being led into an adoption of rule by elders because of an incorrect interpretation of New Testament scriptures when it talks about elders in the first century church. Elders were preachers, and preachers were elders in the Book of Acts and other New Testament Scriptures. These men ruled the early church in two ways: 1) By their preaching, and 2) By their example. The idea of a board of elders as well as a job description and qualifications for the office cannot be found in the New Testament. It just is not there.

Fourth, these well-meaning leaders have misread the pages of Baptist history in general, and Southern Baptist history in particular. In both histories, the term elder was a title for the pastor or pastors of a Baptist church. The term encompassed those men who were called into the ministry, were teachers and doctors, and who were helpers to the pastors of the churches. Some early Baptists had at least one ruling elder whose ministry was like that of the assistant pastor in modern times; he was a helper who assisted the pastor of a local body of believers. After 1845, because of disuse and the development of a proper understanding of the role of ministers and deacons, the office of ruling elders was allowed to die a slow death.

Fifth, it is usually the churches that are Reformed in their theology that are adopting elder rule as the proper form of church governance. A cursory few hours on the internet will reveal

⁶³Adrian Rogers, Pastor of Bellvue Baptist Church, Memphis, TN, transcript of interview, 22 May 2001, Bellevue Baptist Church, Memphis, TN, Typewritten notes, 1.

many Reformed web sites dealing with why Baptist churches should become elder-ruled churches. Most web-publishers and writers who are publishing elder leadership material are outside the Southern Baptist tradition, and for the most part, are reformed in their theology. There is a distinct connection between Reformed theology, Calvinism, Presbyterian ecclesiology and elder rule.⁶⁴

Does It Really Matter What Kind of Church Polity Southern Baptists Use?

I think it does. New Testament teaching concerning biblical church officers, Baptist history in general, and Southern Baptist history in particular, congregationalism, and the priesthood of the believer mandate that we practice a polity that is in keeping with what Christ intended for the governing of His church. Elder rule does not support that mandate. Instead, it usurps it and bypasses Christ's intended principles of church government which are leadership by a pastor(s) and deacons, and the congregational polity which allows every member of the church to participate in the making of informed decisions which affect their corporate lives.

The elder/pastor leads the church in spiritual matters. He guides, teaches, and leads them by his example, and through his preaching. The deacons are his helpers and they serve the membership by taking care of the temporal needs of the congregation. The congregation follows its leadership; not blindly, but by mature thinking and willing obedience. Together, the leaders and the membership decide issues and make decisions.

Since this is true, Southern Baptists need to do something about it because the problems caused by elder rule may affect the way Southern Baptists practice their polity in the near future. Within the next 10 years, as more churches adopt elder rule as a means of carrying on church

⁶⁴Wring, 129-78, for an informed discussion of the influence of Calvinism, Presbyterian ecclesiology, and Reformed theology on the practice of Baptist church polity.

business and daily affairs, State Associations and State Conventions will have to determine how they will deal with the issue in the churches under their sphere of ministry. Already there are several State Conventions that have documents in place that will not allow them to fund new church plants if those church starts decide to have an elder rule type of church polity. Even the North American Mission Board has personnel policies and guidelines that help them steer clear of the elder rule form of church government.⁶⁵

Nationally, the Southern Baptist Convention leadership will need to clarify the wording of the *Baptist Faith and Message 2000* statement dealing with the proper officers in a Southern Baptist Church. This is needed so that there is no misunderstanding about what we believe regarding church officers and church polity. Also, the elder rule issue could become more divisive than it already is, and it could develop into a matter of fellowship among grassroots Baptist churches and drive a wedge between denominational loyalty on the local, state, and national levels.

There needs to be more material written about church polity from the standpoint of contemporary Southern Baptist writers who will produce strong arguments against the elder rule form of church leadership. There is presently a famine of such material in contemporary monographs, systematic theologies, and church manuals. Southern Baptist leaders need to develop their own seminars that will directly address the biblical and Baptist position on church leadership from the standpoint of our unique Baptist distinctiveness.

The seminaries need to provide classes on church polity and Baptist distinctives which do not divide us, but that teach us the truth and draw us together as we seek to corporately lead people to faith in Jesus Christ. And we need young pastors who will believe and practice our

⁶⁵Wring, "Appendix Three," 243-252.

distinctive Baptist principles of church polity instead of trying to put together a church by whatever pragmatic means seems to look like it works.

Does it really matter what kind of church polity contemporary Southern Baptists use? Yes, it does! We need to return to our roots and grow again the Baptist tree that is both biblically true and scripturally sound, and that is historically Baptist in its beliefs, polity, and practices. John L. Dagg was right. Church polity is not as important as winning people to faith in Christ, but it is important. Why? Because Christ gave commands on the subject in the Scriptures; therefore, we must explore the issue of government in the local church and we must be sure we are doing it right!