

Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches

John S. Hammett

CHAPTER 7

ELDERS IN BAPTIST LIFE

Leaders, Not Rulers

A BAPTIST PERSPECTIVE ON CHURCH LEADERS

An emphasis on congregational government should not be interpreted as a denial or denigration of the crucial role church leaders play in the life and health of a church. One of Paul's first steps in the churches he founded was to provide for leaders (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5). Scripture gives specific examples, directions, and qualifications for those who are to lead churches, and practical experience verifies their importance. No church can be healthy with poor leaders.

The first leaders of the New Testament churches were the apostles. They, along with prophets, evangelists, and pastor-teachers, are mentioned in Ephesians 4:11–12 as those given by Christ to the church to equip the saints to do the work of ministry. But apostles, prophets, and evangelists are not generally recognized as offices pertaining to the local church. There is almost nothing in terms of instructions or qualifications for them, as there are for elders and deacons, and they are not mentioned as officers of any local churches in the New Testament.

Apostles and prophets are most commonly seen as extraordinary ministries, serving an important foundational purpose (Eph. 2:20), but are not intended to be ongoing offices in the church. After Acts 6, the original twelve apostles begin to fade into the background. In the council described in Acts 15, they do not hand down a decision, but act in concert with the elders and the whole assembly (v. 22). Some see missionaries today as serving

an apostolic function, but that is quite different than a local church office. Some varieties of polity ground the authority of bishops in a supposed succession from the apostles, but there is no evidence in the New Testament that the apostles ordained, appointed, or envisioned successors. Indeed, when one of the twelve, James, is martyred (Acts 12:1–2), there is no move to replace him. It seems the early church recognized the apostolic office as a passing one.¹

There were numerous prophets associated with the New Testament churches, but none were seen as officers of any particular church. Prophets in the New Testament were commonly involved in ministries of exhortation and interpretation of Scripture, and so some today refer to pastors as prophets and see prophecy as preaching, but no one affirms the office of prophet as normative for local churches today.

The term *evangelist* occurs only three places in the New Testament (Acts 21:8; Eph. 4:11; 2 Tim. 4:5). Many have exercised such a ministry, perhaps the most famous being Billy Graham, but it too is not recognized as an ongoing office in the local church.

Terms such as *minister* and *priest* are used to refer to offices of leadership in some churches today, but in the New Testament, they are used to refer to all believers. First Peter 2:9 calls the church a “royal priesthood,” and John says Christ has made all his followers “a kingdom and priests” (Rev. 1:6). And while the word *minister* is often used to refer to those serving as pastors or elders, it too can describe the work to which all Christians are called (Eph. 4:12; 1 Peter 4:10).

In Baptist life, there have been two categories of those called leaders or officers in the local church. The first office has been called by a variety of terms. Scripture most often refers to this office as elder and, less frequently, overseer or bishop. Contemporary Baptists prefer to use the term *pastor*. The second office is universally referred to as deacon, but often with divergent understandings of the proper responsibilities of those occupying that office.

A variety of factors, including the rise of elder rule and the feminist movement, have occasioned a good deal of discussion concerning the functions and qualifications of leaders in Baptist life in recent years. Those controversies, plus the intrinsic importance of leadership, call for a thorough discus-

1. See the interesting discussion of the surprisingly small role played by the apostles, especially the original twelve, in the early Christian movement in Bartsch, “Divine Power, Community, Formation, and Leadership in the Acts of the Apostles,” in Longenecker, ed., *Community Formation in the*

sion of this topic. This chapter considers the office designated by the terms *elder*, *overseer*, or *pastor*. Chapter 8 examines the office of deacon.

ELDERS/OVERSEERS/PASTORS

The Issue of Terminology

As the heading above indicates, we are first faced with the issue of terminology. What are we to call this office? For many people, the terms *elder* (*presbyteros*) and *overseer* or *bishop* (*episkopos*) carry associations with presbyterian and episcopal polity, though they were widely used by Baptists in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.² Today, the term most often used in Baptist life is *pastor* (*poimēn*). Is there any importance to what we call this office?

There is at least some value in understanding how these terms have been used (or misused) historically. Despite the strong evidence that the three are interchangeable terms for one office, there was a movement, beginning early in the second century, toward the development of what is called the monarchical bishop as an office separate from and higher than the office of elder.³ That pattern endured until the Reformation. Calvin recognized what many earlier exegetes had seen, that Scripture uses the terms *elder* and *bishop* interchangeably.⁴ However, presbyterianism, as it developed, began to distinguish two different types of elders, based on 1 Timothy 5:17. Those called ruling elders were usually laypeople, involved in the governance of the church but not in the teaching and preaching of God’s Word. There was usually only one teaching elder in a church, an ordained man, the one chiefly responsible for the ministry of teaching, more often called the pastor or minister than teaching elder. For a time, there was some debate among Baptists as to the validity

2. See, for example, the interesting resolution passed by the Sandy Creek Baptist Association on October 24, 1829: “Resolved, That we, as a body, will discontinue, and recommend to the churches and preachers discontinue, the title of reverend prefixed to a minister’s name, and substitute, as a more scriptural appellation, the title of Elder.” G. W. Purefoy, *A History of the Sandy Creek Baptist Association from Its Organization in a.d. 1758 to a.d. 1858* (New York: Sheldon and Co., 1859), 143.

3. The earliest evidence for this usage is found in the early second-century letters of Ignatius (35–107) to a variety of churches. See J. H. Strawley, *The Epistles of St. Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch* (London: SPCK; New York: Macmillan, 1900). The bishop is seen as the head of the church in a city, with the elders or presbyters under him. As the office developed, a bishop came to oversee the congregations in an area called a diocese. Those exercising leadership in a single congregation came to be called “priests,” which is a contraction of the term *presbyter*, or *elder*.

4. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2:1:100 (1539).

of having ruling and teaching elders in the church, but the practice was never widespread, because it was seen as having a very slender and debatable biblical basis; it virtually disappeared after 1820.⁵

How are these terms used in Scripture? The word *elder* is used most often in the Gospels for the Jewish leaders, with whom Jesus often clashed. They were usually the more mature men (since *elder* does mean older) and were the leaders of synagogues. The term was taken over for the leaders of the early church, especially the church in Jerusalem. In all, the word *elder* is used as a term for a church leader in the New Testament seventeen times, ten of those times in the book of Acts, with eight of those with reference to the church in Jerusalem.⁶ Perhaps it seemed the most natural term for these early Jewish believers to use for their leaders. *Overseer* or *bishop* is found only four times as a noun with reference to a church office; a verbal form is used once to describe the function an elder serves.⁷ *Pastor* is used as a noun only once for a church office (Eph. 4:11), but twice the verbal form is used to designate the responsibility of an elder (Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:2). More often, *pastor* or *shepherd* is used to refer to Jesus, the great and chief shepherd of the sheep (John 10:11; Heb. 13:20; 1 Peter 2:25; 5:4).

The evidence for the interchangeability of the three terms is seen most clearly in Acts 20 and 1 Peter 5. In Acts 20, Paul sends for the *elders* of the church at Ephesus (v. 17). When they arrive, he says the Holy Spirit has made them *overseers* of the flock (v. 28) and he charges them to *pastor*, or shepherd the church of God. In 1 Peter 5, Peter addresses the *elders* (v. 1), telling them they are to *pastor* or shepherd the flock and that they are to serve as *overseers* (v. 2). The synonymous use seems obvious and has been widely recognized as such by exegetes.⁸ Baptist confessions of faith utilize all three terms for this

5. See the discussion by Greg Willis, "The Church: Baptists and Their Churches in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries," in Dever, ed., *Polity*, 33–34. Evidence of the debate can be seen in Samuel Jones, "Treatise of Church Discipline (1805)," in Dever, ed., *Polity*, 145–46.
6. With reference to the elders of the church in Jerusalem, see Acts 11:30; 15:2, 4, 6, 22–23; 16:4; 21:18; with reference to elders of other churches, see Acts 14:23; and 20:17. Elsewhere in the New Testament, see 1 Tim. 5:17, 19; Titus 1:5; James 5:14; 1 Peter 5:1; 2 John 1; and 3 John 1. Some would add 1 Peter 5:5, but others would see the term there as simply referring to an older man.
7. Acts 20:28; Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:2; and Titus 1:7. First Peter 2:25 uses *episkopos* to refer to Christ. The verb *episkopeo* is used for the work of an elder in 1 Peter 5:2, and *episkope* is used for the office of bishop or overseer in 1 Tim. 3:1.
8. One of the most recent and detailed demonstrations of this fact is the revision of a 2002 doctoral dissertation produced at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary by Benjamin Merkle, *The Elder and Overseer: One Office in the Early Church*, Studies in Biblical Literature, ed. Hemchand Gossai.

church office. Clearly, the term to be used for the leaders of the church does not seem to have been a major concern of the writers of Scripture.⁹ Of greater concern is what they do.

The Role and Responsibility of Elders

There are scattered references to the tasks or responsibilities of elders throughout the New Testament. The most important texts are Acts 20:28–31; Romans 12:8; Ephesians 4:11–16; 1 Thessalonians 5:12; 1 Timothy 3:1–7; 5:17; Titus 1:5–9; Hebrews 13:7, 17; and 1 Peter 5:1–4. These texts describe the four primary responsibilities assigned to this church office.

The first may be called the ministry of the Word. While all Christians are commanded to teach and admonish one another (Col. 3:16), those who are elders are to be especially gifted and responsible for teaching the church. Acts 20:31 and Titus 1:9 reflect the charge laid on elders to preserve sound doctrine; Ephesians 4:11 links the office of pastor with that of teacher; 1 Timothy 3:2 has "able to teach" as one of the elder's qualifications; 1 Timothy 5:17 describes certain elders who work at "preaching and teaching," and Hebrews 13:7 identifies leaders as those "who spoke the word of God to you." Whether it is called preaching, teaching, prophecy, or exhortation, the ministry of the elder is emphatically a ministry that includes the communication of God's Word. It is primarily by means of his preaching and teaching that the elder exerts the influence of leadership in the congregation.

Communication of God's Word is also involved in his second area of responsibility, which is commonly termed pastoral ministry. This is directly related to the charge laid on elders to shepherd the church (Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:2). One of the duties of a shepherd is to feed the flock; for Christians, our food is the Word of God (1 Peter 2:2; Matt. 4:4). So the shepherd must provide his flock with healthy biblical food. Another duty of the shepherd is to protect the sheep (John 10:11–13). One danger to the flock highlighted in the New Testament is the danger of false doctrine (Acts 20:29–31). By teaching the truth, the shepherd provides them with protection. This protection is also spoken of in more general ways as "watching over" the flock. The word used in Hebrews 13:17, *agrupneō*, has the idea of constant wakefulness or unceasing vigilance. This care would be expressed concretely in acts like pastoral

9. For convenience sake, we will use the term *elder* in the chapter, recognizing that the office to which

visitation, personal counseling, and ministry in times of sickness (see esp. James 5:14) and grief. Shepherds who love their sheep notice when their sheep are hurting and seek to be with them to care for them. Making that pastoral responsibility even more solemn is the reminder that leaders "must give an account" for those under their care (Heb. 13:17).

The third area of responsibility assigned to this office is that of oversight or leadership. This is why the term *overseer* (*episkopos*) is appropriate. This officer gives overall administrative oversight and leadership to the church. Three other biblical terms seem to be related to this area of responsibility.

In Titus 1:7, the elder is called to be an *oikonomos*, or steward of God. This word was used of the servant in a household who managed affairs on behalf of the master (Luke 12:42). As it is a position of considerable trust, the key requirement of a good steward is faithfulness to the master (1 Cor. 4:2). This responsibility fits well with the ideas of oversight and leadership.

A second term, found in Hebrews 13:7, 17, and 24, seems to add a tone of authority to the leadership pastors are to exercise. It is true that the individuals involved here are not explicitly described as elders, pastors, or overseers. The word used for them, a form of the verb *hēgeomai*, is simply translated "leaders" and can be used for a variety of leaders, including military and political ones. But the work they are described as doing (speaking the Word of God, watching over the flock) points to them serving in the role of elders and pastors. The note of authority is found in the command in verse 17: "Obey your leaders and submit to their authority."

The third term relates to the nature and extent of pastoral or elder authority. This much disputed question is one of the central differences between presbyterian and congregational polity.¹⁰ The key term in this dispute is the verb *prohistēmi*, which is used six times of church leaders.¹¹ It can be used in a variety of senses, from the authoritative leadership one would exercise in an army, to the idea of assisting or helping, to the idea of leadership in a family. With reference to church leaders, it seems to carry a very general

10. See the criticism of congregationalism and defense of the authority of elders in Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership: An Urgent Call to Restore Biblical Church Leadership*, 2d ed. (Littleton, Colo.: Lewis & Roth, 1988), 116–27.

11. Rom. 12:8 does not specifically link it to an office, but speaks of how those who lead should do so. First Tim. 3:4–5 gives the ability to lead or manage. First Thess. 5:12 is also a general reference. First Tim. 3:12 uses it in the same way as a qualification

sense.¹² But the difficulty of determining the nature and extent of the authority involved can be seen in the various ways the term has been translated, especially in 1 Timothy 3:4–5 and 5:17, the two texts that most explicitly and directly connect this activity to the elder. The King James Version, Revised Standard Version, and New American Standard see the elders in 1 Timothy 5:17 as those who "rule" the church, while the New International Version sees them as those who "direct the affairs" of the church. But on 1 Timothy 3:4–5, all except the King James Version see the overseer as the one who is to "manage" or "care for" the church; only the King James Version uses "rule."

The issue of the nature and extent of pastoral authority cannot be decided on purely lexical evidence; the key terms are too general. Therefore, we look to the larger context of overall biblical teaching. On that topic, we find a delicate tension. On the one hand, church members are called upon to recognize their leaders' authority, submit to them, and obey them (see 1 Thess. 5:12; Heb. 13:17). As Daniel Akin points out, "this mind-set is foreign to our radically autonomous, democratic and egalitarian culture."¹³ On the other hand, the way leaders exercise their authority in the New Testament is never dictatorial, but with a humble spirit, open to the input of others, and seeking to "lead the church into spiritually minded consensus."¹⁴ This pattern fits congregational government with elder leadership. Moreover, the support for congregational government in the New Testament also qualifies the nature of pastoral authority. Thus, the leadership exercised by elders is very important and should be obeyed by the church, though not uncritically or apart from congregational input. Elder leadership with congregational government is in keeping with the meaning of *prohistēmi* and the biblical description of the leadership responsibility of the elder.¹⁵

There is a fourth responsibility of the elder, one that is easily overlooked

12. For more information, see L. Coenen, "Bishop, Presbyter, Elder," in *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, 1:188–201, esp. 189, 193, 197–98 on *prohistēmi*; and B. Reicke, "prohistēmi," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 6:700–703.

13. Daniel Akin, "The Single Elder-Led Church," in *Perspectives on Church Government*, 72.

14. D. A. Carson, "Church, Authority in the," in Elwell, ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 251.

15. I am glad to note a growing movement toward this position among Baptists. While they differ on the plurality of elders, Mark Dever, Daniel Akin, James R. White, Paige Patterson, and Samuel Waldron all seem to affirm the compatibility of congregational government and elder leadership. See Dever, *A Display of God's Glory*; Akin, "The Single Elder-Led Church"; White, "The Plural Elder-Led Church," in *Perspectives on Church Government*; and Paige Patterson, "Single-Elder Congregationalism," in Cowan, ed., *Who Runs the Church?* and Waldron, "Plural-Elder Congregation-

because it is so basic, yet it seems to be the responsibility most clearly related to the qualifications for the office in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1. That responsibility is to serve as an example to the flock (1 Peter 5:3). Leaders are to be set apart, not just to honor them but to recognize them as setting forth the pattern of faith and life that the congregation is to emulate (Heb. 13:7). This leads naturally into the next topic, the qualifications of an elder.

The Qualifications of Elders

The qualifications for this office are given primarily in 1 Timothy 3:2-7 and Titus 1:6-9, with a much briefer description in 1 Peter 5:2-4. Since these lists comprise some of the most detailed and pointed teaching on church order in the New Testament, they deserve careful examination.

The first notable aspect of these lists is their ordinariness. As D. A. Carson notes, "almost every entry is mandated elsewhere of *all* believers."¹⁶ Whatever is involved in being an elder, it is not a calling to a higher standard of Christian living. How could it, when every Christian is commanded by Christ to "be perfect" (Matt. 5:48) and when the goal and destiny of every Christian is Christlikeness (Rom. 8:29)?

But if these character traits are commanded of all Christians, what is their significance here? The key to understanding the meaning of these lists of character traits is remembering that one of the responsibilities of leaders is to set the example for the flock (1 Peter 5:3). The character required to be an elder is the character necessary to be an example to the flock. Such a person would not need to be perfect (such persons are in very short supply among fallen humanity) but would need a degree of maturity and proven character that would enable him to serve as an effective example, including an example of how to confess and repent when he does stumble.

Second, it is also striking how different these qualifications are from modern lists of qualifications for a position. There is no mention of the need for training or educational requirements, little in the way of skills or experience or certification. Character is the central issue.

A third aspect that should be noted is that while there are a number of similar qualifications and some exact parallels between 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1, there are also a number of differences between the two lists. For example, Titus says nothing about the fact that an elder should not be a recent convert

(1 Tim. 3:6); Timothy does not include the characteristics of being "upright, holy and disciplined" (Titus 1:8). These differences imply that Paul was not trying in either list to be exhaustive, but giving a representative list of character traits an elder should embody. Nonetheless, while the lists are not intended to be exhaustive, they are fairly comprehensive. They cover five major areas.

Moral Qualifications

The first may be called moral qualifications. The person in view in these lists is a person of integrity and good judgment, free from vices such as drunkenness, greed, and a quick temper, and one who is worthy of respect. The initial words in the two major lists, "above reproach" (1 Tim. 3:2) and "blameless" (Titus 1:6), serve as summaries. For the flock, he would be a worthy example; for the outside world, he would be someone who would command their respect.

Marital and Family Qualifications

The second area of qualifications, and perhaps the most controversial, comes in the area of marital and familial qualifications. First Timothy 3 and Titus 1 both say an elder must be "the husband of but one wife." Interpretations of this phrase vary from the idea that "he must be married," to "he must not be a polygamist," to "he must not be remarried," to "he must not have been divorced."¹⁷ With the prevalence of divorce in recent American society (and sadly, even within Baptist churches), the last interpretation has become perhaps the most debated interpretation. Some say that a person who is divorced cannot be considered "blameless" and cannot qualify as a husband of but one wife. Thus divorce disqualifies one from serving as an elder.¹⁸ In some circles, such an interpretation is viewed as virtually required if one believes in the literal interpretation of the Bible. Others make a distinction based on the circumstances of the divorce. For example, if the divorce occurred before

17. These are the options listed by Gordon Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus*, Good News Commentary (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, San Francisco, 1984), 43-44. Fee himself advocates a position close to mine; that is, the elder must be exemplary in marriage and family life.

18. This is the view of Warren Wiersbe, *Be Faithful* (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books, 1986), 42. John Piper, *Biblical Eldership*, interprets the phrase to prohibit remarriage after a divorce. Divorce per se does

conversion, some say, it is wiped away, because in Christ, the divorced person is a new creation.

All these interpretations, however, overlook the central point of these lists. The question that should be asked is this, "Can this person serve as an example to us in the area of marriage and family?" While some would object that this approach avoids or undermines the literal interpretation of Scripture, literally, the passage says nothing about divorce at all. Had Paul wanted to exclude divorced persons, he simply could have said, "he must not be divorced." Also, if someone wants to be fully literal, he would have to conclude that a single person could not qualify as an elder (thus disqualifying Paul and Jesus), nor could a married person with less than two children, since 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 both mention the elder's relationship with his children. But no one disqualifies either single persons or those with less than two children. Further, we do not see the other qualifications in this same way. No one argues that a person who got drunk while in college is permanently disqualified, nor someone who at one time struggled with his temper. Rather, we interpret these in terms of his present character. Finally, to those who differentiate preconversion and postconversion divorce, the issue is not forgiveness, but fitness. All our sins, pre- and postconversion, are equally forgiven. That's not the issue. Can this person serve as an example in this crucial area of life? That is the question.

In practice, such an interpretation would exclude some who have been married to only one woman and have more than two children, but are lousy husbands or dads. Perhaps they meet the letter of the lists of qualifications, but cannot serve the purpose behind the lists. Someone who has recently been through a divorce would likewise not be in a position to be an example to the flock. However, someone who at some time in the past suffered through a divorce, but in the years since has established a solid track record as a husband and father would not be automatically disqualified. In terms of those who are single, or married but with little experience in parenting, such persons are not automatically disqualified, but limited. They may be exemplary in all their current family relationships, but if they have no marital or parental relationships, it is difficult to see how they can be an example in those areas. Perhaps even more difficult is the question of a man who is otherwise qualified, but whose children are not noteworthy for their obedience to him (1 Tim. 3:4; Titus 1:6). What degree of obedience is required to meet this qualification? Obviously, Scripture gives no objective standard by which to

pose of the qualifications: Can this person serve as an example to the congregation in the area of parenting? If not, it would not be either wise or loving to place him in a position of leadership over the body. He needs, rather, to focus his energy on his own family.

Areas of Giftedness

In addition to his role as an example to the flock, an elder also has teaching and leadership responsibilities. Therefore, there are also some qualifications in terms of giftedness that are included in the lists. First Timothy 3:2 says an elder must be "able to teach." Titus has the same idea but expresses it in terms of an elder's ability to "encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it" (Titus 1:9). Together, they imply that the elder must have some degree of ability or giftedness in the area of communicating God's Word, and must have an understanding of sound doctrine. Some elders may have a greater degree of giftedness in teaching or a greater depth of understanding of doctrine, but all elders should be competent in both areas. An elder should also give some evidence of giftedness in leadership, revealed in his management of his own family (1 Tim. 3:5).

Spiritual Maturity

One of the qualifications, unique to Timothy but implicit in the idea of an elder, is that of spiritual maturity. In the words of 1 Timothy 3:6, he must not be "a recent convert" (*neophytos*). Titus has no similar language but an elder would be assumed to be a man of some years, an older man. Again, Scripture attaches no specific number to this qualification, but it is a qualification that seems to be often overlooked. Most of the prospective pastors I train as a seminary professor are relatively young men. Many are not recent converts, having grown up in Christian homes and having been converted as children. Still, many lack the maturity and judgment that come with age, and sometimes their inexperience has gotten them into trouble. Since there is no specific standard, it is hard to determine how young is too young, but this qualification serves as a warning. It is ideal when a young pastor can serve as an associate under an experienced pastor for his first few years of ministry. When that is not possible, young pastors should pursue informal mentoring relationships with older pastors in their community.

Limited to Males

There is one final qualification pervasively assumed throughout these lists. It too has become controversial in recent times. These lists assume that elders will be males. The nouns, pronouns, articles, and endings on adjectives all point to males as those in mind. An all-male eldership has been the overwhelming norm in Baptist life, and has recently been officially affirmed by Southern Baptists in *The Baptist Faith and Message 2000*,¹⁹ but there have also been some Baptists who have begun to affirm and argue for female elders. Countless gallons of scholarly ink have been spilled in discussions of this issue, and a full review of it is beyond the scope of this book's objectives. Nevertheless, it does pertain directly to the qualifications of elders, and thus a brief recap of the key issues in this debate is in order.

Two overall perspectives have emerged among evangelical Christians over the past twenty years or so. One is called egalitarianism. It affirms the full equality of men and women, and sees the ability to serve in any role open to men as intrinsic to genuine equality for women, especially roles in the home and church.²⁰ The other perspective, though sometimes called traditionalism or, mistakenly, patriarchalism, is properly called complementarianism. It affirms full equality between men and women, but sees equality as compatible with differing, complementary roles for men and women in the home and church.²¹ When complementarians point to passages such as the lists in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 or other texts relating to differing roles in the church

19. Article 6 of that document states, "While both men and women are gifted for service in the church, the office of pastor is limited to men as qualified by Scripture."

20. Some of the key works enunciating this perspective are Gilbert Bilezikian, *Beyond Sex Roles: A Guide for the Study of Female Roles in the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985); Alvera Mickelsen, ed., *Women, Authority and the Bible* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1986); Gretchen Gaebelein Hull, *Equal to Serve: Women and Men in the Church and Home* (Old Tappan, N.J.: Revell, 1987); and Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen, *Gender and Grace* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1990). All these are representative of what is called evangelical feminism. Less evangelical but foundational to much egalitarian thought, is the important work of Paul Jewett, *Man as Male and Female* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975). The works of more radical feminists are legion. One collection showing their approach is Letty Russell, ed., *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985).

21. The landmark work for this perspective is John Piper and Wayne Grudem, eds., *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 1991). It includes a comparison of the statement on "Men, Women and Biblical Equality," from the egalitarian group, Christians for Biblical Equality, with the Danvers Statement, the doctrinal statement of the complementarian group, The Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (see 403-22,

(such as 1 Tim. 2:9-15) or home (Eph. 5:22-33), egalitarians respond that such texts are culturally conditioned, were addressed to specific situations, or are, for one of a number of reasons, limited in their application, such that the limitations placed on the roles open to women in those texts do not apply today. Complementarians have argued that the passages themselves give no hint of limitation, but rather seem to be based on eternally valid principles going back to the very creation of male and female.

I remain a complementarian because I fail to see any convincing argument that empties the key texts of their significance. First Timothy 2:9-15 contains some phrases that are difficult, but the phrase prohibiting women from teaching and exercising authority, occurring as it does immediately prior to the qualifications for elders whose responsibility it is to teach and exercise authority, seems clearly intended to prohibit women from serving as elders. Other roles, such as teaching men in Sunday School classes, serving in various positions on the staff of a local church, and many other roles, were not a part of New Testament church life and thus are not directly addressed. The propriety of women serving in such roles is debatable and depends on the specific job description and the church's understanding of these roles; what seems clear is the prohibition of women serving as elders.

But what seems clear to me does not seem clear at all to others. In fact, they cannot see why I cannot see that the complementarian position stands in contradiction to the spirit of Christ and the tendency of the whole New Testament. When equally earnest Christians, equally seeking to understand Scripture, come to such opposing convictions, one wonders if there may be some unrecognized influences affecting the interpretation of Scripture.

One such influence is obviously the feminist movement. It has been one of the most profoundly important movements of the past hundred years, affecting the Western world on a variety of issues. Biblical scholarship does not occur in a vacuum but is fully exposed to the currents of history. The question is, has the feminist movement been like a light on Scripture, enabling us to see its true teaching more clearly, without patriarchal or chauvinist assumptions, or has the feminist movement been more like a light in our eyes, blinding us to what has been obvious to past generations?

A curious feature of modern society is our tendency to believe that newer is better. In terms of history, this means we tend to believe that we understand things better than our predecessors. Thus, we often underestimate the importance of historical rootedness. This is especially important in the area

of theology. The Holy Spirit's ministry of illuminating the Scriptures is not a recent development. Thus, I am reluctant to believe that the overwhelming majority of exegetes and students of Scripture down through the centuries are wrong. I do not think history or tradition is infallible. I am a congregationalist, despite the fact that most Christians for centuries were not. But the burden of proof lies on the historically newer interpretation. The egalitarian interpretation cannot bear that burden. It has been unduly swayed by the secular spirit of modern, political feminism.

Another factor, helpfully noted by Stephen Clark in his book, *Man and Woman in Christ*, is the changing idea of equality and identity involved in the transition from a traditional to a technological society.²² Clark argues that the organizing principle of traditional society was relational. What determined one's identity were one's relationships; that is, whose daughter am I, from what clan or tribe do I come, who are my ancestors? People were valued for things intrinsic to them, for *being* something as opposed to *doing* something. In technological society, the organizing principle is functional. What determines identity is what one does; that is, I am a teacher, a doctor, a mechanic. Identity is achieved rather than ascribed. Value depends on what one can do.

This distinction casts a helpful light on the egalitarian-complementarian debate. I have noticed in reading both sides that they seem to be talking past each other and rarely connecting. The egalitarian side does not believe that complementarians can really believe in genuine equality if there is a distinction in the roles open to men and women. This is rooted in the functional idea of identity. If a woman is denied the chance to achieve something simply because she is a woman, equality is undermined because it is seen in a functional framework. Equality means equal opportunity to achieve. Those in the complementary camp seem to be operating with a relational understanding of equality. Men and women can be equal and yet have different roles, because value and equality is a matter of being, not doing.

This distinction can also help resolve one difficulty that has troubled many on both sides of this debate. That difficulty is the question that arises in the minds of many when they read what seem to be prohibitions against women serving as elders: Why? It is obvious that there are many gifted women who are excellent teachers; many are very capable leaders. Why should they be prohibited from serving as pastors? It seems capricious.

There seem to be two responses to this question. First, we cannot or should not need to know all the reasons why God commands us to do as he says. There was no reason why Adam and Eve should not have eaten of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The fruit was ripe, delicious, and desirable. It was within reach. God had created it and put it there. The only reason for not eating of it was because God had commanded them not to do so. Obedience involves trusting, sometimes without knowing the reason.

However, in this case, there are reasons why Scripture prohibits women from serving as pastors, but they are not functional reasons. God may gift a woman in teaching and leadership, and yet ask her to serve in a context other than that of an elder, not because of any functional inability, but for relational reasons. God may have a purpose for asking males and females to relate in a certain way. Perhaps those relationships reflect something of the relationship of the Father and Son (1 Cor. 11:3). Perhaps they reflect something of God's original intention in creating men and women (Gen. 2:18; 1 Tim. 2:13). But these reasons don't make much sense to us, because they are not functional reasons. Similarly, we all know many women who seem far more capable of leading their families than their husbands. Yet one of the purposes why God assigns husbands to be the head of the family is to illustrate something of the relationship between Christ and the church (Eph. 5:23-24).

If all this is true, that is, that the egalitarian view is undergirded by a technological, functional view of life, and the complementarian view is based on a relational view of life, how do we decide which view to adopt for male-female relationships in the church today? We live in a world that is clearly dominated by a functional understanding of life, and while a functional view is perfectly acceptable in some arenas of life, faithfulness to Scripture requires adopting a relational view in the church and within the Christian family. God desires his people in these two areas to show relationships that reflect something of his nature and his relationship with us.

Scott Bartchy, though writing on a different topic, makes a helpful observation concerning the society in which the church originated. He states that there were two primary institutions in the Greco-Roman world that provided the metaphors for human relationships: politics and kinship. In the political realm *egalitarianism* was a key term, referring to things like "equal access to vote, positions of public leadership, and the ownership of property."²³ In kinship, the key term was *patriarchy*. But the New Testament, particularly

22. Stephen B. Clark, *Man and Woman in Christ* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Servant Books, 1980). In what

Luke in the book of Acts, while antipatriarchal, was not egalitarian. Bartchy says that the goal of Luke's portrayal of the development of the church in Acts "was not the creation of an egalitarian community in the political sense, but a well-functioning family in the kinship sense."²⁴ Egalitarianism is a political term, dealing with equal rights, and is an idea we can applaud in the political realm. But the church is a different type of entity, more like a family than a state. Issues of individual or personal rights are secondary to the health and well-being of the family, and that family may be healthiest when men and women fill complementary roles.

Therefore, since it seems to be the teaching of Scripture, since it is the overwhelming view historically speaking, and since it seems to accord with the relational view of life that the church as a family is called to exhibit, I affirm a complementarian view of male and female roles. In the church, that means that the office of elder is limited to males. How far that limitation extends to other roles not mentioned in Scripture (Sunday School teacher, youth group leader, minister of music, etc.) is a matter for debate on which we should be willing to allow a degree of diversity, since the answer seems to depend in large measure on individual factors such as the understanding of the role by the individual church, and thus must be decided on a case-by-case basis.

A Divine Call

One final matter in terms of the qualifications of the elder concerns a qualification that many think is vital, but is not found in any list. It is the matter of a divine call to ministry. Daniel Akin includes "a call to ministry and aptness to teach" as among the qualifications for the office of elder,²⁵ but only the second is found in the biblical lists. Nonetheless, for many Baptists, a special divine call is the most important and indispensable qualification. Commonly, the first question put to a young man seeking ordination has to do with his conversion and call to ministry. The list of those emphasizing the importance of a call to ministry includes Baptists like John Dagg, Charles Spurgeon, and W. A. Criswell.²⁶ Most mention the necessity of an *inward* call, which Gerald Cowen calls "a profound conviction that God has chosen one

24. Ibid., 98.

25. Akin, "The Single Elder-Led Church," 54.

to serve Him in a special way," and an *outward* call, which is corporate confirmation of the individual's conviction, often expressed in ordination, as fellow believers affirm their belief that he is gifted and qualified to serve.²⁷

Those who emphasize the necessity of a divine call want to highlight God's initiative in the lives of those who become pastors and the serious commitment involved in entering pastoral ministry. Certainly the importance of pastoral ministry is seen in the extensive qualifications that are given for the office. Certainly those who are involved in pastoral ministry should do so with the conviction that they are doing the will of God. But should that not be the goal of every believer, in all areas of life?

While there is no problem in saying that God has called some to pastoral ministry every Christian should see his or her vocation, be it medicine, business, or farming, as a calling from God.²⁸ The idea that there is a special divine call, unique to pastoral ministry, is not clearly found in Scripture. There is an Old Testament precedent in the calling of prophets and a New Testament precedent in the calling of apostles, but there is no clear example of the calling of pastors or elders. A survey of the terms *called* and *calling* in the New Testament finds the overwhelming proportion refer to a call common to all believers. All believers are "called to belong to Jesus Christ" and "called to be saints" (Rom. 1:6-7; 1 Cor. 1:2). Indeed, the very word *church* (*ekklesiā*) implies that believers are those called out by God. Paul exhorts the Ephesian believers to "live a life worthy of the calling" they had all received. Of the eleven occurrences of the word *calling* (*klēsis*) in the New Testament, none refer to a special calling of an individual; all but one (Rom. 11:29) seem to refer to a calling issued to all believers. Furthermore, ministry is not a work reserved for some, but the responsibility of all. First Peter 4:10 says all believers are to minister, faithfully using whatever gifts they have been given.

If, then, all believers are called to minister, how is a young man to determine if he is called to pastoral ministry? It is the same way all Christians find their area of ministry. They are to seek to serve and see if their gifts (teaching,

27. Cowen, *Who Rules the Church?* 29-31.

28. This was involved in Luther's idea of the priesthood of all believers: "It is pure invention that pope, bishop, priests, and monks are called the spiritual estate while princes, lords, artisans, and farmers are called the temporal estate. . . . All Christians are truly of the spiritual estate, and there is no difference among them except that of office. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12[12-13] that we are all one body, yet every member has its own work by which it serves the others." Martin Luther, "To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation Concerning the Reform of the Christian Estate," in *A Reformation Reader: Primary Texts with Introductions*, ed. Denis Janz (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 1999), 91.

leadership) equip them for pastoral ministry. They should possess a desire and willingness to serve in this way (1 Tim. 3:1; 1 Peter 5:2). They are to seek confirmation from those who know them best, especially concerning whether or not they meet the qualifications. And they are to listen for the still, small voice of the Holy Spirit that guides God's people.

What about the idea of a calling to full-time vocational ministry? First, the term *full-time* might be misleading. Does it not imply that others are part-time Christians? Should not all Christians do all they do in obedience to God's will? Does not God call for all of every Christian's life? Calvin says, "the Lord bids each one of us in all life's actions to look to his calling." He adds, "no task will be so sordid and base, provided you obey your calling in it, that it will not shine and be reckoned very precious in God's sight."²⁹ So all Christians are to obey God's calling in all of life's activities. All Christians are called to be full-time Christians.

As to the second aspect, vocational ministry, it is certainly valid to pay pastors (1 Tim. 5:17), and pastoral ministry is so important to the life and health of a church that churches normally seek to pay their pastors and thus relieve them of working another job to provide for themselves and their families. But God's calling is always a calling to minister, not to receive a paycheck. Anyone gifted and called to pastoral ministry should begin to seek avenues to be involved in teaching and leading, whether they are paid to do so or not. All Christians are called to minister because they are gifted, whether paid or not.

Paul provides a good example here. In Acts 18:3-4, Paul worked as a tentmaker with Priscilla and Aquila. Apparently he concluded that doing so, and thus providing for his needs, was the will of God for his life. It was God's calling for that time in his life. He ministered on every Sabbath, using his gifts in evangelistic ministry. But when Silas and Timothy came from Macedonia (with financial support for Paul), he gave himself to full-time ministry (Acts 18:5). He ministered part-time when he had to and full-time when he could. Those gifted in pastoral ministry should not wait until a church hires them full-time but should to seek to exercise their gifts as time and circumstances allow immediately. If a church recognizes the value of someone's ministry and wants to provide for him so that he can devote his full time to that ministry, that is wonderful, but hundreds if not thousands of Baptist churches have been planted and led by pastors who farmed or taught

school or worked in other ways to provide for their families. Their call to pastoral ministry was no different from that of those called to serve churches that had the means to support them. Nor were they being disobedient to their calling in working in other ways to provide for their needs. God's call to all believers includes a call to provide for their needs. For some, that call is answered *through* their calling to pastoral ministry; for others, that calling is answered *alongside* their calling to pastoral ministry.

In short, while it is useful to speak of a call to full-time vocational ministry to describe a calling to a type of ministry that normally is of such value to a local church that they want to enable someone to devote his full time to it, it is open to misunderstanding and thus may require some qualification. All Christians are called to minister and to live out God's calling on their lives full-time. For some individuals, their gifts and qualifications are recognized by God's people as equipping them for pastoral ministry. As they seek God's will, they hear his call to that type of ministry. In most cases, churches will want to enable them to devote their full time to their ministry. Thus, their call to provide for their needs coincides with their call to minister. For others, their call to pastoral ministry involves serving small or new congregations that have no means to support them. They answer God's call to provide for their needs through other avenues, and answer God's call to minister as their time and circumstances allow.³⁰

This discussion of the qualifications of the elder has been long but necessary. While I am a convinced congregationalist, it is obvious that churches can be healthy with any pattern of polity, if they have good and godly leaders. Even more important than the pattern of our polity is the character of our leaders. Congregations should ponder these qualifications carefully, and evaluate candidates for leadership graciously but biblically.

The Number of Elders

We raise the issue of the number of elders because, while most Baptist churches today have one pastor or elder, some see strong support in Scripture for a plurality of elders.³¹ Beyond the fundamental theological question

30. This will also be true of most churches that adopt a plurality of elders. Normally, a number of them are not paid and are sometimes called "lay elders." They work other jobs to provide for themselves and their families, and minister as elders as their time allows.

31. Advocates of a plurality of elders include White, "The Plural Elder-Led Church," 255-96; Grudem,

of which pattern seems most in keeping with Scripture, the idea of a plurality of elders raises other practical questions of implementation. If a church has a plurality of elders, are they all equal? Would they take turns preaching on Sundays? Would they all be financially supported by the church? For larger churches with multiple staff members, would all the members of the pastoral staff be considered elders? All these questions merit consideration, but the first matter to consider is the teaching of Scripture on this issue.

When one looks at the verses containing the words *elder*, *overseer*, and *pastor*, a consistent pattern of plurality emerges. The church in Jerusalem is spoken of eight times in the book of Acts as having elders;³² the church at Ephesus had elders (Acts 20:17); the churches to which James wrote had elders (James 5:14), as did the churches to which Peter wrote (1 Peter 5:1). Perhaps the strongest support is found in Acts 14:23: "Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church." *Elder* is used in the singular only three times; once in a generic sense (1 Tim. 5:19) and twice for an individual (2 John 1; 3 John 1). There is no verse describing anyone as *the* elder of a church. *Overseer* is only used as a term for a church officer four times. Three times it is used in a generic sense (1 Tim. 3:1–2; Titus 1:7). The one place where it refers to the officers of a specific church it is used in the plural, for the overseers of the church in Philippi (Phil. 1:1). The one place where *pastor* is used for a church office it is in the plural, though not referring to a specific church (Eph. 4:11).

Moreover, when church leaders are referred to in other ways, the pattern is the same. The church of the Thessalonians was commanded "to respect those who work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord" (1 Thess. 5:12). Clearly the reference is to a group, not to an individual. Likewise, the letter to the Hebrews refers three times to the "leaders" of the group to which that letter was sent (13:7, 17, 24). Looking at this evidence, E. C. Dargan states, "It appears to be well-nigh certain that in the apostolic churches generally there was a plurality of elders."³³ John Piper states categorically, "All New Testament churches had elders."³⁴

In addition to this strong biblical support, there are also theological and

6. According to Greg Wills, the texts reprinted in *Polity*, ed. Mark Dever, give ten examples of earlier Baptists who also believe the New Testament churches practiced plural eldership. See Wills, "The Church," 34.

32. See Acts 11:30; 15:2, 4, 6, 22–23; 16:4; 21:18.

33. Dargan, *Ecclesiology*, 57.

practical reasons for plurality in leadership. Theologically, the doctrine of human depravity warns us against entrusting too much power or authority to any one individual. Practically, plural leadership would seem to offer many advantages. Mark Dever says of his experience:

Probably the single most helpful thing to my pastoral ministry among my church has been the recognition of the other elders. The service of the other elders along with me has had immense benefits. A plurality of elders should aid a church by rounding out a pastor's gifts, making up for some of his defects, supplementing his judgment, and creating support in the congregation for decisions, leaving leaders less exposed to unjust criticism. Such a plurality also makes leadership more rooted and permanent, and allows for more mature continuity. It encourages the church to take more responsibility for the spiritual growth of its own members and helps make the church less dependent on its employees.³⁵

James White sees a plurality of elders as advantageous in fostering maturity as elders learn from each other, in providing a check for the errors of any one man, in better providing for the full spectrum of needs in a congregation, and as helping in the exercise of discipline.³⁶

In view of the strong case for a plurality of elders, how is it that the great majority of Baptist churches today have one pastor? A variety of factors are probably involved. First, it should be noted that the single-elder model has not been universal in Baptist life. In the early nineteenth century, Samuel Jones's "Treatise of Church Discipline" noted several of the advantages of plurality in leadership,³⁷ and W. B. Johnson, the first president of the Southern Baptist Convention, argued from Scripture and practical benefits for a plurality of elders in each church.³⁸ But over time, the single-pastor model became dominant. It seems likely that the rapid growth of Baptist churches, from 150 in 1770 to 12,150 in 1860, outstripped the supply of qualified men.³⁹ In some churches, deacons have taken the role of elders and provide some of the benefits of plurality in leadership. In fact, many nineteenth-century Baptist

35. Dever, *A Display of God's Glory*, 24.

36. White, "The Plural Elder-Led Church," 282–83.

37. Samuel Jones, "Treatise of Church Discipline," in Dever, ed., *Polity*, 146.

38. W. B. Johnson, "The Gospel Developed," in Dever, ed., *Polity*, 190–95.

churches saw the pastor and deacons as constituting the church's eldership.⁴⁰ In the twentieth century, the business model entered Baptist life and perhaps conditioned people toward adoption of the single pastor, patterned after the chief executive officer of the business world. In the absence of an explicit command in Scripture concerning the number of elders, the single-elder model became dominant.

There were and are others who seek to make a case for the single elder/pastor from Scripture. Gerald Cowen argues that the support for plural elders from Scripture is not as clear as may first seem.⁴¹ For example, it is true that the church in Jerusalem had a plurality of elders, but that congregation numbered several thousand from its first day. Clearly so many could not meet in one place at one time, but met often in homes. Each home group would need a pastor-elder. Still they considered themselves one church, the church of Jerusalem. It was one church, composed of many groups with a plurality of elders. The same may have been true of the church in Ephesus, Philippi, and other cities. In fact, it is a fascinating fact that the New Testament never speaks of churches (plural) in a city (singular). One can find references to the churches in Syria and Cilicia (Acts 15:41), the churches of the Gentiles (Rom. 16:4), and "the churches of Judea" (Gal. 1:22), but it is always the church in Jerusalem, Antioch, Ephesus, and every other city. In Titus 1:5, Paul even commands Titus to appoint elders in every city. Perhaps there were elders (plural) in every city, but an elder (singular) for every congregation.

This is one possible reading of the evidence. The situation today is quite different, with churches in the same city, even those of the same denomination, seeing themselves as separate churches, with separate pastoral leadership. Thus, it can be argued that the plural eldership of the church in Jerusalem and other New Testament churches was a plurality for a different context than the one in which churches function today. However, the most that can be said for this argument is that it is a *possible* explanation for *some* of the texts, but even at that, it is an argument from silence. We are not told how many elders each house group had, but we do know that these groups were called churches (Rom. 16:5; 1 Cor. 16:19; Col. 4:15), and that it was Paul's practice to appoint elders (plural) in every church he planted (Acts 14:23), and that the church to which James wrote had a plurality of elders who are

40. Wills, "The Church," 34, says such a view was adopted by the Tyger River Baptist Association of South Carolina in 1835, and reflected the practice of many churches.

described as ministering jointly (James 5:14). If one elder had responsibility for a particular small group, it would have seemed more natural for James to have described that single elder as visiting a particular sick member.

Perhaps the classic case for the single pastor is that given by A. H. Strong in his influential theology text.⁴² Negatively, he begins by noting that there is no requirement for a plural eldership. The New Testament nowhere prescribes any number, and the fact that many churches had plural elders may be due simply to their size. On the positive side, he points to some indications that some churches had only one pastor. He sees Acts 12:17; 15:13; 21:18; Galatians 1:19; and 2:12 as indicating that James "was the pastor or president of the church at Jerusalem, an intimation which tradition corroborates."⁴³ He further claims that the use of overseer in the singular in 1 Timothy 3:2 and Titus 1:7 supports the idea of a single pastor, and believes the reference to the "angel of the church" in the seven letters to the churches in Revelation 2-3 should be interpreted as referring to the pastor of each church. Finally, Strong claims that plural eldership is natural and beneficial only in cases where the size of the church requires it.

What can be said in evaluation of Strong's case for the single elder-pastor? First, he is correct in saying that there is no biblical *requirement* for plural elders. Thus, having either a single pastor-elder or a plurality of elders is not a matter of obedience to a clear command of Scripture, for there is no such command. A decision on this question is thus a matter of drawing out the implications of Scripture, and allowing a degree of diversity may be advisable.⁴⁴ Nonetheless, Strong's arguments for a single pastor are quite weak. James may have had a certain prominence in the church at Jerusalem, but that church did have a plurality of elders. The use of *overseer* in the singular in 1 Timothy 3:2 and Titus 1:7 is clearly generic, giving the qualifications for any elder. It really has no relevance to the issue of plurality. As to the angels of the seven churches of Revelation 2-3, it is barely possible that *angelos* in these instances refers to a pastor or elder, but it would be the only place in the New Testament or anywhere else in Greek where *angelos* bears that meaning. It is a very unlikely interpretation. By contrast, the case for a plurality of elders, outlined above, seems quite strong. In fact, it would

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

43. *Ibid.*, 916.

44. For example, Akin, "The Single Elder-Led Church," says he could pastor a single elder-led church or a church with a plurality of elders or co-pastors because the New Testament allows flexibility on

be fair to characterize the New Testament as assuming a plurality of elders. After all, that was the pattern they would have inherited from synagogues, which employed a council of elders.

Daniel Akin, while acknowledging that it is easier to make the biblical case for a plurality of elders, nonetheless maintains that a viable case for the single elder can be made from Scripture. He points to the possibility of a single elder in house churches and contends that there is a biblical pattern for "a plurality of leaders with a senior leader over them."⁴⁵ He also notes the New Testament emphasis is on the character of leaders, rather than the number of leaders, and thus there should only be one elder in the many churches he suspects would have only one qualified man. Finally, he adds the observation that, in practice, only one can and must lead. Yet, in the end, Akin concludes that "a plurality of God-called men in leadership, led by a senior pastor/teacher" is the preferable model.⁴⁶

In a similar fashion, Paige Patterson, while defending the position called "single-elder congregationalism," states that the position as he understands it could also be called "primary-elder congregationalism," because he acknowledges that some churches in the New Testament had a plurality of elders, and so may churches today, when necessary.⁴⁷ But he argues strongly that a plurality of elders cannot be mandated because there is no commandment relating to the number of elders. In the absence of such a command, he believes we should decide the issue of plurality based on what we see of leadership patterns elsewhere in Scripture. He says "the general pattern that emerges in the Bible is that God calls a leader from among the people." As he adds later, "it is difficult to find any place where God called a committee."⁴⁸ He believes that pattern is substantiated by the practice of church history and true to "the psychology of leadership," in that every human endeavor seems to require a leader. Thus, while many churches may need more than one elder, one among the elders "should be the primary leader and preacher-teacher for the flock."⁴⁹

45. *Ibid.*, 66. He sees evidence for this pattern in Exod. 18:19–22.

46. *Ibid.*, 67–73.

47. Paige Patterson, "A Single-Elder Congregationalist's Closing Remarks," in Cowan, ed., *Who Runs the Church?* 283.

48. Patterson, "Single-Elder Congregationalism," in Cowan, ed., *Who Runs the Church?* 150, 152. He sees that pattern in the sole leadership of Moses, the individual judges and prophets, Peter's leadership among the apostles, the position of James in the church in Jerusalem, and the "messengers" to the churches in Revelation 2–3.

For my own part, I think the consistency of the example of a plurality of elders in New Testament churches and the practical benefits that result from such a plurality constitute a strong recommendation for the advisability of adopting a plurality of elders in local churches. But I would not raise that recommendation to the level of a command. That would be going beyond New Testament teaching. I can imagine at least two situations in which I would not seek to adopt a plurality of elders, at least not immediately. The first would be a church where there were no other men qualified to serve as elders. The pastor's task in such a setting would be to mentor some who would become qualified. The second situation would be the more common scenario of a very traditionally minded church. I would not divide a church over the issue of a plurality of elders. If there was significant resistance, I would not push for immediate adoption but would teach and train the congregation in the hopes that over time the resistance would lessen. In the meantime, I would be looking for individuals in the church who fit the qualifications for elder and begin using them as elders, even without that title. That is, I would solicit their input on various ideas and seek to involve and mentor them in a variety of areas of ministry. They could provide some of the benefits of a plurality of elders without incurring the objections some would make to formal adoption of a plurality of elders. But in other cases, it may be both possible and desirable to move a church toward an open adoption of a plural leadership. For those considering moving a church toward a plurality of elders, a number of practical questions of implementation must be faced.⁵⁰

"Where do I begin" would be a common question for pastors. Perhaps a prior question would be, "Should I begin?" Transitioning a church from a traditional practice to a smoothly functioning plural leadership will probably take at least two to three years.⁵¹ A pastor would need to be convinced of the biblical basis and important practical benefits of such a change to make the long-term commitment transitioning would require. It may be wiser for

50. I have been aided in thinking through the issues in transitioning a church to a plural eldership by a book by Phil A. Newton, *Elders in Congregational Life: Rediscovering the Biblical Model for Church Leadership* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2005). Pastor Newton draws upon his own experience and that of several others with whom he has had contact. John Piper also reflects on the process his church followed in "Rethinking the Governance Structure at Bethlehem Baptist Church" (<http://www.desiringgod.org/library/topics/leadership/governance.html>, accessed September 24, 2004).

51. John Piper's church took close to four years to adopt plural eldership (see Piper, *Biblical Eldership*, 2). Four years also elapsed between Mark Dever's installation as pastor of Capitol Hill Baptist

those anticipating a short pastorate or unconvinced that plural leadership has New Testament sanction and practical value to not attempt a transition. Even those who are convinced and desire change would be advised to proceed slowly and build trust among the members of the congregation initially.

For those who decide to proceed with change, assessment of present practice and policy is a good starting point. Most Baptist churches have some affirmation of congregational government in their governing documents (constitution, bylaws, charter, confession of faith, etc.), but in practice, many are deacon ruled, staff ruled, or pastor ruled. In fact, Jeff Noblitt, pastor of First Baptist Church of Muscle Shoals, Alabama, was moved to transition his church to plural leadership when he realized the temptations he faced as pastor in a church where the pastor was accepted as a virtual dictator.⁵² Other churches may be accustomed to rule by powerful deacons. A wise pastor will identify where he is likely to encounter problems and opposition at the outset.

The second step is a long-term focus on preaching and teaching. Phil Newton recommends studying in depth all the major texts on leadership with the existing church leadership in a context that allows for give and take, questions, and discussion on how a church can follow biblical guidelines.⁵³ Eventually such teaching must also be presented to the church body as a whole. Here too there must be opportunities for questions to be asked and feedback to be received.

Eventually, a specific proposal for changing the leadership structure of the church would be presented to the church. It would be best for this proposal to emerge from the existing church leadership and be presented to the church as a draft for their dialogue, discussion, input, and revision. Putting proposals in writing would force the church to think through some issues systematically.

For instance, what would the new leaders be called? Jeff Noblitt initially called them "Pastor's Council," to avoid the reaction he feared would come to the term *elders*. Eventually, his church came to accept that term, and biblically, it is the most appropriate term. But far more important than their title are their qualifications and responsibilities.

Their qualifications we have discussed at length above. We have also considered the responsibilities of elders in general, but need to speak more spe-

52. Newton, *Elders in Congregational Life*, 139.

53. *Ibid.*, 152-59, presents a well thought-out plan for leading a church in working through the bibli-

cifically of the responsibilities of the elders in relationship to the one called the pastor. Of course, in the Bible a pastor is simply an elder; the terms are interchangeable. But in practice, most Baptist churches have one man that does most of the public preaching and teaching and is known as *the* pastor. What would these new elders do? Would they take turns preaching?

We noted above the four responsibilities assigned to elders in the New Testament: the ministry of the Word, overall leadership of the church, pastoral ministry, and setting an example. All elders should be qualified and capable of involvement in all four. One of the qualifications is "able to teach." But there are many settings and areas of teaching. If one of the elders, the one called the pastor, is especially gifted in preaching and teaching the Word, there is no reason why he should not handle the bulk of the public preaching and teaching. In fact, it could be argued that 1 Timothy 5:17, while not validating a distinction between teaching elders and ruling elders, does recognize "a distinction in gifts and function within the eldership."⁵⁴ John Piper thinks it "very likely [that] one will be the 'preaching elder' while not excluding others from that responsibility."⁵⁵ Similarly, if an elder is particularly gifted in administration or visiting the sick, there is nothing wrong if he focuses his efforts in that area. All elders share in all the responsibilities of the elders, but they need not all share equally in all these responsibilities.

How do the other elders relate to the one called the pastor? Is he the senior elder, or the teaching elder? In New Testament terminology, the pastor is an elder, and all the elders are pastors. In terms of contemporary Baptist usage, the pastor is the one primarily responsible for the public preaching of the Word. He is usually paid and thus able to devote his full time to pastoral ministry. He is also the one most of the church members look to for leadership and ministry. By virtue of his intense involvement, experience, and giftedness, he may exercise leadership among the elders, but he should not seek to be the senior elder in the sense of ruling over them, lest he and the church lose one of the major advantages of a plurality of elders, namely, the help other mature and godly men give in decision making and leadership of the church. The pastor should see himself as one of the elders, accountable to them and under their corporate authority, even as they as a whole are under the ultimate authority of the congregation.

Another question could be asked concerning the relationship of the elders

54. White, "The Plural Elder-Led Church," 282.

55. Piper, "Rethinking the Governance," 17.

to the other staff members in churches with multiple staff. Are all staff members elders? Not automatically. Not all the jobs on a modern church staff require those who would qualify as elders. For example, many fine youth ministers, Christian education ministers, and music ministers could perform their ministries well, without necessarily meeting all the qualifications for elders. However, staff members exercising general pastoral oversight and leadership should probably qualify as elders to hold their positions. Which staff members function in that way would differ from church to church and from job description to job description. The other staff members, though they may have responsibility for a specific area of ministry, are accountable first to the elders, as those charged with general oversight of all the ministries of the church; second, to the congregation as a whole; and, ultimately, to the Lord.

How many elders should a church have? A church should set no fixed number, but wait to see how many the church recognizes as qualified and how many are willing to serve. However, the larger the church, the larger the number of elders it will need to shepherd the flock.

Another important issue would be the process for selecting elders. Scripture gives little explicit help on this matter. Paul and Barnabas appointed elders in the churches they planted (Acts 14:23); Titus was to appoint elders "in every town" in Crete (Titus 1:5). Aside from those two instances, elders and overseers appear in the churches of Jerusalem, Ephesus, Philippi, and elsewhere with no explanation. However, two biblical principles would seem to apply. The biblical support for congregational church government would argue for a role for the congregation in the process. The biblical teaching on the leadership role for the elders would support their involvement in and oversight of the process. Below are some suggestions for a process that incorporates these two biblical principles and that has been found workable in local church contexts.

Certainly, the pastor would want to preach very carefully on the qualifications for elders prior to any selection process. After careful examination of the qualifications, all members of the congregation would be invited to pray and submit nominees. Perhaps requiring that such nominations be accompanied by a rationale explaining how the person nominated meets the biblical qualifications would be advisable to lessen frivolous nominations or the idea that such nominations are a popularity contest.

Someone or some group would then have to screen the nominees. Ini-

tially, the screening committee might consist of the pastor and the deacons, or a special committee chosen for the purpose; later, the existing elder body would be the obvious choice. This group would receive and evaluate the nominees, with the pastor, or an elder, giving leadership and oversight. Some members of the committee may know of circumstances that would make some nominees ineligible. Those the group considered as at least possibly qualified would be contacted concerning their willingness to serve. Those willing would then be asked to complete some material, evaluating their own qualifications. They would be asked doctrinal questions, indicating their understanding of God, the gospel, the church, and other basic doctrinal issues. They would be asked to evaluate their own marriage and family relationships, and other aspects of the qualifications. The group would review each nominee's responses. All those seen as willing and qualified would be brought before an ordination council. Such a council is often formed of local pastors but could be formed of a local church's elders as well. This council would ask further questions relating to the fitness of the nominees to serve as elders. The council would then issue a recommendation to the church, in favor of or opposed to ordination.

The names of those nominated and recommended for ordination and service as elders of the church would then, for the first time, be made known to the church at large. Those who were initially nominated but not recommended would never be mentioned publicly. A period of time (two to three weeks) would be given for any church member to give a reason to the committee why a nominee is unqualified and should not be accepted. The committee would investigate any such charge. If found valid, the nomination would be withdrawn. If there were no challenge, or any challenges were found to be invalid, the congregation would be asked to affirm or reject the nominee. While all prospective leaders should receive a clear consensus of approval, it would probably be wise to specify a percentage (e.g., 75 percent of those voting) required for a nominee to be selected.

All those selected would be ordained. This ordination would not signify that the individual was entering "full-time vocational ministry" but would be the church's affirmation of his qualifications to serve as elder and recognition of his entering into ministry as one of their elders. A wise pastor would also set a priority on training new elders, especially in their first year or so of service.

A final matter in the selection of elders would be the issue of terms of

service or rotation. By virtue of his character, an elder should always serve as an example to the flock, but there is no biblical barrier to the possibility that an elder could take a time apart from active service in the church leadership. There are pluses and minuses to mandatory rotation from active service after a set length of time. Some advocate rotation on the ground that it keeps any one individual from accumulating too much power, but internal accountability among the elders should prevent that occurrence. More cogent is the observation that circumstances in an individual's life may change. Family or career responsibilities may change and affect one's ability to minister as an elder. Provision should be made for such situations. In opposition to mandatory rotation are the observations that some elders' skills and abilities in ministry may improve over time, that we don't force pastors to rotate out of their ministry, and that mandatory rotation could mean the replacement of qualified elders by unqualified or less qualified men. John Piper sees the issue of terms of service as balancing the need to have the most qualified men in positions of leadership with the need "to guard against burn out and stagnation."⁵⁶ On the whole, a church should have a provision for rotation of elders, and encourage elders to take a sabbatical from active service from time to time, but leave the final decision on an individual's rotation to the individual in consultation with the elders.

Finally, there should be a statement in a church's constitution or bylaws mandating an annual review of the church's leadership structure, to be done by the elders and reported to the congregation. This would include matters such as rotation of one or more elders off active service and the solicitation of nominees for new elders, if needed. It would also be an appropriate time for reviewing the paid staff of the church, and considering if further staff need to be added. It would also provide an opportunity to review the church's policies as to the qualifications and responsibilities of the elders, to inform new members and refresh longtime members on these matters.

All these proposals should be incorporated within the church's governing documents. Since some may believe that a plural eldership implies elder rule, it may be wise to state explicitly that ultimate authority for church decisions resides in the congregation, acting under Christ's lordship and headship, and that the authority exercised by the elders is delegated to them by the congregation and is ultimately subject to congregational review. It may even be helpful to delineate some of the specific decisions that are reserved for the

congregation (approval of budgets, hiring of staff, approval of elders, any decisions affecting the church as a whole) and those that are delegated to the elders. On the whole, though, it would be wise and healthy to keep the congregation as involved as practically possible, while recognizing the impossibility of congregational involvement on every minor item. Congregational involvement would seem to be an incentive to congregational commitment, which is another reason to preserve congregational government alongside a plurality of leadership.

Moving a church to a plurality of elders could be problematic. It is still very much a minority view in Baptist life today, and Baptist churches like change as little as most other churches. There is no biblical command that requires churches to adopt a plural eldership and thus there is no problem with a pastor moving slowly on this issue or even working informally with a group he sees and relates to as elders, even if they are not recognized as such by the church. Some remain convinced that the single-elder model has a solid biblical basis or that there should be a primary elder if a church has a plural eldership. On the whole, the weight of the biblical evidence supports plural eldership, and the practical benefits offered by a plurality of elders seem considerable. Thus, churches should move toward a plural elder model with two conditions: (1) that the church have men who meet the qualifications for elder, and (2) that the church be accepting of such a change.