

Harvest Christian Fellowship
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Theology @ 9
“Elders”

“What kind of leadership does a healthy church have? Is it a congregation that strives to ensure that the gospel is faithfully preached? Yes (Galatians 1). Is it deacons who model service in the affairs of the church? Yes (Acts 6). Is it a pastor who is faithful in preaching the Word of God? Yes (2 Timothy 4). But the Bible presents one more leadership gift to churches to help them become healthy: the position of elder.”

-Mark Dever, “What is a Healthy Church?”

What is an elder? In Acts 6, the young church in Jerusalem began to bicker over how food was being distributed to the widows. The issue was important but seemed to divert the Apostles away from their primary roles as spiritual leaders and teachers of God’s Word in the church at Jerusalem. Can you think of issues you’ve seen in local churches of a similar caliber?

Acts 6:1–7 (ESV)

6 Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. ² And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, “It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. ³ Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. ⁴ **But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.**” ⁵ And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. ⁶ These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them. ⁷ And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.

- This, in the briefest terms, appears to be the division of labor between deacons and elders that we see developed throughout the rest of the New Testament.

- What have you been trained to believe is an elder’s (pastor) primary responsibility?

Elders and congregations

- There are three New Testament titles for the spiritual leaders of the church, and they are used interchangeably (for example, Acts 20:17 and 20:28)
- 1. *Episcopos*: translated in English as “overseer” or “bishop”
- 2. *Presbuteros*; translated in English as “elder”
- 3. *Poimain*; translated in English as “shepherd or pastor”

Acts 20:17,28 (ESV)

Now from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called the elders [presbuteros] of the church to come to him... “Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers [episcopos], to care for [poimain] the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.”

- Most evangelicals, when they hear the word “elder,” think of “Presbyterian.” However, the first Congregationalist churches in the 16th century clearly taught that eldership was an office for New Testament churches.
- Elders could also be found in Baptist churches in America throughout the 18th and 19th centuries. In fact, the first president of the Southern Baptist Convention, W.B. Johnson, wrote a treatise in 1846 calling Baptist churches to use a plurality of elders since the practice was biblical.

2 Major Differences between Baptist and Presbyterian Uses of “Elder”

1. **Authority:** Baptists most often are congregationalists, meaning, Baptists believe that the Bible teaches that the final decision on matters rests with the congregation as a whole, not with a church’s elders or anyone outside the church body.
- When Jesus teaches about confronting a sinful brother He said the congregation was the final court of appeal.

Matthew 18:17 (ESV) *“If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.”*

- When the Apostles sought out several men to act as deacons, they gave the decision to the entire congregation.

➤ In Paul's letters the congregation appears to assume final responsibility.

- **1 Corinthians 5:1–13 (ESV)**

5 It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father's wife. ² And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you.

³ For though absent in body, I am present in spirit; and as if present, I have already pronounced judgment on the one who did such a thing. ⁴ When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, ⁵ you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.

⁶ Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump?

⁷ Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our Passover lamb has been sacrificed. ⁸ Let us therefore celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

⁹ I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people— ¹⁰ not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. ¹¹ But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one. ¹² For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? ¹³ God judges those outside. "Purge the evil person from among you."

- **2 Corinthians 2:5–11 (ESV)**

⁵ Now if anyone has caused pain, he has caused it not to me, but in some measure—not to put it too severely—to all of you. ⁶ For such a one, this punishment by the majority is enough, ⁷ so you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. ⁸ So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him. ⁹ For this is why I wrote, that I might test you and know whether you are obedient in everything. ¹⁰ Anyone whom you forgive, I also forgive. Indeed, what I have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, has been for your sake in the presence of Christ, ¹¹ so that we would not be outwitted by Satan; for we are not ignorant of his designs.

The fact that Baptists embrace congregational church polity (and that the congregation has the final say in matters), does not engender necessarily a democratic governmental structure; i.e. "one man, one vote" on all matters. The congregation empowers elders to act on their behalf and is best served when informed, spiritual leaders lead the congregation. Thus, most day to day decisions are entrusted to the elders and even most significant matters of a spiritual nature. However, vital matters (including membership, leadership affirmation, church discipline, and doctrinal positions) are brought before the entire congregation for final decision.

- At HCF we admittedly are journeying a path most of us have never been down. We knew from the beginning that living together with a congregational church polity that is also elder led (not elder ruled) would take time to adjust to.
2. **Designations:** Presbyterians generally have two classifications of elders; ruling elders and teaching elders.

1 Timothy 5:17 (ESV) *“Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.”*

Baptists, on the other hand, recognize that some elders of the church are especially gifted to preach and teach, but that all elders are **able to teach** (this does not necessarily mean teach in a formal setting, but accurately be able to defend the faith and speak truth among the congregation). Thus, there is no formal “pecking order” among elders as they are, first and foremost, servants of the body of Christ.

Character of Elders

The pastoral role of elders demands mature and stable Christian character and a well-ordered personal life.

- 1 Timothy 3:1–7 (ESV) *“The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. ² Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, ³ not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. ⁴ He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, ⁵ for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God’s church? ⁶ He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil. ⁷ Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil.*
 - Titus 1:5–9 (ESV) *“This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you— ⁶ if anyone is above reproach, the husband of one wife, and his children are believers and not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination. ⁷ For an overseer, as God’s steward, must be above reproach. He must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or a drunkard or violent or greedy for gain, ⁸ but hospitable, a lover of good, self-controlled, upright, holy, and disciplined. ⁹ He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.”*
- Therefore, elders are not to be selected based on potential, but on demonstrated mature character, both personally and theologically.

Plurality of Elders

The New Testament never suggests a particular number of elders for a congregation, but it clearly and consistently refers to “elders” of a local church in the plural.

- Acts 14:23 (ESV) *“And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed.”*
- Titus 1:5 (ESV) *“This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you...”*

The plurality of elders does not mean that the pastor has no distinctive role.

- Preaching. There are many references in the NT that refer to preaching and preachers that do not apply to elders as a whole.
- 1 Corinthians 9:14 (ESV) *“In the same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel.”*
- 1 Timothy 4:13 (ESV) *“Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching.”*
- It is at least inferred that preachers are apt to be relocated for the purpose of preaching, whereas elders seemed settled among the community.
 - Romans 10:14–15 (ESV) *“How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? ¹⁵ And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!”*
- As the regular voice that proclaims God’s word, a faithful preacher will probably find that a congregation and the other elders treat him as the first among equals and especially worthy of double honor. Still the pastor is fundamentally an elder, called by the congregation to serve in a similar way as other elders.
 - 1 Timothy 5:17 (ESV) *“Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.”*

- Galatians 6:6-7 (ESV) *“Let the one who is taught the word share all good things with the one who teaches. Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap.”*

Benefits of elders

- The benefit of the counsel of many. Most decisions in church life do not require congregational participation, yet most decisions should not rest on one person.
- Shouldering the burden
- Accountability
- Removal of personal tyrannies
- My personal testimony

What about deacons?

Many modern churches tend to confuse elders with either the church staff or the deacons. As we saw earlier in Acts 6, deacons are generally concerned with the physical/temporal needs of the congregation while elders oversee and shepherd the congregation spiritually. This distinction, however, does not imply deacons are not concerned with the overall spiritual health of the body, or, that elders are not concerned with the members' physical estate.

The qualifications to serve as deacon are nearly identical with those of elder, with the exception of “teaching.” Likewise, when the church identifies/affirms deacons it does not look for men with potential, but, rather, acknowledges those who already possess such character and servant lifestyles.

So, have Baptists generally ignored the Bible regarding elders, deacons, pastors, and church leadership?

Historically Baptists did recognize the office of elder and the necessity of a plurality of spiritual leaders. Baptist churches in the United States have “grown up” alongside the nation and its strong, independent, democratic mindset. Additionally, many Baptists argue that they have always had elders and deacons; the pastor being “The” elder. There appears to be a trend towards elder leadership among Baptist churches.

References: Much of the above was taken from *“What is a Healthy Church?”* by Mark Dever, *“Concise Theology”* by JI Packer, and *“Systematic Theology”* by Wayne Grudem.