

The Place of Elders in Baptist Church Polity

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Introduction

Many contemporary scholars believe that the New Testament is silent, or ambiguous at the very least, on the topic of church government. George Eldon Ladd, theologian and former professor at Fuller Theological Seminary, laments that, "It appears likely that there was no normative pattern of church government in the apostolic age, and that the organizational structure of the church is no essential element in the theology of the church" (*A Theology of the New Testament*, p. 534). "Baptists in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries generally agreed. Church polity, they conceded, was not the most essential area of doctrine. But just because it was not central to salvation did not mean that it was not important. The doctrine of the church was as much revealed truth as the element of orthodox belief. For this reason Baptists sometimes disfellowshipped one another over disagreements in polity." (Wills, Greg. "The Church: Baptists and Their Churches in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries." *Polity*. Mark E. Dever, ed. Sheridan Books, 2001, 19.) Such opinions do not match those of our forefathers.

It is well for us to remember that the church is very important to our Triune God!

- It was eternally purposed in the mind of the Father (Rom. 8:29-30; Eph. 3:10-11).
- It was sacrificially purchased by the blood of the Son (1 Pet. 1:18; Acts 20:28).
- It was powerfully produced by the baptism of the Spirit (1 Cor. 12:13).
- It is wonderfully preserved by the promise of Jesus Christ (Matt. 16:18).

The *Ecclesia* ("Called out Assembly") that was prophesied in the Gospels (Matt. 16:18; Matt. 18:15-17) and produced in The Acts of the Apostles (Acts 2), is perfected in the Epistles. God's Word provides all that is necessary for the faith and practice (or organization and operation) of the local church (1 Tim. 3:15; 2 Tim. 3:16-17); yet, the church of the 21st century finds itself grievously divided on matters of church polity.

The church of the 21st century is divided as to which form of government is the best. Should the church be organized as an autocracy (the rule of one), an oligarchy (the rule of a small group) or a congregational democracy? Common forms of modern church government reflect different conclusions:

- The Universal Model –
- The National Model –
- The Episcopalian Mode–
- The Presbyterian Model –
- The Congregational Model –

The church of the 21st century is divided about which leaders should guide the church. Churches are becoming increasingly divided over this question, and the church of the 21st century elects elders, deacons, trustees, pastors, etc.

The New Testament teaches that the local church is to be a biblically-guided, pastor-led, and Spirit-controlled democracy. The New Testament provides a wonderful balance of power between pastoral leadership and congregational authority. Let's examine the foundational responsibilities of the congregation as we move toward discovering the role of elders in Baptist church life.

I. There are decisions that require the _____ declaration of the congregation.

Autocratic pastors, dictatorial elders and deacons with the spirit of Diotrophes need to take careful note. The New Testament provides that leadership is accountable to the democratic voice of the congregation. The very word ecclesia ("church") is rooted in democracy. "In Athens, the ecclesia was a governing body of the city; and its membership consisted of all the citizens of the assembly (Barclay, *The Letters of Timothy, Titus and Philemon*, p. 88). An ecclesia was a called-out assembly meeting to transact business. The New Testament tells us of the business transacted by the ecclesia. The congregational assembly maintains the decision making power over at least the following seven matters:

A. _____ require congregational action (Matt. 18:15-17).

The Lord makes us responsible to deal with difficult matters methodically. One day, we shall judge angels (1 Cor. 6:1-8). In Matthew 18 our Lord prescribes three disciplinary steps:

- o The _____ step
- o The _____ step
- o The _____ step

B. _____ requires congregational action (1 Cor. 5; 2 Cor. 2).

1 Corinthians 5:1-13 – The entire church must voice its displeasure with the disobedient brother. (Note: 2 Corinthians 2:6 says, "This punishment . . . was inflicted by the many.")

Since we have noted that the church is prophesied in the Gospels, produced in the Acts and perfected in the Epistles, it ought to follow that the Epistles provide the clearest instruction on the implementation of church discipline. Note the occasions that warrant church discipline:

1. When _____ purity is lost (1 Cor. 5)
2. When _____ purity is under attack (1 John 7-11; Rev. 2:18-22; 2 Tim. 4:3-5).
3. When _____ purity is compromised (2 Thes. 3:14; 1 Tim. 5:8).

Note: Church discipline is a very important matter and is not to be considered for the resolution of every problem. Church discipline is reserved for the resolution of matters of principle, not for matters pertaining to personality (i.e. Paul and Barnabas).

C. _____ selection requires congregational activity (Acts 6:1-7).

In Acts 6, the congregation is involved in selecting its leadership team (v. 3). In verse 5, we discover that it was the "multitude" that "chose Stephen." The word translated "chose" in verse 5 is the Greek word *ecklego* which means "to elect!" In verse 3, the Apostles maintained the responsibility of "appointing" (the word is *kathistemi* and has the idea of

“installing in office” or “ratifying” the electoral process as is also seen in Titus 1:5). The pattern of Acts 6 is not that of a self-perpetuating board, or of a pastorally appointed committee. The pattern set forward requires congregational activity.

- D. _____ of the Gospel required congregational accountability (Acts 13:1-3; 14:26-27).

It was the church as a whole which released (13:3) the missionaries and it was the church that heard the report of the missionaries upon their return (14:26-27).

- E. _____ on elders required congregational assent (Acts 14:23).

Notice that the “elders” were “ordained in every church.” The word translated “ordained” in this verse, is the Greek word, *cheirotoneo*. *Cheirtoneo* comes from two Greek words. “*Cheir*” means “hand” and “*teino*” means “to stretch” (we get our word “tendon” from this word). Literally, the people “stretched out their hands” and voted for those who would serve as elders.

- F. _____ positions require congregational approval (Acts 15:1-3, 22-23).

The record of the work of the Jerusalem Council found in Acts 15 is a record of representative government.

1. In verse 3, the representatives from Antioch were “being brought on their way by the church.” This is the Greek word *propempeo* and literally means to be sent “under authority” (see 2 Thes. 2:11; Mk. 5:12).
2. In verse 22 the “whole church” is involved in the sending of “chosen” men. The word translated “chosen” is the Greek word *eklego* which means “to elect.”

- G. _____ of funds required congregational authority (1 Cor. 16:3; 2 Cor. 8:19, 23).

In verse 3, we learn that certain ones were “approved.” This is the Greek word *dokimadzo*, a word that assumes the whole body’s involvement. In 2 Cor. 8:19, the Spirit of God affirms the involvement of the body and pictures it with the word “chosen”—*cheirotoneo* (stretching out the hand).

It would appear that the weightiest of decisions were made not by a committee, and not by an edict of the Bishop or elders, but rather by the democratically respected, Spirit-led voice of the congregation.

II. It is membership that protects the integrity of congregational government.

Is the matter of church membership an unimportant matter? Whose voice is to be heard in the *Ekklesia*?

- A. The biblical warrant for church membership.

1. You cannot be _____ from a group if you are not a recognized member of the group. Church membership protects congregational discipline/purity. (Matt. 18)
2. You cannot be a leader of a group if you are not a recognized member of the group. Church membership protects congregational _____. (Acts 6)
3. The church was able to be counted (Acts 2). Those that were counted with the congregation were evident.

B. The practical necessity of church membership.

1. Church leaders will one day give “account” of those for whom they are responsible to watch (Hebrews 13:7, 17). It is impossible to know whom we watch for without a membership.
2. Congregational government requires a carefully guarded membership. Only an active, informed, unified membership can make spirit led decisions in the church.

III. God-given and Spirit-enabled men are to provide leadership within congregational government.

Controversies abound with regard to the number, function and authority of the officers in the local church.

- A. The New Testament specifically teaches that _____ lead (1 Tim. 2:9-3:13; Acts 6:1-7).
- B. The New Testament specifically recognized _____ offices (1 Tim. 3:1-13; Phil. 1:1).
- C. Since the terms “bishop,” “elder,” and “shepherd” all speak of an individual serving in the office of “bishop” (1 Peter 5:1-4; Acts 20:17, 25-28) we can conclude:
 1. The New Testament does not allow some to be “teaching elders” and others “administrative elders.” All are to be “apt to teach” (1 Tim. 3:2) and should serve as “pastor-teachers” for the “perfecting of the saints” (Eph. 4:11-13).
 2. The New Testament does not allow some to be _____ and others to be unpaid (1 Cor. 9:14; 1 Tim. 5:18).
 3. The New Testament allows for some to serve singularly in the bishop’s office (1 Tim. 3:1-13; Revelation 2-3) while others serve collectively. (Note: Paul’s instruction to Timothy and to Titus is instruction given to a Pastor not to a board of elders. According to 1 Timothy 3:15, Paul is writing for the purpose of giving instruction for the operation of the local church. It is therefore noteworthy that the irreducible minimum instruction for officers calls for a singular Bishop and deacons (plural).

Conclusion

Autocratic bishops, dictatorial deacons and presumptuous elders have no place in the perfect model of polity set forth by the New Testament. ***The local church is to be a pastor-led, biblically guided, and Spirit controlled democracy.***