

Why Baptist Elders Is Not an Oxymoron¹

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Old photos of old men raised questions in my young mind. As a teenager, my curiosity was piqued upon seeing portraits of the pastors that served my home church during the nineteenth century. Each had the title, “Elder” under his name. I had some familiarity with elders among the local Presbyterian and Church of Christ congregations, but I had never heard of an elder in a one hundred year-old Baptist church. The old pictures were not lying—the First Baptist Church of Russellville, Alabama had once recognized elders. It appears that presbyters—plural eldership—from neighboring congregations held the responsibility for establishing and maintaining new churches in the area. First Baptist Russellville was founded in 1867 “with Elders R. J. Jennings and Mike Finney constituting the presbytery.”²

Admittedly, in some circles the title, “Elder,” was used much the same way that “Pastor” or “Brother” is used today. Beyond the title, however, the practice of plural eldership existed among some of the churches. While addressing the egalitarian distinction of Baptists functioning democratically, Baptist historian Greg Wills points out that in previous centuries, “Government [as distinguished from matters of discipline] related to the election of church officers—deacons,

¹The following article is taken from the forthcoming title *Elders in Congregational Life: A Model for Leadership in the Local Church* © 2004 by Phil A. Newton. Used by permission of Kregel Publications, Grand Rapids, MI. All rights reserved.

²Boyce Broadus, *Baptists of Russellville, Alabama 1867-1967* (Birmingham, AL: Banner Press, 1967), 3. Miss Broadus was the granddaughter of noted Southern Baptist Theologian John Broadus.

elders, and pastors.” He further explains, “Antebellum Baptists frequently called ordained ministers *elders*. Some churches also appointed “ruling” elders, who were not ordained ministers.”³ In detailing the history of early Baptists of Tennessee, J. H. Grimes frequently refers to pastors as *elder*. He identifies Elder John Bond in Statesville as “only a licensed minister at this time, but was regularly ordained by Union Church AD 1820, by a presbytery consisting of Elders Joshua Lester and David Gordon.” Bond subsequently served as pastor, but was called *elder* even before assuming the pastorate. Within Tennessee Baptist churches, Grimes further identifies plural eldership of men involved in pastoral leadership but not drawing a salary, and thus serving in what was termed, “lay elders.”⁴

David Tinsley, a prominent Baptist serving in Georgia in the late eighteenth century alongside Jesse Mercer’s father, Silas Mercer, was ordained four times. “The first was to the office of a deacon, the second to that of a ruling elder, his third ordination was to the office of preaching the gospel, and in the fourth place he was ordained an evangelist by Col. Samuel Harris, while he officiated in the dignified character of the Apostle of Virginia.”⁵ The first two of these offices represented non-paid, non-staff positions in the local church, placing Tinsley as

³Gregory A. Wills, *Democratic Religion: Freedom, Authority, and Church Discipline in the Baptist South, 1785-1900* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 51, 155 n. 4. He derives this conclusion from several eighteenth and nineteenth century historical records of Baptists in Georgia.

⁴J. H. Grimes, *History of Middle Tennessee Baptists* (Nashville: Baptist and Reflector, 1902), 158. Admittedly, the terms “ruling elders” and “lay elders” are not New Testament titles. However, the distinction in these titles resembles some of the common titles used in modern churches, e.g., *senior* pastor, *associate* pastor, pastor of *education*, and *executive* pastor. All are considered to be serving in pastoral roles but not all have the same function within the local church setting. The adjective qualifies the role just as it has done with the *ruling* elder and *lay* elder titles. I am indebted to Dr. Daniel Akin for raising questions about this important historical distinction (personal correspondence, July 24, 2003).

⁵David Benedict, *General History of the Baptist Denomination in America and Other Parts of the World* (Boston: Manning & Loring, 1813), 176.

part of the plural eldership in his church. His service with Silas Mercer demonstrates the prominence given to plural eldership by a noted leader among Baptists.⁶

Minutes of the Philadelphia Baptist Association 1707-1807, notably the leading association of Baptists in the Colonial period, gives ample evidence of plural eldership. In 1738, a question before the association sought to determine whether a ruling elder that had been set apart by the laying on of hands, and “should afterwards be called by the church, by reason of his gifts, to the word and doctrine [i.e., as pastor], must be again ordained by imposition of hands.” The answer was simple, “Resolved in the affirmative.”⁷ A cursory reading of the *Minutes* clearly proves the commonality of plural eldership among eighteenth century Baptists in the Northeast. Recognizing a distinction between ruling elders and those ministering the Word appears to have been the norm in the Philadelphia Association; ordination of ruling elders was left to the discretion of the individual churches.⁸ Plurality was clearly their practice.

In the South, some Baptists of the eighteenth and nineteenth century had plural eldership. “It was sometimes a formal recognition of the ordained ministers, the elders of their membership,” writes Wills. “These elders assisted the pastor as necessary in preaching and administering baptism and the Lord’s Supper. They were leaders of the congregation by their wisdom, piety, knowledge, and experience. Such churches recognized the gifts and calling of all

⁶Greg Wills, *Democratic Religion*, 31, identifies Silas Mercer in Georgia and Isaac Backus of Massachusetts as “Revolutionary War-era leaders” among Baptists. So Tinsley’s service in plural eldership took place within a prominent church.

⁷A. D. Gillette, Editor, *Minutes of the Philadelphia Baptist Association 1707 to 1807, Being the First One Hundred Years of its Existence* (Springfield, MO: Particular Baptist Press, 2002, reprinted from the 1851 edition), 39.

⁸Gillette, 102.

elders among them.”⁹ It is at this point we find that many Baptists made a distinction between ruling elders and teaching elders. Ruling elders focused on the administrative and governing issues of church life while the teaching elders exercised pastoral responsibilities, including administering the ordinances. The title of ruling elders eventually faded in active church life by 1820 due to the Baptist distinctive of ecclesiastical authority residing in the congregation. Some considered that the pastor and deacons constituted the eldership. Not all agreed, including the first president of the Southern Baptist Convention, W.B. Johnson, who “taught that Christ strictly required each church to have plural eldership,” which implied a distinction between plural eldership and plural diaconate.¹⁰

The place of elders in Baptist life did not begin in America. Plural eldership was common in England during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. A. C. Underwood notes several examples of lay elders¹¹ as part of the plurality of elders in local English Baptist churches. He demonstrates that early Baptists not only recognized elder plurality but also distinguished their functions within local churches. He mentions the seventeenth century Broadmead Church in Bristol that had a pastor, ruling elders, deacons and deaconesses (who were presumably widows supported by the largesse of a ruling elder).¹²

⁹Greg Wills, “The Church: Baptists and Their Churches in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries,” in Mark Dever, editor, *Polity: Biblical Arguments on How to Conduct Church Life* (Washington, DC: Center for Church Reform, 2001), 33-34.

¹⁰Ibid. 5. Wills summarizes Johnson’s view.

¹¹My use of “lay elders” by way of explaining the historical practice of plural eldership is not an endorsement of the term for modern usage. A better distinction, when necessary for explanation, might be “non-staff elders” serving with the elders that constitute the church staff. This assumes that, unlike staff elders, the non-staff elders receive no compensation from the church for their service.

¹²A. C. Underwood, *A History of the English Baptists* (London: The Carey Kingsgate Press Limited, 1947), 130-131.

Baptist eldership in England differed from Presbyterian eldership. Early Baptists “recoiled at the prospect” of elders in one church functioning as elders in another, hence the idea of a synod or presbytery outside of the local church would be unheard of among them due to the congregational perspective concerning the weight of authority placed in the local congregation. The only exception appears to be when they helped in ordaining officers or administering the ordinances upon approval of the local church. These functioned as ministers of the gospel but without pastoral authority in the local church.¹³ Unlike Presbyterians, most of the English Baptists of this era rejected the idea of “ruling elders.” In Devonshire Square Church in London where William Kiffin was pastor, they recognized “a parity within the eldership;” that is, each elder shared responsibility and authority within the church. Quoting from primary sources, James Renihan illustrates, “At Kensworth, Bedfordshire, in 1688, three men were chosen jointly and equally to officiate in the room of [the deceased pastor] Brother Hayward in breaking bread, and other administration of ordinances, and the church did at the same time agree to provide and mainetane [sic] all at there one charge.”¹⁴ The renowned Benjamin Keach rejected the idea of ruling elders as a distinct position but allowed that the church might “choose some able and discreet Brethren to be *Helps in Government*,” presumably either as a separate alliance or more likely as members of plural eldership.¹⁵ Renihan points out, “that at least a small number of the churches made a distinction between teaching and ruling elders.” In such cases, “The pastor was the “chiefe [sic] of ye Elders of ye Church,” while the ruling elders shared with him its

¹³James M. Renihan, *The Practical Ecclesiology of the English Particular Baptists, 1675-1705: The Doctrine of the Church in the Second London Baptist Confession as Implemented in the Subscribing Churches* (Ph.D. diss., Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 1997), 196.

¹⁴Renihan, 201.

¹⁵Renihan 202.

oversight.¹⁶ Certainly not all of the English Baptist churches of this era followed elder plurality but “the majority of the Particular Baptists were committed to a plurality and parity of elders in their churches,” believing plural eldership “necessary for a completed church.”¹⁷

Elders were never to lord their position over their churches. They were “stewards responsible to their Master, and servants to their people.” Their duties, according to Nehemiah Coxe in a 1681 ordination sermon, were “prayer (leading worship), preaching and the exercise of discipline; and the private duties as visiting the flock, encouraging, exhorting and rebuking them.”¹⁸ Hanserd Knollys, another of the remarkable leaders among English Baptists of the seventeenth century, described the duties of plural eldership.

The Office of a *Pastor, Bishop, and Presbyter, or Elder* in the Church of God, is to take the Charge, Oversight, and Care of those Souls in which the Lord Jesus Christ hath committed to them, to feed the Flock of God; to watch for their Souls, to Rule, Guide and Govern them... according to the laws, Constitutions and ordinances of the Gospel.¹⁹

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

That being thus joyned [sic], every Church has power given them from Christ for their better well-being, to choose to themselves meet persons into the office of Pastors, Teachers, Elders, Deacons, being qualified according to the Word, as those which Christ has appointed in his Testament, for the feeding, governing, serving, and building up of his Church, and that none other have power to impose them, either these or any other.²⁰

Similar to the London Confession of Baptists, the 1658 Savoy Declaration, the Congregationalist confession that contained much of the substance of later Baptist confessions,

¹⁶Renihan, 203.

¹⁷Renihan, 205.

¹⁸Renihan, 210, summarizing Coxe’s comments.

¹⁹Renihan, 210, quoting Knollys’ work, *The Word that Now is*, 52.

identifies “Pastors, Teachers, Elders, and Deacons” as “the officers appointed by Christ to be chosen and set apart by the Church.” The Baptist Confession of 1688 (the Philadelphia Confession) follows the language of the Savoy Declaration with a change only in the offices identified as “bishops or elders and deacons.” The New Hampshire Confession of 1833, the foundational document for Southern Baptist’s 1925 *Baptist Faith and Message*, identifies the local church’s only scriptural officers as “Bishops, or Pastors, and Deacons, whose qualifications, claims, and duties are defined in the Epistles to Timothy and Titus.”²¹ The Abstract of Principles (1858), the confession still used at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, stated, “The regular officers of a Church are Bishops or Elders, and Deacons.” While the 1925 *Baptist Faith and Message* of Southern Baptists identifies the office of elders, both the 1963 and 2000 *Baptist Faith and Message* revisions eliminate the titles bishop and elder, opting for “its Scriptural officers are pastors and deacons.” The change demonstrates how plural eldership fell out of use in Baptist thought during the early to mid-twentieth century, even though commonly practiced in many churches for over two centuries.²²

Admittedly, the confessional statements are somewhat vague, allowing those who affirmed elder plurality and those objecting to it to fit into the confessional framework. Certainly

²⁰John Piper, *Biblical Eldership: Shepherd the Flock of God Among You* (www.desiringgod.org/library/tbi/bib_eldership.html, n.d.), Appendix 1.

²¹Philip Schaff, ed., *The Creeds of Christendom with a History and Critical Notes: The Evangelical Protestant Creeds with Translations*, vol. III, rev. David Schaff (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, reprinted 1993, sixth edition), 725, 739, 747.

²²Paul Burleson, in a sermon, “An Historical Study of Baptist Elders—1 Peter 5:14,” at Trinity Baptist Church in Norman, OK (<http://www.hhbc.com/webpages/baptist1.htm>), 2, offers three reasons for the decline of elders in Baptist life in the late 1800’s to 1900’s. First, in the expansion of Baptist churches into the west, the single pastor/church planter often served as a circuit riding minister, handling the bulk of church duties with plural eldership fading in the process. Presumably, qualified male leadership was scarce in the early days. Second, the rise of Landmarkism, with its emphasis on “democratic rule with no elder rule” had profound influence on Southern Baptist life and practice. Third, “the rise of the Campbelites,” now called the Church of Christ, who “used the word elder exclusively,” caused Baptists to react and throw out the name elder, using only the word pastor for those involved in church ministry and leadership.

not all of the English Baptist and Colonial Baptist churches practiced plural eldership. By some accounts, only a minority did so. Yet the presence of plural eldership among notable leaders and strong churches contradicts the notion that eldership is an anomaly among Baptists. Modern Baptists seeking to embrace plural eldership have a good heritage as a foundation.²³

This heritage radiates clearly through some of the polity documents of earlier Baptists. Benjamin Griffith in “A Short Treatise Concerning a True and Orderly Gospel Church” (1743) clearly taught elder plurality, pointing to ruling elders as those gifted “to assist the pastor or teacher in the government of the church.” He further explained, “The works of teaching and ruling belong both to the pastor; but in case he be unable; or the work of ruling too great for him, God hath provided such for his assistance, and they are called ruling elders.” His whole idea was that such elders were to come alongside the pastor who labors at the ministry of the Word, strengthening his hands for the demands of Christian ministry. In this sense, Griffith insists on the practicality of employing a plurality of elders “in easing the pastor or teacher, and keeping up the honor of the ministry.”²⁴

As one of the founders of the Southern Baptist Convention, and its first denominational president, W. B. Johnson left a legacy of biblical fidelity and passion for the gospel. His work on church polity, “The Gospel Developed through the Government and Order of the Churches of Jesus Christ” (1846) remains trustworthy in encouraging Baptist churches to faithfulness to the Word of God. After outlining the biblical evidence of plural eldership in the first century churches, Johnson explained that each elder (or “bishop” as he called them, though he preferred

²³I am indebted to Shawn Wright, assistant professor of church history at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, for research and comments that helped to clarify this point (personal correspondence January 24, 2003).

²⁴Dever, *Polity*, 98.

the term “overseer”) brought “a particular talent” to the needs of the church. He added, “The importance and necessity of a bishopric for each church, embodying gifts for various services, is thus most obvious for the accomplishment of one of the great ends for which Christ came into the world, and for which, when he ascended up on high, he received gifts for men” (i.e., the purpose of ministry as outlined in Eph. 4:12-16). Each elder brings a different set of gifts and abilities to the mixture in a plurality so that the whole body profits by this sharing together in ministry. Explaining the benefit of more minds thinking together upon the complexities of ministry he states, “A plurality in the bishopric is of great importance for mutual counsel and aid, that the government and edification of the flock may be promoted in the best manner.”²⁵ In reviewing the Scriptural teaching on elders, Johnson explains, “These rulers were all equal in rank and authority, no one having a preeminence over the rest. This satisfactorily appears from the fact, that the same qualifications were required in all, so that though some labored in word and doctrine, and others did not, the distinction between them was not in rank, but in the character of their service.”²⁶

Johnson was realistic. Although acknowledging that elder plurality was required, he noted that some churches might not be able to establish a plurality immediately. “In a church where more than one [elder] cannot be obtained, that one may be appointed upon the principle, that as soon as another can be procured there shall be a plurality.”²⁷ Further, Johnson clearly distinguished the elders and deacons. The elders’ office is spiritual, while that assigned to the deacons is temporal. “Whatever of temporal care the interests of the church require, *that* care

²⁵Dever, *Polity*, 192-193.

²⁶Dever, *Polity*, 191.

²⁷Dever, *Polity*, 194.

falls upon the *deacons*, as the *servants* of the church.”²⁸ Of course, deacons function in plurality as well.

May we conclude that every Baptist church of the past had elder plurality? Obviously not. However, in light of Baptists’ historical emphasis on the autonomy of the local church, clearly the Baptists we have noted believed plurality of elders to be the New Testament model. After surveying historical Baptist confessions, John Piper drew his own conclusion, “The least we can say from this historical survey of Baptist Confessions is that *it is false to say that the eldership is unbaptistic*. On the contrary, the eldership is more baptistic than its absence, and its disappearance is a modern phenomenon that parallels other developments in doctrine that make its disappearance questionable at best.”²⁹

The past two hundred years has witnessed the demise in elder plurality among Baptists. Pastors are expected to abandon the shepherding role for that of becoming “ranchers,” a term used often by church growth leaders. Many well known pastors resemble corporate CEO’s rather than the New Testament office of humble shepherd. Their staffs have taken on the corporate board air. Churches have become big businesses, requiring corporate structures that mirror many successful companies. Some of the mega-church pastors have achieved such success that they now advise businesses.

An honest examination at the condition of the church at large today raises questions regarding our diligence to conform to Scripture in our polity. Are our churches more conformed to the image of Christ? Are we so transformed by holiness of life that we are the salt and light in our communities that our Lord declared us to be? Are the moral and family values of church members appreciably different from the typical American home? Are local congregations

²⁸Dever, *Polity*, 196-197.

nurtured and disciplined as was our New Testament counterparts? Are the exaggerated membership rolls that have been fomented by the success driven, CEO model for the church legitimate bragging rights in denominational circles? Does the average church display the kind of unity which the apostles exhorted and for which Jesus Christ prayed? Do church staffs make the most of the godly, capable leaders within the congregation? Are pastors and staff members held accountable to anyone beside themselves? Could it be that the alarming rate of immoral behavior among ministers is due to a disconnection between the church staff and a plurality of godly elders comprised of staff and lay leadership?

Baptist forebears sought to anchor their church structure and practice in the teaching of Holy Scripture. Shunning conformity to the world's designs that were prevalent in their times, these stalwarts used the truths of Scripture to forge a path for their heirs. In the end, whether or not Baptists historically practiced plural eldership is secondary. The primary focus for church leaders today must be to understand the teaching of God's Word, and then to order the local church accordingly. History merely serves to affirm the veracity of Scripture.

Reflections

- What part does history play in one's understanding of modern church life?
- Did all of the early Baptist churches practice elder plurality?
- What was W. B. Johnson's position on plural eldership?
- Why was there a movement away from elder plurality among nineteenth and twentieth century Baptists?

²⁹Piper, *Biblical Eldership*, Appendix 1.