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**A NOBLE TASK: A BIBLICAL DEFENSE OF ELDER-RULE
POLITY IN THE SOUTHERN BAPTIST CONTEXT**

Michael R. Burgos¹

This study examines the biblical and theological basis for elder-rule church governance, beginning with a consideration of the origin of the office and the NT's characterization of elders. Elder-rule is not a historically Baptist approach to polity, but numerous passages within the NT support both a plurality of ruling elders and the appointment of elders by elders. The objections to elder-rule polity put forward by proponents of congregationalism are evaluated and shown to rest on conclusions that sometimes fall short of consistent exegesis. Lastly, an exploration of whether elder-rule polity may subsist within the context of the Southern Baptist Convention showed that the theological diversity among Southern Baptist churches suggests that Baptist identity in the Southern Baptist Convention depends on general but not exact agreement with the Baptist Faith and Message.

Keywords:

Baptist Polity, Elders, Congregationalism, Southern Baptist Convention

Recent debates within the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) related to the pastoral office and local church governance have demonstrated a persistent divide in how Southern Baptists understand the church and its offices. While the most common church governance model among contemporary Southern Baptists is likely single-pastor

¹ Michael Burgos, PhD., serves Forge Theological Seminary as President and Professor of Theology and Biblical Counseling. He also serves as Preaching Pastor at Northwest Hills Community Church in Torrington, CT.

congregationalism,² elder-led congregationalism has experienced a revival in popularity, partially owing to the influence of organizations such as Nine Marks and Founders Ministries. Whereas Baptists have historically practiced elder-led congregationalism,³ a minority of Southern Baptist churches affirm a non-congregationalist form of polity known as elder-rule.

This study will provide a biblical, theological, and practical substantiation of elder-rule church governance. Throughout this study, proponents of elder-led congregationalism will serve as the primary interlocutors. It will be argued that, although not a historically Baptist approach to church governance, elder-rule best satisfies the expectations of Scripture.

The Office of Elder

Curiously, the NT does not include any indication of the establishment of a new office of elder. While the NT specifies that a plurality of elders are to lead a local congregation, it does not offer a defense of the office. Rather, the need for a plurality of elders who lead a congregation is assumed. Paul believed that a properly functioning church required a plurality of men to govern its affairs, and, therefore, he ordered Titus to “put what remained into order, and appoint elders in

² Mark Dever, Paul Alexander, *The Deliberate Church: Building Your Ministry on the Gospel* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2005), 131.

³ See “A True Confession,” §22–25 in William L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Philadelphia, PA: The Judson Press, 1959), 89–90; *London Baptist Confession of Faith* (1689), §26.8–9; Michael A. G. Haykin, “Some Historical Roots of Congregationalism” in Mark Dever, Jonathan Leeman eds., *Baptist Foundations: Church Government for an Anti-Institutional Age* (Nashville, TN: B & H Academic, 2015), 27–45.

every town” (Titus 1:5).⁴ This implies that the concept of elders preexisted the NT and was appropriated by the apostles and the broader church.⁵ Since the Jewish synagogue is the practical vorlage of the local Christian church, synagogue elders were likely the forerunner of the NT’s office of elder, as Craig Keener observed: “The primary leadership model that the Christians had available to adapt was leadership in the synagogue.”⁶ He notes further: “That early Christians adapted the title of ‘elders’ from contemporary Judaism may be regarded as fairly certain.”⁷ Therefore, a brief consideration of the function of synagogue elders is needed before a discussion of the NT office.

Synagogue Elders

Drawing upon the Talmudic evidence, John Lightfoot argues that the establishment of a synagogue required a community to have “ten

⁴ Unless otherwise noted, all English biblical citations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016).

⁵ Campbell has argued extensively against viewing synagogue elders as a distinct office and suggests that the term elder “Cannot be shown to have denoted officers of a religious organization, whether the synagogue congregation or in the Qumran sect...” Instead, he asserts that the term denotes a place of esteem and prestige. He is careful not to rule out the possibility of the existence of an actual office. While there was undoubtedly a significant amount of honor associated with the role, the descriptions in the NT portray a distinct and identifiable group (i.e., an office). R. Alastair Campbell, *The Elders: Seniority within Earliest Christianity* (London, UK; New York: T&T Clark, 2004), 65. Other writers have argued that the existence of the office of elders with Second Temple synagogues is inarguable: “There is no question that the presbyter was an integral part of the synagogue officialdom in many locales.” Lee I. Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue: The First Thousand Years*, 2nd ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 2005), 432.

⁶ Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015), 2184.

⁷ Keener, *Acts*, 2187.

learned men professedly students of the law.”⁸ Three of these men would serve as elders or “rulers of the synagogue” (ἀρχισυνάγωγοι) whose function was tantamount to civil magistrates within the fellowship.⁹ These men would manage all aspects of the synagogue, handle its finances, adjudicate disagreements and complaints, oversee the Sabbath service, and appoint other elders through the laying on of hands.¹⁰ The elders would jointly offer readings and explanations of the law in conjunction with a resident priest.¹¹ Lightfoot concluded, “These were properly, and with good reason, called ἀρχισυνάγωγοι, rulers of the synagogue because on them laid the chief care of things, and the chief power.”¹²

⁸ J. B. Lightfoot, *Horae Hebraicae et Talmudicae: Hebrew and Talmudical Exercitations Upon the Gospels, the Acts, Some Chapters of St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans, and the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, vol. 2 (Oxford, UK: Oxford Univ. Press, 1859), 89.

⁹ Several sources portray the rulers and elders of a synagogue as distinct offices. E.g., Gerhard Kittel et al. eds., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1964), 91 and vol. 7, 894. This conclusion is entirely dependent upon burial inscriptions in which the titles are apparently differentiated. Campbell notes that among these inscriptions, the title “elder” is “comparatively rare.” *The Elders*, 52. Because the term πρεσβύτερος may bear connotations beyond synagogue leadership, and because of its relative rarity, the distinction in inscription titles is too slight a hook upon which to hang two distinct offices. Assuming that ἄρχων is synonymous with ἀρχισυνάγωγος, the only possible NT example of such a distinction is Peter's address to the Sanhedrin in Acts 4:8 (“Rulers [ἄρχοντες] of the people and elders [πρεσβύτεροι]...”). However, Peter likely uses the two terms to reflect the diversity of leaders that comprised the Sanhedrin (cf. Acts 4:5, v. 23).

¹⁰ Lightfoot, *Horae Hebraicae et Talmudicae*, 90.

¹¹ Philo explained: “[The] priest who is present, or some one of the elders, reads the sacred laws to them, and interprets each of them separately till eventide.” Charles Duke Yonge with Philo of Alexandria, *The Works of Philo: Complete and Unabridged* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995), 744.

¹² Lightfoot, *Horae Hebraicae et Talmudicae*, 90.

While it is often claimed that there was only one such ruler per synagogue,¹³ the NT describes a plurality of synagogue rulers. Mark describes Jairus as “one of the rulers of the synagogue” (Mark 5:22) and Luke mentions the “rulers of the synagogue” in Antioch who invited Paul and Barnabas to speak to their congregation (Acts 13:15).¹⁴ When referring to the leadership of a particular community, the Sanhedrin, or origin of Jewish religious tradition, the NT always refers to “elders” and never “elder” (e.g., Matt. 15:2; Luke 9:22; Acts 6:12).

The New Testament Description of Elders

The qualifications for the office of elder laid out by Paul require that those who hold the office must not only meet a high standard of moral integrity and personal competence, they require that elders rule over the flock as under-shepherds of Christ (1 Tim. 3:1-7; Titus 1:6–9). In 1 Timothy 3:4–5, Paul establishes the manner in which a man manages his household as a metric for his potential competence in managing the church: “He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God’s church?” The

¹³ See for example the comments of Elwell and Beitzel: “It is generally understood that there was only one such official in any one synagogue.” Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel, “Ruler of the Synagogue,” in *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 1870. This sentiment is also implied in William Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 139.

¹⁴ Cf. Justin Martyr, “Dialogue of Justin with Trypho, a Jew,” in *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, vol. 1, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1885), 268.

implication is that “the same qualities are required in both spheres.”¹⁵ How a husband and father manages his household is generally how the elders care for the church. Ceslas Spicq notes that the verb translated “care” in v. 5 (i.e., ἐπιμελέομαι) was used in antiquity “especially for the care and devotion shown by parents or nurses to children.”¹⁶ There is little question about how Paul envisioned the order of the Christian home (1 Cor. 11:3; Eph. 5:22–24). Husbands lead their families and children, and wives submit to their husbands. If the home is analogous to the household of God, elders authoritatively lead the church just as husbands authoritatively lead in the home.

Paul describes the leaders of the Ephesian church using two complementary nouns, namely “elders” and “overseers” (Acts 20:17, v. 28). He describes these leaders as appointed by the Holy Spirit to “shepherd the church of God” (v. 28). While the terms “elder” and “overseer” are explicitly applied to the same group of Ephesian elders, the term “pastor” is implied through the use of the verb ποιμαίνω (cf. Eph. 4:11). These titles describe the single office of elder as authoritative, attentive, and protective.

Paul charged the Ephesian elders to guard their congregation against “fierce wolves” who would seek to devour the flock (Acts 20:29). Therefore, the Ephesian elders would need vigilance and authority to drive out wolves and to admonish those who flirted with their false doctrine.

¹⁵ I. Howard Marshall, Philip H. Towner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles*, International Critical Commentary (London, UK; New York: T&T Clark Int., 2004), 481.

¹⁶ Ceslas Spicq, *Theological Lexicon of the New Testament*, vol. 2 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Pub., 1994), 50.

Peter wrote,

So I exhort the elders among you, mas a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: Shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory (1 Peter 5:2–4).

Peter envisions elders as under-shepherds who serve the chief Shepherd through intentional pastoral care. That Peter charges elders to shepherd their congregation “not as ones lording over [the flock]” (μηδ’ ὡς κατακυριεύοντες), requires that elders must properly steward the authority of their office. Were the churches Peter addressed congregationally governed, he might have exhorted the congregations to serve as a check on those elders who domineered. Instead, Peter addressed the elders directly, charging them to regulate their exercise of control in light of the eschaton.

Peter went on to instruct those men who are young in the faith to “be subject to the elders” (v. 5).¹⁷ Peter’s charge does not imply that the entire congregation should not submit to their elders but that the spiritually immature should especially submit to their oversight and example. Similarly, the author of Hebrews wrote, “Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those

¹⁷ On the interpretation of νέος see Peter H. Davids, *The First Epistle to Peter*, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1990), 183–84. It stands to reason that if the noun refers to youth, the referents are necessarily young in the faith.

who will have to give an account” (Heb. 13:17).¹⁸ While elders are not explicitly mentioned herein, they are undoubtedly in view.

If elders are responsible for a congregation to the extent that they will give an account to God for the souls under their watch, it necessarily follows that elders have the authority to guide, direct, and govern their congregation. Mark Dever asserted, “Only the congregation is finally accountable to God for the church’s actions in discipline and doctrine.”¹⁹ However, if elders will give an account for the souls of those they shepherd, they bear responsibility for the church and its doctrine.

Paul wrote, “Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching” (1 Tim. 5:17). John Hammett has sought to lessen the force of Paul’s description: “The word translated ‘ruling’ in that verse (*prohistēmi*) can bear a variety of senses, from ruling to managing to directing.”²⁰ While it is true that words have a semantic range, Hammett’s assertion questions the typically English rendering of the term without an explanation of what sense is intended by προϊστημι.²¹ The other three occurrences of the verb in 1 Timothy (3:4–5; 3:12) refer to how a

¹⁸ On the idiom λόγον ἀποδώσοντες, see Matt. 12:36; Rom. 14:12; Luke 16:2; 1 Peter 4:5. It is likely that ὡς with the future participle gives the idiom the sense of intent (i.e., “as those who intend to give an account”). See A. T. Robertson, *Grammar of the Greek New Testament in Light of Historical Research* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Pub. 1914), 974. It stands to reason, however, that if these leaders believe they are to give an accounting for the souls they oversee, it is because they will (cf. Jas. 3:1).

¹⁹ Mark Dever, *By Whose Authority?: Elders in Baptist Life* (n.l.: 9Marks, 2006), 32.

²⁰ John S. Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches: A Contemporary Ecclesiology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic, 2019), 142.

²¹ See D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1996), 60–1.

husband manages his household; therefore, it may be safely inferred that what Paul has in view is not congregationalism.

A similar use of *προϊστημι* occurs in 1 Thessalonians 5:12–13: “We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves.” For Paul, elders are “over” or “have charge over” (NASB) and counsel their congregations. The verb functions as a substantive, and thus, Paul characterizes the ministry of elders in terms of laborious oversight. For this reason, elders are due high esteem.

Who Appoints Elders?

It must be noted that there is very little evidence for the democratic appointment of elders in the biblical text. Indeed, the NT does not provide a list of specific procedures for appointing elders. What it does provide is the consistent portrayal of leaders appointing other leaders. Just as Moses “chose able men out of all Israel and made them heads over the people” (Exod. 18:25), Paul and Barnabus choose elders for the churches at Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch (Acts 14:23). Paul commanded Titus to appoint elders in every church in Crete (Titus 1:5), and he told Timothy, “Do not neglect the gift you have, which was given you by prophecy when the council of elders laid their hands on you” (1 Tim. 4:14). In addition to denoting the bestowal of spiritual gifts and blessings, the laying on of hands in this fashion indicates the conferral of authority from one to another for the commission of a particular ministry (cf. Exod. 29:22; Num. 27:18–23; Acts 13:3; 2 Tim. 1:6). Thus, Paul told Timothy, “Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands” (1 Tim. 5:22). That is, Paul did not want Timothy to appoint elders for the sake of expediency hurriedly. Instead, Paul desired Timothy to carefully evaluate the men of Ephesus in order to ensure the best appointment.

While there is not a specific outline for their appointment, the preponderance of NT evidence suggests that elders should appoint elders, as John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue note: “Whether appointment was made by an apostle, an apostolic delegate, or a team of local church elders, the basic principle is clear: the ordination of new elders is the responsibility of those who currently serve as part of the church’s recognized spiritual leadership.”²² The typical elder-rule approach to the installation of an elder begins with carefully observing those men within a congregation who might meet the biblical qualifications (1 Tim. 3:1–7; Titus 1:5–9).²³ Their goal is to emulate Paul’s command to Timothy: “What you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also” (2 Tim. 2:2). Following a period of prayerful evaluation of the candidate’s life in light of the biblical qualifications, the council of elders should consult the congregation for input,²⁴ and eventually appoint qualified candidates through the laying on of hands. This pattern follows the explicit depictions of the appointment of elders in the NT since the elders Paul and Barnabus appointed were the elders who appointed Timothy.

Congregationalist Objections to Elder-Rule Appointment

The main biblical arguments presented by proponents of congregational governance against the elder-rule approach to the appointment of elders are not dependent on the most relevant biblical

²² John MacArthur, Richard Mayhue eds., *Biblical Doctrine: A Systematic Summary of Bible Truth* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 765.

²³ See for example Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership: An Urgent Call to Restore Biblical Church Leadership*, rev. ed. (Littleton, CO: Lewis & Roth Pub., 1995), 277–89.

²⁴ This is implied by the qualifications in 1 Tim. 3:2–4.

passages but on texts that do not directly relate to the appointment of elders. This divulges the weakness of the position from the outset. The most substantial of these arguments are considered below.

Acts 1:15–26

The appointment of Matthias to the office of apostle was deemed necessary by Peter, given Judas' fate (Acts 1:18–19). Peter articulated the criteria for appointment, namely, that the candidate must have been a disciple from Jesus' baptism and an eyewitness of the resurrection (vv. 21–22). Two candidates were proposed (v. 23). However, whether the male brothers or the entire company of disciples participated in the selection is unclear. Paige Patterson assumes that the entirety of one hundred and twenty people "were involved in the nomination of two," but he does so without any exegetical basis.²⁵ Since the nearest antecedent is ἄνδρες ἀδελφοί (v. 16), it may be that the men or possibly even the twelve were the intended primary audience of Peter's address.²⁶ Subsequently, Matthias was chosen through the casting of lots (v. 26).

W. B. Johnson argues that the casting of lots "is the same with the giving of votes" and that Matthias was chosen through popular vote.²⁷ However, it is doubtful that v. 26 indicates anything remotely similar to a simple vote. The practice of casting lots was a dispassionate method of

²⁵ Paige Patterson, "Single Elder Congregationalism" in Stephan B. Cowan ed., *Who Runs the Church?: Four Views on Church Government* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 146. See also Benjamin Merkle, *40 Questions About Elders and Deacons* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic, 2008), 38–9.

²⁶ Paul Ellingworth, "Men and Brethren," *The Bible Translator* 55, no. 1: 153–55.

²⁷ W. B. Johnson, "The Gospel Developed," in Mark Dever ed., *Polity: Biblical Arguments on How to Conduct Church Life* (n.l.: Center for Church Reform, 2001), 209.; cf. 214.

choosing something or someone through an appeal to the sovereign decree of God: “The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD” (Prov. 16:33; cf. 1 Sam. 10:19–24).²⁸ Indeed, Peter states explicitly that the Lord chose Matthias (Acts 1:24). The casting of lots was precisely the opposite of a popular vote. Rather, it was a means of decision-making that relied upon the providence of God to select his choice.

The account of Matthias’ appointment is an unsuitable basis on which to even partially ground congregationalism. The ambiguity of who Peter addressed aside, the unique occasion of replacing one of the twelve through the casting of lots is mainly irrelevant to the appointment of elders. Even so, congregationalist writers have persistently mischaracterized Acts 1:15–26 in order to find support for their view. For example, B. S. Poh concludes, “Matthias was chosen by the people, under the guidance of the existing church-officers.”²⁹ This, however, is to ignore the plain reading of the text.

Acts 6:1–7

Proponents of congregational forms of church governance appeal to the appointment of deacons in Acts 6:1–7 wherein the apostles direct the church to choose seven men “of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint” (v. 3).³⁰ Samuel Waldron’s

²⁸ Patricia Cone, Adam J. Silverstein, “The Ancient Near East and Islam: The Case of Lot Casting,” *Journal of Semitic Studies* 55, no. 22 (2010): 423–50; Johannes Lindblom, “Lot-casting in the Old Testament,” *Vetus testamentum* 12, no. 2 (1962): 164–78.

²⁹ B. S. Poh, *The Keys Of The Kingdom: A Study On The Biblical Form Of Church Government* (Petaling Jaya, MY: Good News Ent., 2017), 202.

³⁰ Regarding the debate as to whether those appointed held the office of deacon, see Greg R. Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers: The Doctrine of the Church*, Foundations of Evangelical Theology (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012),

application of this passage depicts the typical congregationalist sentiment: “The right to elect its own officers is confirmed by the manner in which the twelve apostles led the church to elect the seven.”³¹

There are three problems with Waldron’s conclusion: First, the apostles approved and appointed the first deacons. The apostles gave the congregation permission to select these men, and they approved their selection. Given this, ultimate authority lies with the preexisting leadership, not the congregation. Second, the selection of the deacons was delegated to the congregation, likely owing to the infighting that had occasioned the need for them in the first place. The Hellenized Jews complained that their brethren had ignored their widows in the distribution of food (Acts 6:1), and thus, the disturbance was resolved by permitting the congregation to find men who would meet the needs of all widows. Therefore, the apostles’ decision to delegate the selection of men to serve as deacons is inherently tied to their immediate situation. Third, there is no indication within the text that a formal vote or some other democratic procedure was initiated to select the candidates. It is more likely that both the Hellenized and non-Hellenized Jews negotiated to determine who would best fit the role.

Acts 14:23

241–42; Robert L. Saucy, *The Church in God’s Program* (Chicago, IL: Moody Pub., 1972), 153–55.

³¹ Samuel E. Waldron, “Elder-Led Congregationalism” in Cowan ed., *Who Runs the Church?*, 211. Cf. the comments of Stephen and Kirk Wellum: “The whole congregation acted together with the apostles. How much more, then, with nonapostolic elders?” Dever and Leeman eds., *Baptist Foundations*, 73. See also Gerald B. Cowan, *Who Rules the Church?: Examining Congregational Leadership and Church Government* (Nashville, TN: B & H Pub., 2003), 86–7; Jonathan Leeman, *Don’t Fire Your Church Members: The Case for Congregationalism* (Nashville, TN: B & H Academic, 2016), 109–10.

In order to justify congregational appointment of elders in light of Acts 14:23, Johnson argues that “In the ordination of elders by Paul and Barnabas, the act is expressed by a term which imports, as stated above, the casting of votes in an appointment to office” and “to elect by suffrages, indicated by the lifting up of hands.”³² He appeals to χειροτονέω as it is used in 2 Corinthians 8:19, wherein Titus is described as having been “appointed by the churches” to accompany Paul. Johnson subsequently claims that the verb itself connotes “the casting of votes,” and therefore, Paul and Barnabus merely ratified the vote of the churches: “The ordination of elders in the churches indicates that it was done by the votes of the members of those churches.”³³ However, this is to read the phrase ὑπὸ τῶν ἐκκλησιῶν as it appears in 2 Corinthians 8:19 into the verb as it occurs in Acts 14:23. Whereas χειροτονέω can connote an election by a show of hands, especially in literature that predates the NT, the term can also mean merely to “appoint, install” and “to choose or select.”³⁴ Subsequently, context must determine the sense of the verb, and there is no contextual evidence to suggest that any form of an election occurred. Further, Johnson merely assumes that the appointment of Titus was accomplished by a democratic process. “The churches” may be shorthand for an informal appointment by the congregations or an appointment by the leadership of those congregations.

³² Dever ed., *Polity*, 209, 213.

³³ Dever ed., *Polity*, 209.

³⁴ Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 1083; Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains*, vol. 1 (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 362; Horst Robert Balz, Gerhard Schneider, *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1990), 465.

Some congregationalist writers have sought to recast Acts 14:23 on other grounds. Stephan Cowan suggests that the subject of χειροτονέω may not be Paul and Barnabus only but may also be inclusive of “other believers.”³⁵ He argues, “It is not likely that they governed by fiat since that was not Paul’s approach in other matters.” This is, however, to ignore what the text says in favor of what it does not say. Paul and Barnabus are the subjects of all of the key verbs of the pericope (vv. 19-23), and there is no contextual basis to suggest otherwise.

The Practical Benefits of Elder-Rule Governance

While practicality is not a suitable basis for any system of church governance, elder-rule results in several practical benefits that are not realized through other forms of polity. The following section outlines a few of these benefits.

Expedience in Decision Making

Whereas elder-ruled churches are frequently described as reserving all decision-making for elders,³⁶ these churches recognize the principle of subsidiarity and the need for delegation. Deacons, for example, are charged with decision-making and leadership of their particular ministry just as church members make decisions related to their ministries. Elder-rule does not mean totalitarianism but includes wise and measured delegation of decision-making. Further, elder-rule churches include church members as a vital part of major decisions. Through seeking congregational input, elders glean wisdom and insight from their congregation to serve as an inherent part of their decisions.

³⁵ Cowan, *Who Rules the Church?*, 87.

³⁶ John R. Bisagano, *Inside Information: Worship Wars, Calvinism, Elder Rule, and much more!* (n.l.: Xulon Press, 2008), 30–1.

Regarding those decisions that elders do not delegate, leadership is shared through evenly distributed authority. Vocational elders, typically called “teaching elders,” do not possess more authority than non-vocational elders (i.e., “ruling elders”). While ruling elders teach and teaching elders rule, the egalitarian power structure of an elder board affords thoughtful and streamlined decision-making. Congregationalism places ruling authority within the cumulative hands of the church such that each member, whether a newly baptized convert or seasoned believer, has the same opportunity to vote for this or that decision. In an elder-ruled congregation, major decision-making falls within the hands of men who have met the biblical qualifications for leadership and are, therefore, best equipped for decision-making.

In an elder-ruled context, congregations serve a consultative function to aid the board in decision-making. Further, elders may determine that the best means to gain congregational input on an issue is to hold an advisory ballot. While such a vote is not binding upon the board, it can serve as an important metric as they make their determination. That is, elders should always involve their congregation in significant decisions, but they are free to increase the involvement to the degree that they believe is most beneficial.

Maintaining Unity

As guardians of the deposit entrusted to them (2 Tim. 1:14; cf. 1 Tim. 6:20), elders possess a unique responsibility to safeguard the life and doctrine of the church. Given the NT’s emphasis on the unity in the local church (e.g., John 17:23; 1 Cor. 1:10; 4:6; Eph. 4:3; 1 Pet. 3:8), elder-rule governance affords elders the authority to immediately address individuals who threaten the unity of the church whether through false doctrine, doctrinal imbalance, or interpersonal disunity. As Paul

told Timothy to “command” obedience to Christ for the sake of the well-being of the elect (1 Tim. 4:11; 5:7), elders bear an authoritative voice in the church that may censure threats without prolonged debate and unnecessary controversy.

A Case Study in Elder-Rule

In 2023, Northwest Hills Community Church (NHCC) in Torrington, Connecticut, was issued a cease and desist notification from the City of Torrington that sought to preclude its longstanding ministry to the homeless. For over ten years, NHCC has provided approximately twenty homeless men, women, and families a place to sleep in one of its buildings during the winter months. The homeless shelter involved evangelism, discipleship, and biblical counseling and thus served as one of the church’s major ministries. Due to a complaint against NHCC by a nearby parochial school, the City of Torrington sought to prevent the homeless shelter because it was alleged that it might endanger school children. Even though no dangerous activity had occurred during the prior ten years, Torrington ordered NHCC to submit to a zoning process to achieve approval to continue.

The City of Torrington’s Zoning Commission denied NHCC permission to continue its ministry to the homeless. The elders explained the city’s decision to the congregation and sought its counsel. Many members suspected that the city officials had violated the law and that it might be worthwhile to seek legal counsel. The elders subsequently pursued the aid of a law firm. The legal team determined that the City of Torrington had violated federal and state laws and that a lawsuit would not only result in reversing the city’s decision but also establish a significant legal precedent that would benefit other churches. However, after examining the litigation proposal in detail through multiple meetings and much prayerful study and discussion, the elders decided to

forgo litigation as they considered broader witness of the church, community relations, and alternative solutions. When the elder board announced their decision during a churchwide meeting, the congregation appreciated their many hours of hard work and trusted their decision.

The following account demonstrates four practical benefits to elder-rule governance: First, the issues surrounding the question of litigation were often convoluted and required substantial effort to parse. The elders considered the legal, practical, theological, and missional implications of litigation in great detail. Since the elders were closest to the problem and had already invested the time to understand the issues, they were best positioned to make the decision. Second, the elders have a depth of spiritual maturity beyond that of many members. They leveraged their cumulative years of discipleship, biblical wisdom, and experience so that they were the best equipped to make the decision. Third, the elders considered the good of their congregation throughout the entirety of their decision process. Their primary goal was to honor Christ by ensuring the long-term well-being of their congregation. Therefore, their decision was fundamentally driven by concern for God's people, not individual considerations. Fourth, elder-rule does not result in an elder board ignoring the congregation, as some have suggested.³⁷ Instead, since elders lead with the church in view, they are obliged to engage with the congregation just as a husband is obliged to counsel with his spouse.

Objections to Elder-Rule Considered

Proponents of elder-led congregationalism have based their perspective on many biblical passages, and their objections to elder-rule

³⁷ Phil A. Newton, *Elders in Congregational Life: Rediscovering the Biblical Model for Church Leadership* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic, 2005), 57.

governance extend well beyond a few prooftexts. The following section deals with several more prominent objections to elder-rule governance.

Congregational Involvement in Church Discipline

Christ’s instructions for confronting sin and seeking reconciliation demonstrate that, in cases of persistent rebellion, the entire church has a role in the pursuit of reconciliation. When the initial confrontation fails (Matt. 18:15–16a), Jesus instructs that two or three witnesses are to be involved (v. 16). If the witnesses are unsuccessful, the matter is brought before the entire church (v. 17). This pericope is a *locus classicus* for congregationalists who view v. 17 as a specific appeal to congregational rule. Mark Dever explains: “The final court for matters of dispute between brothers is the congregation. So we read in verses 15 to 17 that the final step for resolving a dispute is to ‘tell it,’ not to the elders, but to the ἐκκλησία, the church or the congregation.”³⁸

The problem with this viewpoint is that it misunderstands the rationale behind Jesus’ command to “tell it to the church.” The purpose of telling the matter to the church is not so that a verdict may be rendered. Rather, judgment is rendered after one refuses to listen to the church: “If he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector” (v. 17). Since Jesus intends the initial confrontation to bring about repentance, and since the involvement of two or three others is similarly intended, telling the matter to the church is intended for the same end. Therefore, the congregation’s role in the church discipline process is not as a “final court” but as a means unto the contrition and reconciliation of another.

Practically speaking, it is unlikely that those churches who practice elder-led congregationalism neglect to include their leaders in

³⁸ Dever, *By Whose Authority?*, 33.

the church discipline process. When Jesus describes the church in v. 17, he has the entire congregation in view, including its elders. Geoff Chang observes, “Jesus does not speak of the involvement of elders in Matthew 18, but given the responsibility over the church that the apostles assign to them in other passages, it makes sense that elders would be involved in the process of church discipline at some point.”³⁹ By necessary implication, church discipline occurs under the elders of the church.

A similar conclusion may be deduced from 1 Corinthians 5:1-13. Within that pericope, Paul orders the removal of a man who was actively involved in an incestuous relationship (v. 1). He wrote, “Purge the evil person from among you” (v. 13). This charge is entirely similar to the Septuagintal rendering of several passages in the OT civil law (e.g., Deut. 17:7; 19:19; 21:21 LXX). However, instead of delivering the guilty party over for capital punishment, Paul commands the Corinthians to remove the man from the church. Since it is safe to assume the involvement of leadership in fulfilling OT civil law and the Matthew 18 discipline process, the involvement of Corinth’s elders may be safely assumed.

Authoritarianism

Stephen and Kirk Wellum describe elder-rule governance in the following way: “[Elder-led congregationalism is] different from the authoritarian twist taken lately by a number of churches, where the elders take control and minimize, even exclude the congregation’s involvement.”⁴⁰ This description implies that elder-rule is imposed upon unwilling congregations. Not only is this unrealistic and unhelpful, to

³⁹ Geoff Chang, “A Step-by-Step Primer for Church Discipline,” *9Marks Journal* (Winter 2017): 39. 37–43

⁴⁰ Dever and Leeman eds., *Baptist Foundations*, 48.

describe elder-rule as “authoritarian” is an irresponsible mischaracterization.

Given such an unfortunate mischaracterization, one might expect Wellum and Wellum to provide some exegetical or theological evidence to support their treatment of elder-rule. However, the only argumentation these authors provide is a single footnote: “The leaders of these churches may be well-intentioned, but this form of governance is highly problematic. In worst-case scenarios, leaders treat questions as a sign of disloyalty. When healthy discussion is ended, churches will soon become highly dysfunctional.”⁴¹ Instead of a substantial argument, this objection consists of a “what if” scenario that has no relevance to the biblical rationale of those who practice elder-rule. Instead, it is assumed that the leaders of elder-ruled churches have a penchant for eliminating “healthy conversation,” and thus, this form of governance is “highly problematic.” Not only is this argument rooted in an *ad hominem*, it is also disproven by the legion of healthy churches that practice elder-rule.

Moreover, the authors implicitly assume that congregational rule either precludes or limits the potential for an abuse of authority. However, it is not difficult to find cases where congregational governance has facilitated the sinful treatment of churchmen and members. The “what if” approach to castigating elder-rule is a two-edged sword.

In a church that has elder-rule polity, the church is accountable to the elders, and the elders are accountable to each other and to the Triune God. Because of the egalitarian structure of an elder board, individual elders are beholden to the board and are bound by its decisions. Accountability, therefore, is an inherent part of the model.

⁴¹ Dever and Leeman eds., *Baptist Foundations*, 48, n. 4.

Further, in an elder-led and congregationally governed context, elders are beholden to members in the final analysis. Subsequently, the congregation's accountability to the elders is curtailed by popular vote and the prevailing agenda.

Excursus on Complementarianism and Congregationalism

Elder-led congregationalism results in female members voting to determine matters related to membership, doctrine, discipline, and the appointment of officers. Women, therefore, exercise their respective authority together with male voting members. When a woman votes to either approve or disprove the installation of an elder, she is undoubtedly exercising some measure of authority over the candidate. This would seem to violate the prohibition given in 1 Timothy 2:12 and the spirit of 1 Corinthians 14:34–35.

Jonathan Leeman suggests that the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers and the equality of men and women in Christ, as described in Galatians 3:28, affords a biblical justification for female voting.⁴² On Leeman's view, women are precluded from possessing the authority that comes with occupying the office of elder, but they simultaneously have the authority to determine who the elders should be. He notes that "Congregationalists historically have also affirmed that the rule of equals in the church is coupled with male pastoral leadership" and that "the

⁴² Leeman, *Don't Fire Your Church Members*, 15. A similar perspective is offered in John Piper, Wayne Grudem eds., *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*, rev. ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021), 97-8. Piper and Grudem see a distinction between the authority exercised by the congregation and the individuals who make up the congregation: "When we say the congregation has authority, we do not mean that each man and each woman has that authority." The problem with this viewpoint is that the congregation's authority is exercised through the suffrage of individual members, including women.

highest human authority in a church belongs to men and women.”⁴³ On the one hand, Leeman affirms the relevance of 1 Timothy 2:12 as it relates to the authority of the office of elder. On the other hand, he places “the highest human authority” (i.e., an authority beyond that of elders) in the hands of men and women. If half of the highest authority in the church belongs to women, and Paul precludes women from exercising authority over men, then Leeman’s position is both contradictory and unbiblical.

Is There Room in the SBC for Elder-Ruled Churches?

Whereas Baptists are “ardent congregationalists,”⁴⁴ there is a spectrum of politics among them. While it is evident that congregationalism is a significant part of Baptist identity and practice, Baptists are also an expression of the Protestant tradition and are committed to the doctrines of *Sola Scriptura* and *Sola Reformanda*. Each Baptist church must examine its doctrine and practice and seek to further conform itself to the expectations of Scripture. While there are benefits to belonging to a historical tradition, traditional expressions of piety should only earn one’s loyalty insofar as they accord with Scripture.

John Broadus identifies four “distinctive views of Baptist churches,” namely, the affirmation that the Bible is alone the authoritative Word of God, regenerate church membership, believer’s baptism by immersion, and the autonomy of the local church.⁴⁵ Can an elder-ruled church that affirms these truths and other Baptist distinctives

⁴³ Jonathan Leeman, “Mailbag #44: Applying “Husband of One Wife”; Leaving the Church but Attending Bible Study; Women Voting in the Church,” 9Marks, December 9, 2016, <https://www.9marks.org/mailbag/44/>.

⁴⁴ R. Albert Mohler, “Church Discipline: The Missing Mark,” in Dever, *Polity*, 44.

⁴⁵ John A. Broadus, *The Duty of Baptists to Teach Their Distinctive Views* (Philadelphia, PA: American Baptist Publication Society, 1881), 6–10.

fit within the Southern Baptist theological continuum? In one sense, this is a moot question since there are elder-ruled churches in cooperation with the SBC. While it is claimed that “Baptists embrace congregationalism as the only form of church government,”⁴⁶ there are churches in full cooperation with the SBC who consider themselves Baptist and differ on what constitutes a biblical form of church governance. These churches diverge from Article VI of the *Baptist Faith and Message* (BF&M): “Each congregation operates under the Lordship of Christ through democratic processes,” possibly interpreting “democratic processes” to be inclusive of voting among an elder board even though that is not the intent of the confession.

This question may be reframed in terms of a congregation’s conformity to the BF&M. To what degree may a fellowship differ from the confession and still cooperate with the SBC and fit within the Baptist tradition? Can a church disagree with, say, the notion that regeneration precedes faith as in Article IV: “Regeneration... is a change of heart wrought by the Holy Spirit through conviction of sin, to which the sinner responds in repentance toward God and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ”? In 2012, a litany of SBC pastors and other leaders affirmed “A Statement of Traditional Southern Baptist Understanding of God’s Plan of Salvation,” wherein the notion that regeneration precedes faith is explicitly denied.⁴⁷ Therefore, Baptist identity within the SBC depends

⁴⁶ Malcom B. Yarnell III, “Article VI: The Church” in Douglas K. Blount, Joseph D. Wooddell eds., *Baptist Faith and Message 2000: Critical Issues in America’s Largest Protestant Denomination* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Pub., 2007), 61.

⁴⁷ Eric Hankins, “Preamble and Text of the Traditional Statement,” *Journal for Baptist Theology & Ministry* 9, no. 2 (2012): 14–18.

on general conformity with the BF&M but can accommodate significant secondary theological differences, even relating to soteriology.

Conclusion

This study has examined the biblical and theological basis for elder-rule church governance, beginning with a consideration of the origin of the office and the NT's characterization of elders. Elder-rule is not a historically Baptist approach to polity, but numerous passages within the NT support both a plurality of ruling elders and the appointment of elders by elders. The objections to elder-rule polity put forward by proponents of congregationalism depend on conclusions that sometimes fall short of consistent exegesis. Lastly, an exploration of whether elder-rule polity may subsist within the context of the SBC showed that the theological diversity among Southern Baptist churches suggests that Baptist identity in the SBC depends on general but not exact agreement with the BF&M.

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