

seek to know the needs of the flock, understanding its strengths and weaknesses, while recognizing its spiritual gifts and ministry inclinations.

The most daunting of responsibilities for elders involves the *distinction* of modeling the Christian life. Elders are to be examples to the flock, which is the reason for immediate public censure when one falls into public sin (1 Tim. 5:19–21). Peter told the elders “to be examples to the flock” (1 Peter 5:3). The writer of Hebrews reminds those struggling believers to reflect upon those who had been leading them (perhaps they were deceased or even martyred) and “imitate their faith” (Heb. 13:7). This plea to imitate is another reason for the detailed description of the character qualities of elders. It is not that any of the qualities, with the exception of aptitude for teaching, are beyond the norm for all Christians. Instead, elders are to set the example by modeling the blamelessness that ought to characterize all who know Christ (1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:6).

What difference can elders make in church life? If a congregation has a group of godly spiritual leaders who walk with Christ, who do so in such a way that they assist the body in fleshing out the details of the Christian life, who attend to the doctrine of the church, who labor to maintain discipline of the members, and who regularly give direction to the church, that church will be better positioned for spiritual growth and effective ministry.

REFLECTIONS

- What is the challenge for modern church government in light of God’s Word?
- What are three titles used for plural eldership, and how does each shade the meaning of the office?
- How is the plurality of elders taught in the New Testament?
- What are the strengths of plurality in the local church?
- What are the fourfold duties of elders?

CHAPTER THREE

Character and Congregationalism

Why do we need spiritual leaders known as elders and deacons in our churches? With the high education level, the vast experience, and the varied abilities possessed by the average church member, why do we even need to have men in positions of elder and deacon? And considering the size of most congregations—less than 100 members—why bother with elders and deacons? Would it not be easier for one man to take care of the church?

One man serving as pastor cannot take care of all the needs in any ministry. Some churches expect as much—since that is the reason they employ him. But the living organism known as the local church has far too many needs and opportunities of service and growth for one man to capably meet. He might excel at preaching, but fall short on ministering to those in crisis. He might maintain regular hours for counseling while neglecting to plan, direct, and equip the church. Often the pastor becomes the brunt of criticism because he fails to wear enough hats to satisfy the needs (and sometimes whims) of the congregation. The church can have unrealistic expectations upon the solitary pastor, and the pastor can agonize with feelings of inadequacy for not fulfilling the church’s expectations. But there is a better way.

Every situation a church faces calls for the Word of God. From time to

WHY ELDERS AND DEACONS?

Why Do We Need Elders and Deacons?

- It's the New Testament church's pattern.
- It assures congregations of well-rounded, balanced ministry.
- It meets diverse congregational needs through functioning in plurality.
- It strengthens the church's unity and efficiency.

While deacons are not the subject of this present work, it is not without use to reflect for a moment upon both offices of the church—elders and deacons.

1. *Elders and deacons are needed because that is the pattern taught in the early church.* The early churches serve as role models for the structure and leadership of present-day churches. Rather than simply structuring today's churches in a clever but nonbiblical fashion, churches need to adhere to the practice of Scripture. For evangelicals who believe in the sufficiency of Scripture for life and practice, it only makes sense to develop church polity based on God's Word.
2. *Elders and deacons are needed to assure congregations that the "whole person" will receive effective ministry.* Responsibilities of elders and deacons certainly overlap at times—deacons will indeed find plenty of spiritually oriented work while elders will at times deal with temporal issues—yet those two offices are distinct in their essential duties.
3. *Scripture does not specify a precise number of elders and deacons to be appointed in the church, only stating the office in the plural (two or more) rather than the singular.* If diverse congregations, like the more mature and larger Jerusalem church, and the weaker, smaller Lystra church both needed elders, then it is apparent that churches of every size and geographical locale do, too. The passage of time does not diminish the spiritual or temporal needs of those making

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time an issue may arise that the Word does not address directly, although typically answers can be found by inference. But for other areas, Scripture clearly gives an answer. Certainly, the issue of elders and deacons is such a case.

SURVEYING ACTS

The official designation of elders and deacons did not begin immediately in the early church. There was no formation committee or announcement that precipitated elders and deacons. Instead, we see the emergence of what some have termed "deacon prototypes" in "The Seven" of Acts 6, and even a prototype of the ministry of elders in "The Twelve," as they labored in the Word and prayer. The former group focused upon the temporal needs of the church (feeding the widows), while the latter sought to teach and govern the church. The early chapters of Acts refer to the apostles without reference to elders. Then in chapter 11 there is a reference to "the elders" (v. 30). Not until Acts 14:23 are "elders" intentionally appointed for the first time in the infant church: "And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed." These young, small churches of Asia Minor needed biblical instruction, regular discipline, spiritual leadership, and models for the faith. So the apostle Paul saw the need for assuring the continued spiritual growth of these churches, appointing elders (plural) in every church (singular). This in itself offers an excellent pattern.

In Acts 15:2, the apostles are joined by elders as the spiritual leaders in Jerusalem. From this point onward in the book of Acts, elders became the norm. While there is no mention of deacons in the book of Acts, they are considered as part of the official leadership of the church at Philippi (Phil. 1:1) as Paul addresses that young church. Deacons were clearly to be an important part of the spiritual service in Ephesus under Timothy's pastoral charge (1 Tim. 3). In the epistles of Paul, Peter, James, John, the book of Hebrews, and the Revelation, significant passages refer to spiritual leaders of congregations. No one portion of Scripture relates everything concerning these spiritual leaders, but taken together these passages form a marvelous working structure of true, New Testament church life.

suggests that elders ultimately serve at the pleasure of the congregation. In the process of forming the church in Crete, Titus was told to "appoint elders in every city" (Titus 1:5). The word *appoint* seems to have taken on ecclesiastical strength as it implies something akin to ordaining the elders to office. Did Titus single out the men without the congregation's involvement? Or does the appointment suggest that Titus availed himself of the churches' voices in the process but final discretion for appointment was left to him? The ambiguity of the language and settings prevent a definitive response.

When it comes to the selection of elders (or deacons) in the church, it is perhaps best to leave the process to the individual, autonomous churches. Flexibility seems to be in order, but an elimination process would assure elder candidates to be qualified for office. Eliminating candidates will be difficult to accomplish at a congregational level because of the intensive and personal nature of examination required. But at the minimum, congregations should be involved in nominating men deemed faithful and qualified to be elders. Nominees would then undergo examination by a smaller group (the presbytery or ordination council) responsible for recommendation to the office of elder.

The bar must be raised for elders and deacons if these officers are to serve their respective churches as they ought.

What qualifies a man for the office of elder in a local church? In my observation, the greatest oversight by churches considering elders—or even churches that have deacons functioning as elders—is neglect of biblical qualifications. In regard to requirements for elders and deacons, the bar must be raised if these officers are to serve their respective churches as they ought. Nothing is, in fact, more important than examining men in light of the qualifications set forth in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1, and expecting those men to maintain faithfulness in these qualities. In church settings where shifting to elder leadership might create undue conflict, it is recommended to raise the bar for, at the very least, spiritual qualifications for leaders. Churches that simply fill a vacant leadership slot without seriously

up the church. The New Testament does not distinguish church types or sizes or required maturity before needing elders and deacons.

4. *Establishing groups of elders and deacons gives the church an opportunity to function under God-given authority, keeping the church headed in the proper direction, building the unity of the body, and increasing efficiency in ministry.*

There appears to be no single way that elders were chosen in the early church. As one writer points out, "Much of the instruction given about church order is *ad hoc* rather than of universal principle."¹ So it must be understood what is principled and what is flexible. It is clear that Paul and Barnabas chose the first elders among the young churches in Asia Minor (Acts 14:23, where *appointed* means either "to elect by show of hands" or "to appoint"²). Whether the congregation affirmed their decision or not can only be speculated but it seems that affirmation *might* have occurred. In the earlier case of the deacon prototypes of Acts 6, the language implies congregational involvement in the decision-making process. They were told to "select from among you seven men" (v. 3), with selection carrying the idea of inspecting or examining the men for selection to this office.³ The congregation no doubt was involved in the process, evidently putting forth the names of seven men who met with the apostolic approval. The precise way they did this is not given.

ELDERS AND CHARACTER

In the Pastoral Epistles, the office of overseer is something that a man might "aspire" to embrace (1 Tim. 3:1). But does he just volunteer to serve as elder? The list of character qualities no doubt means that the church is involved in some kind of examination of those aspiring to serve as elders, or otherwise spiritual wolves would gain ready entrance into church leadership. Elders who deserve public censure for failing to uphold the character and practice incumbent on those holding this office are rebuked before the entire church. They can be accused publicly but only by two or three witnesses lest there be unfounded charges leveled against them (1 Tim. 5:19–21). Such examination and censure at least

shady business-dealer or loose with his tongue has no place among the eldership.

The phrase *husband of one wife* has over the years generated much print. Many commentators give detailed arguments of its meaning so there is no need here to work through all the issues regarding this quality. But in order not to get lost in the arguments, the phrase literally means "a one-woman-man," pointing to the fidelity in the marriage relationship as well as the ongoing devotion exemplified toward his wife. In a day of rampant moral failure within church leadership, it is critical that elders set the example for faithfulness and devotion in their marriages. Is there a reason to question the elder candidate's devotion to his wife? If so, then he should not be placed in a position of leadership.

The word *temperate* refers to the ability of an elder to exercise self-control over his appetites so that they do not dictate his life, whether regarding alcohol (as the original meaning) or the broader desires of the flesh. The elder is thus to be sober-minded in all things. *Prudent* implies that an elder's mind remains engaged, that he is able to exercise sound judgment even in difficult times. *Respectable* implies that the elder's personal life is well ordered, reflected in relationships with others. He does not engage in pretenses, but conscientiously guards his inner life so that his outward conduct might bring honor to Christ and the gospel. An elder is also to be *hospitable*, a word that originally meant a lover of strangers. His home must be opened to others as a center of ministry beyond the walls of the church building.

The elder's aptitude to teach (1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:9) is central to his work. Some divide elders into categories of ruling elders and teaching elders, based on 1 Timothy 5:17: "The elders who rule well are to be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching." Without question, elders are involved in the ruling aspect of church life—that goes with the office. But all are to be involved in the teaching ministry of the church. It can be argued that some excel in teaching while others excel in governing, but to make a distinction seems artificial. The necessary balance of both teaching and governing keeps the entire group of elders focused on the Scriptures, thus deriving wisdom from the Word, and applying the lessons and principles of Scripture in congregational life. Doing so calls for all elders to be theologically

considering the nominees' qualifications set the stage for deeper problems. As John Piper expressed, "Spiritual qualifications should never be sacrificed to technical expertise."⁴ Gerald Cowen adds, "For the church to have a moral impact on society, the highest standards should be upheld."⁵ Adding public speakers, accountants, legal experts, project managers, banking executives, and advertising geniuses is not the object of spiritual leadership. Some of those qualified might have additional technical expertise of this kind, but such must always be secondary.

1 Timothy 3:1-7

It is a trustworthy statement: if any man aspires to the office of overseer, it is a fine work he desires to do. An overseer, then, must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, prudent, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not addicted to wine or pugnacious, but gentle, peaceable, free from the love of money. He must be one who manages his own household well, keeping his children under control with all dignity (but if a man does not know how to manage his own household, how will he take care of the church of God?), and not a new convert, so that he will not become conceited and fall into the condemnation incurred by the devil. And he must have a good reputation with those outside the church, so that he will not fall into reproach and the snare of the devil.

The chief characteristic of an elder is being "above reproach." Paul demands this: "An overseer, then, *must* be above reproach" [emphasis added].⁶ The phrase *above reproach* serves as an umbrella under which the balance rests. "It *doesn't* mean that a man has to be perfect," writes John MacArthur. "If so, we would all be disqualified! It means that there must not be any great blot on his life that others might point to."⁷ Piper adds, "The word seems to be a general word for living in a way that gives no cause for others to think badly of the church or of the faith or the Lord. . . . The focus here is not a person's relationship to the Lord, but how others see him."⁸ A man known as a hothead or a womanizer or a

astute, biblically articulate, and ready to instruct individuals or groups as the need arises. An elder who only knows how to "rule," and lacks the biblical precision called for in the aptitude of teaching, will likely create disharmony among the elders. Nothing has honed our elders more than all of us being students of Scripture and accountable for teaching the church.

"Freedom from enslavements should be so highly prized that no bond-age is yielded to," explains John Piper concerning the implications of "not addicted to wine."⁹ So while this characteristic stresses that an elder must not "sit long at his wine" or be "a slave to drink," he also must guard other areas where he might be tempted to enslavement.¹⁰ Self-control will also be shown in the elder's temper. Therefore, he is not to be "pugnacious," or a bully, but instead "gentle," or kind and forbearing, and "peaceable," going to great lengths to avoid unnecessary conflict in the church. "Free from the love of money" reminds elders of the temporal nature of material things, and the enslaving tendencies found when possessions become the focus of life. Generosity, contentment, and personal financial discipline serve to cure love of money.

"He must be one who manages his own household well, keeping his children under control with all dignity (but if a man does not know how to manage his own household, how will he take care of the church of God?)" The elder must set the example of spiritual leadership in the home.

John Piper explains:

The home is a proving ground for ministry. [The elder] should have submissive children. This does not mean perfect, but it does mean well disciplined, so that they do not blatantly and regularly disregard the instructions of their parents. The children should revere the father (*meta pases semnotetos*) [sic]. He should be a loving and responsible spiritual leader in the home. His wife should be respected and tenderly loved. Their relationship should be openly admirable.¹¹

Since spiritual maturity is at the heart of an elder's life, Paul warns that he must not be a new convert, "so that he will not become conceited and fall into the condemnation incurred by the devil." Nothing seems to

puff up an immature person more than a title. The eyes of the church are constantly on the elders, seeking exemplary conduct and instruction. Putting a new believer into such a demanding role positions him to slip into the Devil's trap of pride.

An elder represents his church, so "he must have a good reputation with those outside *the church*, so that he will not fall into reproach and the snare of the devil" (emphasis added). The world is not setting standards for the church's leaders but, to be sure, the church's leaders must never slip below even the world's standards of character, dignity, and propriety. The high standards of Christian life and character must give the world no cause for accusation of hypocrisy in the church's leaders.

Paul's list of character qualities penned to Titus resembles that penned to Timothy but with some variations. Thus, the apostle was giving a sample in each epistle of what Christian character looks like when taken seriously. Again, "above reproach" stands as a sentinel over the balance of the character requirements. While the language in Titus regarding the family differs slightly from that in Timothy, the intention remains the same. The elder is to set an example by wisely ordering his own home: "the husband of one wife, having children who believe, not accused of dissipation or rebellion."

Titus 1:5-9

For this reason I left you in Crete, that you would set in order what remains and appoint elders in every city as I directed you, namely, if any man is above reproach, the husband of one wife, having children who believe, not accused of dissipation or rebellion. For the overseer must be above reproach as God's steward, not self-willed, not quick-tempered, not addicted to wine, not pugnacious, not fond of sordid gain, but hospitable, loving what is good, sensible, just, devout, self-controlled, holding fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, so that he will be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict.

and studying bible doctrine, regular in delving deeper into the Word, thereby setting the example of loving God's Word for the congregation. Elders' faithfulness in the Word enables them to "be able both to exhort in sound doctrine"—teach, admonish, and instruct whether one-on-one or to groups—"and to refute those who contradict"—that is, they readily deal with error and false teaching as well as correcting those who misap- ply God's Word for some selfish or legalistic motive.

The most remarkable thing about these characteristics is that there is nothing remarkable about them.

—D. A. Carson

In order to avoid self-scrutiny, some have magnified the seeming im- possibility of these character qualities, stressing that no one fulfills them. But in both the 1 Timothy and Titus texts Paul is calling upon elders to simply act like genuine Christians. Outside the need for teaching, none of the characteristics should be unusual among Christians—every be- liever should seek to be "above reproach." In a sermon, D. A. Carson said, as I recall, "The most remarkable thing about these characteristics is that there is nothing remarkable about them." They demonstrate that the el- der takes seriously the gospel's intent of sanctifying a people for God's own possession (Titus 2:14).

Elders not only lead the congregation, but they also must work with each other. The character qualities thus remain critical for plural leader- ship to live in unity and work together in humility. Alexander Strauch clearly expressed this need:

When it functions properly, shared leadership requires a greater exercise of humble servanthood than does unitary leadership. In order for an eldership to operate effectively, the elders must show mutual regard for one another, submit themselves one to another, patiently wait upon one another, genuinely consider one another's interests and perspectives, and defer to one another. Eldership, then, enhances brotherly love, humility, mutuality,

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Again, John Piper provides helpful commentary that explains Paul's meaning regarding the children of elders:

Here, the focus is not just on the relationship of the children to the father, but on their behavior in general. They are not to be guilty of the accusation of "wild living" or uncontrolled behav- ior. And they are not to be "insubordinate."

Does *pistos* mean "believing" (with *rsv*) or "faithful" in the sense of honest and trustworthy? In favor of the latter would be the use of the word in 1 Timothy 3:1-11, where women (deaconesses or wives of deacons) are to be *pistos en pasin*, faithful in all things. Other places in the pastoral epistles [sic] where the word seems to have this meaning are 1 Timothy 1:12, 15; 3:1; 4:9; 2 Timothy 2:11; 2:13; Titus 1:9; 3:8.

So the idea seems to be of children who are well bred, orderly, generally obedient, responsible, and reliable.¹²

Paul continues, repeating the need for an elder's being "above reproach," but in this case the reason is because he is "God's steward." The term points to the ongoing responsibility of the elder to manage the affairs of the church. If encumbered by areas of reproach or constantly trying to hide his behav- ior, then he will not fare well as a manager of a spiritual body. In Titus, Paul adds that an elder is not to be "self-willed," that is, never to be so stubborn about his own opinions that he is unteachable and unbending or thinking only of himself.¹³ Nor is he to be "quick-tempered," or in the habit of firing his attitude and tongue quickly when someone contradicts him. Instead, he is to be marked by "loving what is good, sensible, just, devout, self- controlled." His priorities are fixed on the things that matter: relationships, justice, purity, and intense devotion to the Lord. The list is crowned by "self-control," a term meaning "complete self-mastery, which controls all passionate impulses and keeps the will loyal to the will of God."¹⁴

While Paul tells Timothy that elders must be "able to teach," he ampli- fies the meaning in his letter to Titus: "Holding fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching"; that is, he not only under- stands biblical doctrine but is diligent in applying the same to his life and practice. Elders must be students of Scripture, faithful in reading

patience, and loving interdependence—qualities that are to mark the servant church.¹⁵

The goal of a church should not be to establish plural eldership at any cost, but rather to elevate the standards of spiritual leadership in the church at any cost.

It would be wise for any church pursuing a transition to elder leadership to spend time emphasizing the character more than even the function of elders. Functions will vary from church to church but the character of a holy, humble servant life should always mark those set apart as elders. Elders, deacons, and other church officers that fail to display the character required of spiritual leaders have done great damage to churches. Therefore, set forth God's standards—raise the bar of qualifications to a level that parallels the teaching of Scripture. Even congregations that are not sure what constitutes the function of elders will more likely follow elder leadership when it resides in men who truly live like Christians. The goal of a church should not be to establish plural eldership at any cost, but rather to elevate the standards of spiritual leadership in the church at any cost.

PLURALITY IN CONGREGATIONAL FRAMEWORK

In the process of elevating spiritual leadership, churches must pursue biblical patterns for our churches, including plural eldership. But some fear the term *elders*. One Southern Baptist leader stated his stark opposition: "I am not in favor of elder rule in the Southern Baptist church to which I belong, indeed, if the church to which I belong instituted elder rule, I would leave."¹⁶ During the past dozen years a number of Baptist churches have adopted plural eldership in one form or another—although not all did so smoothly. Some churches have split over the issue because of the strong feelings and fears of jettisoning the cherished Baptist practice of congregationalism. Pastors have even been dismissed or barred from the fellowship of their local associations over eldership.

Growing up in a Southern Baptist church, I found that elders were foreign to our polity. The local Church of Christ congregations had elders that so firmly ruled their churches, the ministers served at their pleasure. That picture of "totalitarian rule" by elders put fear in a Baptist's mind! In other churches the elders lacked the spiritual dignity of the office, thus negatively coloring the office of elder. Still others appeared to have weak elders who lacked the passion that ought to characterize spiritual leadership. Here, then, is precisely where the problem of fear arises—getting our picture of elders from sources other than the Bible. By adopting plural elder leadership, many Baptists thus fear the loss of congregationalism, while many pastors fear the loss of authority.

These fears are understandable. But as in any situation that causes fear, stepping back, taking an unbiased look, and evaluating it by the facts can often alleviate anxiety. I might fear a snake in the path ahead of me. But if I stop to realize that, first, it is probably not poisonous; second, the snake fears me more than I fear it; and third, I can go around the snake, then I need not tremble and profusely sweat. Facts change my entire outlook.

Plural eldership should not eliminate congregationalism. It is true that some forms of plural eldership completely by-pass the congregation. In the early church, however, the congregation was involved to some degree in all decisions. The church is to hold the final authority, for instance, on matters of disciplining its membership (Matt. 18:15–17; 1 Cor. 5). The church selected the deacon-prototypes upon the counsel of the apostles, thus providing a workable pattern for congregational involvement in recommending spiritual and temporal leaders (Acts 6:1–5). After the apostles and elders established the church's position regarding the problem raised by the Judaizers, the congregation became involved by approving the recommendation of sending messengers to the churches of Asia Minor as the official voice of the Jerusalem church. The congregation as a whole was not part of the discussions or debates, but they were later informed, and affirmed the result of the council: "Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them to send to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas" (Acts 15:22). *Then it seemed good* was a political term in the Greek world for "voting" or "passing a measure in the assembly."¹⁷

order and purpose. The congregation holds the eldership accountable to exercise faithfully their responsibilities under the Lord Jesus Christ. "The ministry of the church," writes John Piper, "is primarily the work of the members in the activity of worship toward God, nurture toward each other and witness toward the world. Internal structures for church governance are *not* the main ministry of the church, but are the necessary equipping and mobilizing of the saints for the work of ministry."¹⁹ So the congregation at large must focus on mobilization for ministry rather than spend its time worrying over governance. That responsibility is entrusted to the smaller body of the elders. Piper adds, "Governance structures should be lean and efficient to this end, not aiming to include as many people as possible in office-holding, but to free and fit as many people as possible for ministry."²⁰

At the root of *much opposition to plural eldership are pastors who fear the loss of their authority in the church*. Although many Baptist churches claim to exercise congregationalism, their actual structure is monarchical episcopacy—the solitary rule of one man over the congregation. Early Baptists reacted against monarchical episcopacy in the Church of Rome and the Church of England. Their dissenting voice echoed with other seventeenth-century evangelicals who were alarmed over the abuse levied by the solitary rule of one man over the church. Baptists vested congregations with final authority in matters of church life, but also recognized the need for order that comes only through spiritual leadership. The Philadelphia Confession of Faith (1742) provides a good example of both congregational voice and the authority entrusted to its spiritual leaders:

[Article] 8. A particular church gathered, and completely organized, according to the mind of Christ, consists of officers and members: and the officers appointed by Christ to be chosen and set apart by the church (so called and gathered) for the peculiar administration of ordinances and execution of power or duty, which He entrusts them with or calls them to, to be continued to the end of the world, are bishops or elders, and deacons.

[Article] 9. The way appointed by Christ for the calling of any person, fitted and gifted by the Holy Spirit, unto office of bishop or elder in the Church is, that he be chosen thereunto by the

There is no evidence that the early church voted on every issue. Rather, the plural eldership competently and efficiently handled day-to-day matters. And the church respected and submitted to this leadership, knowing that trustworthy men stood before them by divine design. On occasion, the churches had to be reminded to obey and submit to the plural eldership, but that eldership, then, lacked despotic purposes in the early church, and the congregation exercised decisive roles in church life (1 Thess. 5:12-13; Heb. 13:17). Congregationalism certainly existed, but not to such a degree that the public assembly literally ran the church.

Absolute congregational government is unwieldy in practice. During my early years of ministry, a seminary president told a group of young, aspiring ministers that if a church *voted* to call you as pastor then you had best go, because that was the will of God. I was shocked by his tone—and I still am—and by his insistence that the will of God is infallibly known through the congregation's vote. A little reading of church history refutes such an idea. Church votes are affected by human depravity as much as are individuals. Church votes cannot assure God's mind. Mark Dever offers a reminder that congregations must labor to understand the teaching of Scripture rather than presuming blanket infallibility when the church assembles:

A church is not just straightforward democracy, for in churches there is a common recognition of our fallen state, of our tendency to err, and, on the other hand, of the *inerrancy* of God's Word. So the members of a church congregation are democratic, perhaps, only in the sense that they work as a congregation to try to understand God's Word.¹⁸

The eldership will lead the charge in understanding God's Word. As students of Scripture and men devoted to prayer, elders earn the congregation's trust and enhance their authority as spiritual leaders in the church. The authority of leaders is necessary in a church, as it is in any type of government. While national, state, and local governments serve at the pleasure of their citizens, the citizens depend on their elected officials to give leadership, direction, and protection on a daily basis. Citizens submit to this authority because it gives order to their lives. In the same way, the congregation that submits to elder leadership can function with greater

spirituality of the elders. A pastor who is called by a church will certainly hold greater responsibility than the other elders because of the duties entrusted to him. In this case the pastor is first among equals in authority—first by virtue of the church's call and his training and gifts, but equal in that he is not a "Lone Ranger" figure in church leadership. Daniel Wallace explains that "accountability and our sin natures" provide one of the clearest reasons for the shared authority of plural eldership. He continues,

Each leader knows that he lacks complete balance, that there are things he continues to struggle with. Further, even beyond the sin nature factor is the personality factor. Some pastors are detail men; others are big picture men. Some love music, others have gotten little from music. . . . All of us together contribute to the way the body of Christ works. But a church that follows in lock-step with the personality and foibles of one man will always be imbalanced.

. . . Churches that have a pastor as an authority above others (thus, in function, a monarchical episcopate) have a disproportionately high number of moral failures at the top level of leadership. In other words, it is less likely for a pastor to fall into sin if he is *primus inter parus* ("first among equals" in the sense of his visibility and training, not spirituality) than if he is elevated above the rest of the leadership.²²

Plural Eldership

- Encourages leaders by shouldering the load of ministry
- Approaches ministry with greater precision
- Curtails tyranny and authoritarianism in the church
- Provides a laboratory for displaying unity in the church

Developing plural leadership is demanding, so some may ask, *Why bother?* A plurality offers each elder some measure of encouragement since the body of elders or body of deacons work together on behalf of their particular congregation. Each man is to work toward the same purpose.

common suffrage of the Church itself; and solemnly set apart by fasting and prayer, with the imposition of hands of the leadership of the Church, if there be any before constituted therein: and of a deacon, that he be chosen by the like suffrage, and set apart by prayer, and the imposition of hands.²¹

The officers of the church, elders and deacons, are appointed by Christ and chosen by the church. They possess the "execution of power or duty, which He entrusts them with or calls them to." Each elder is "chosen thereunto by the common suffrage"—or voting—"of the Church itself." So the pastor does not lack authority, but rather he shares authority with the plurality of spiritual leaders chosen by the church.

Is this shared authority to be feared by a pastor who has been called to serve vocationally in a church? Not if the elders adhere to the biblical requirements for character and practice. Instead, a pastor should welcome this structure as a God-given means for protecting him and enhancing the ministry of the church. Granted, major problems will arise when unqualified men serve as elders. But that is part of the ongoing struggle faced by the church until Christ returns. The pastor must labor to preach, teach, train, and pray until the Lord purifies the church's leadership base, making it possible for the pastor gladly to share authority with a plural eldership.

Another element of the fear-factor involves the concept of "ruling." If ruling means dictatorial control over church members' lives—including constant prying into mundane personal decisions, or placing demands on members outside the parameters of church ministry—then that type of rule is well to be feared. Indeed, rule of that sort has given bad press to plural eldership and is a distortion of the biblical picture of elders. Elders are never to rule in a "lording" manner; rather they are to serve the church in humility. Elder rule must never resemble the despotic rule of Henry VIII or any number of Stalinist dictators. Instead, it must mirror the shepherd-rule modeled by Christ. Shepherding the flock of God does demand the exercise of a level of governance, but elders must exercise that governance as those who will give account to the Chief Shepherd of His flock (1 Peter 5:2-5; Heb. 13:17).

Plural eldership serves to prevent one man from falling prey to the temptation of dominating a congregation. Shared authority hones the focus and

They can lift up one who is under pressure or offer a word of consolation to one who has a need. Many times I've watched as our elders have helped each other shoulder difficult loads or labored with each other in prayer.

In my own experience I know what it is to stand alone in a congregation—virtually every pastor knows what I mean. It is a difficult and trying time when a pastor is seeking to follow the teaching of God's Word and there is no crowd rushing to join him. But how marvelous and uplifting it is to have like-minded and like-purposed brethren standing with you. It breathes encouragement into any Christian leader's heart.

A plurality provides the opportunity to approach the whole work of ministry in a more exacting way. In a body of elders or body of deacons, each man will inevitably have his own particular gifts and strengths to add to the overall work. When laboring as a team, each man can apply his gifts to the common good of the entire body. No one man attempts to carry the load of a congregation.

A plurality, too, curtails attempts at tyranny or dictatorships. Having too much authority and too little accountability corrupts some people. This is especially true in the spiritual realm. When someone lacks spiritual maturity, that person's role in leadership can provide opportunities for ego-boosting or power-grabbing. Plural leadership protects against such abuses because the leaders hold one another accountable for purity of motives and actions. Equal authority among the elders checks attempts by one man to dominate the church leadership.

Plurality also serves as a laboratory for proving unity. Any group of people working together for a period of time will have its unity tested. The elders' character, or lack thereof, will surface during times of testing and adversity. Nothing is any sweeter than to see brethren walk through such times in unity.

REFLECTIONS

- Why do we need both elders and deacons?
- How were elders selected in the early church? Does this offer an example of how elder selection should be conducted in our day?
- What qualifies a man to be an elder? Identify the chief characteristics.
- Why do some church leaders fear plural eldership?

PART TWO

Three Key Biblical Texts