

## The Order and Government of God's Church

### I. The background and meaning of "Elders"

- 1 Peter 5:1-2 — Therefore I exhort the elders among you...

The Greek word for "elder" is *presbyteros*, from which we get the word Presbyterian. Sometimes, this word (*presbyteros*) can mean someone who's old/older without being recognized as an "elder."

- Genesis 18:11 — Now Abraham and Sarah were **old** [*presbyteros*], advanced in years.
- Genesis 27:1 — [Isaac] called Esau his **older** [*presbyteros*] son and said to him...

But in the vast majority of cases the word *presbyteros* refers to a specific group of recognized "leaders" in a community. So why were these "leaders" called "elders"? The *main reason* couldn't have been their age because the majority of "older men" still were not elders, and because there would have always been men older than the elders. When it comes to age, all of us are both "older" *and* "younger" depending on who it is we were comparing ourselves to.

So why the name "elders"? Well, elders were those *within* the community (especially within the familial or tribal and clan based community common in biblical times) who were recognized by that community to have the maturity and the wisdom—and at times also the necessary influence and social/family status to lead. Not only would they be informally recognized in their group, but in most cases they would then also be formally "called" and appointed as official leaders.

- Numbers 11:16 — Then the LORD said to Moses, "Gather for me seventy men of the elders of Israel, whom you know to be the elders of the people and officers over them, and bring them to the tent of meeting, and let them take their stand there with you."

We could say here that "elders" refers to the respect and honor given to these men while "officers" refers to their responsibilities of governing and leading in the community. (cf. Hendriksen on 1 Timothy 5:17) So to sum up, elders were those who were recognized and respected as men of maturity and wisdom, and therefore also chosen and appointed by their "tribal clan" and community to serve as leaders in their midst. In light of this definition, you can see why most (but not necessarily all; cf. 1 Tim. 4:6-5:1) elders would be chosen from among *older* men (relatively speaking).\*

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\* Elders as a "class" of leaders are almost always definite and plural ("*the* elders") and clearly cannot refer simply to "**the old people**" or "**the older people**" for this would then mean *all old/older people*. (see above). If the term did mean simply "the old/older people [**who are leaders**]" (notice how the fundamental definition of the word here is an "old/older" person) then it's clear that no "younger" person could ever be called an elder (i.e. there could be no "exceptions" to the rule). But, of course, this then also begs the most pressing question of who is young enough to be called "younger" and who is old enough to be called "older." **As soon as we refer to "elders" as a distinct and definite "class" of leaders (*the* elders)**, it also becomes necessary to clearly define the boundaries of such a clearly distinct group. Therefore, if the **fundamental meaning** of "*the* elders" is "old/older people," then we must have some definition of who is "old/older." When does a person stop being "younger" and become "older"? Since the Bible gives us no such definition with regard to the distinct "class" of elders, we can conclude that the fundamental meaning of "the elders" suggested above is accurate. When *presbyteros* is definite and plural either morphologically

Can you see how the concept of “elders” was just a natural, “organic” outworking of living life in these tribal, clan-based communities? (This is very different from the modern, western, individualistic culture we live in today). So we read in Genesis 50 about the elders of the household of Pharaoh and the elders of the land of **Egypt** (Gen. 50:7), in Numbers 22 about the elders of the land of **Moab** and **Midian** (Num. 22:4, 7), in Joshua 9 about the elders of **Gibeon** (Josh. 9:11), and in numerous other places throughout the Old Testament about the elders of **Israel**. Even when the “family” (lit. “sons”) of Israel were living in Egypt under the rule of a foreign people, there were still recognized elders among them. (Exod. 3:16, 18; 4:29; 12:21) When the Jews were exiled and taken into captivity, since they could no longer organize themselves around the temple and its sacrificial worship, they developed the system of synagogue worship centered around prayers and the reading and expounding of the Law and the Prophets. They were trying to maintain their identity as a chosen and set-apart people. They were trying to keep from being absorbed into the culture surrounding them. And so, naturally, who was responsible for guarding and maintaining the life of the community which was centered now around these synagogues? It was those men who were recognized as elders of the people. In the Gospels and Acts, we hear over and over again about the chief priests, and the scribes, and the rulers and elders of the people. (cf. Mat. 16:21; 21:23; Lk. 7:3-5; Acts 4:5, 8, 23)

## **II. Why Elders in the Church?**

So what we need to see now is that it’s out of this soil—it’s out of this whole historical picture that we have, now, elders in the church. “Elders” were not an invention of the Church. Remember, the very first churches were all Jewish and so it was only natural that these brand new churches whose gatherings were to some extent modeled after the synagogue worship would recognize and put forward elders from their midst. This would have been *first of all* an “organic” thing, *but then also* a formal and official thing. So, without any explanation we simply read in Acts 14:

- **Acts 14:23** (cf. 11:30) — And when [Paul and Barnabas] had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed.

And, then, in Acts 15:

- **Acts 15:2** — Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders [of the Jerusalem church] about this question.

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or “indirectly” by association with context, the semantic meaning of the word shifts from its indefinite and singular meaning/sense. (In all languages, words can have different semantic ranges of meaning and even different meanings altogether). This explains how we can speak in the following way: “Most—but not necessarily all—“elders” would be chosen from among “older” men (relatively speaking).” In this statement, “elders” (definite and a corporate plural) and “older men” (indefinite and a distributive plural) have **different meanings** (though with a certain semantic overlap). One of the practical implications of all this is the universal call to humility. When “elders” is thought to mean “older people [who are leaders]” it can be easy for pride and a lack of submission to manifest itself in all those who are “older” than the “elders.” On the other hand, if we accept that younger men can be “elders,” these younger men should never forget Paul’s exhortation to appeal to the older women as mothers and the older men as fathers. (1 Tim. 5:1-2)

Some years later, Paul writes to Titus:

- **Titus 1:5** — This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you.

Many of these elders had perhaps already been elders in their local Jewish communities and now that they had embraced Jesus as the Messiah they were recognized and then appointed formally as elders in the newly formed churches. Not only was it natural for the church to be elder-led because the first churches were Jewish but also because the church is put together **as a family** – **similar** to those ancient cultures that were all built around family and tribe and clan. We're all sons and daughters of God and therefore brothers and sisters of one another. This explains why even in this modern, western, individualistic culture that we live in, the ancient idea of "elders" still fits perfectly in the "family" context of the church. So, for example, the Bible calls for the leaders in the church and those responsible for the life of the church to be "elders," never "staff members" or "board members." I thank God that I am not "staff," but an elder among other elders in the church of God and the body of Christ.

Are you beginning to appreciate a little more the true nature and the beauty of the Church? Are you seeing, now, why LWBC has elders and why they're *called* elders? This isn't "about" me, or Ralph, or Lance, or Ed or any other elders who will ever serve in the future – it's about the office of elder. It's about the Church and the nature of the Church and how God Himself has designed His Church to function. In light of all this history and background, are you seeing what Elders really are and how they're to function within this community?

Remember that the Greek word for elder is *presbyteros*, from which we get the word Presbyterian. So, historically, the Presbyterian church has taken its name from its form of church government – from its emphasis on "elder-rule" or being elder-led. As **Reformed** Baptists (not Baptists generally), we emphasize the same thing because of our understanding of Scripture.

### **III. The work and responsibility of the Elders**

- **1 Peter 5:1–2** — Therefore I exhort the elders among you... shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight [*episkopeo*]...

We'll talk a lot more about this next week. I only want to emphasize now that the role of the elders is to be shepherds of the flock, exercising oversight. This oversight implies watching over, and guarding, and caring for, but it also assumes that the means to this watching over, and guarding, and caring for is a **certain** "authority."

- **1 Timothy 5:17** — Let the elders who manage/lead [*proistemi*] well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.

Some translations say, "let the elders who *rule* well," but there's certainly a danger that this word can send a wrong message. Paul uses the same Greek word in other places for a man who manages and leads his household.

- **1 Timothy 3:4–5** (cf. 1 Tim. 3:12) — [The church overseer] 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 **attend to [the needs of]** God’s church?

Even as the overseer manages and leads his household, so he must also manage and lead the household of God. An elder must know how to keep and promote good order in **God’s** church – attending to the church and looking to its needs. The elder’s role is to direct and manage the affairs of **God’s** church – it’s worship, its teaching, its ordinances (baptism and the Lord’s Supper), its missions and ministries, its membership, etc.

- **Hebrews 13:17** (cf. 7, 24) – Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account.
- **1 Thessalonians 5:12** — We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you.

It’s in the light of all these things that elders are often called, in the bible, “overseers.”

- **1 Timothy 3:1–2** (cf. Titus 1:5, 7) — The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the **office of overseer** [overseer-ship; *episcopos*], he desires a noble task. Therefore an overseer [*episkopos*] must be...
- **Acts 20:17–18, 28** (cf. Phil. 1:1) — Now from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called the **elders** of the church to come to him. And when they came to him, he said to them... “Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you **overseers...**”

#### **IV. The plurality of the Eldership**

One thing we notice in the Scriptures is that the elders, or the leaders, or the overseers of any specific church are always plural (more than one!). So, along with the Presbyterians (and contrary to many Baptists churches [one “pastor/elder” and a deacon board], we believe that a plurality of elders is always the biblical ideal. This plurality guards against many things in the body of Christ: Putting one man on a pedestal, dictatorial leadership, making decisions without counsel, etc.

So what does this plurality actually look like? On the one hand there is equality. (Each elder has only one “vote” in the elder meetings.) All of the elders hold, equally, the same office and no one elder has greater authority than another. But this equality is not “absolute.” Some churches do hold to an “absolute equality” that is expressed in all of the elders **functioning** equally and identically (e.g. all of the elders share equally in preaching and teaching responsibilities). The danger of this, we believe, is that the ministry of the Word (and, in connection with this even the place of vocational ministry) is ultimately down-graded. So, we also affirm the principle of a “‘first’ among equals.”

- **1 Timothy 5:17** — Let the elders who manage/lead well be considered worthy of double honor, **especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.**

In other words, even though all of the elders are equal in authority, not all of the elders will labor equally or be gifted equally in the task of public preaching and teaching. So we conclude that the elder whose task it is to labor the most at preaching and teaching is recognized in the Scriptures as a sort of “first” **among equals**. Our constitution recognizes this by referring to a “Senior Pastor” who is also an elder, and who shares authority equally with the rest of the elders – who are not all “pastors” or “Senior Pastors.” How this looks and how it works itself out in practice may look different from church to church.

#### **V. The Elders’ “local” area of influence**

So, is our church government actually Presbyterian? Where we differ from our Presbyterian brothers and sisters is in not having higher assemblies of elders that are over entire groups of local churches. In the Presbyterian church, these higher assemblies of elders (presbyteries) can be grouped together into synods, and then the synods can gather together in the governing body of the “General Assembly.” As Reformed Baptists, we affirm the role of elders, but only with a sphere of influence or authority within the particular local church where they fellowship. We emphasize the biblical concept of congregations being led by elders (just like the Presbyterians), but we also believe in the autonomy, or the independence of each local church – the right of each local congregation to govern its own affairs. We believe this is the outworking of the fact that each local congregation is actually a true and complete church! This is not just one detached and isolated *part* of the body of Christ. In a very real and biblical sense, this *is* the body of Christ, *entire* and *complete*.

- **1 Corinthians 12:27** (cf. Rom. 16:23) – Now you [members of a specific visible and gathered assembly in Corinth] are the body of Christ and individually members of it.
- **1 Corinthians 3:16** – Do you not know that you [the gathered congregation in Corinth] are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you [the gathered congregation]?

Think about it: If this is, truly, a **church** (full and complete), then this is a microcosm **in and of itself** of the larger church universal and “invisible” that’s spread throughout all the world! So to put it simply, we believe it’s the privilege and the responsibility of each local congregation to be wholly self-governing because of what we believe about the wholeness and the completeness of each local congregation.

Of course, the danger is that we can so easily become isolationist. How many independent Baptist and independent Bible churches have failed to see their place in the stream of church history and also their connection with other sister churches throughout the world? This is one very important reason why, as a church, we’re a member of FIRE (Fellowship of Independent Reformed Evangelicals), why the elders attend the FIRE conferences, why we support a sister FIRE church plant in Columbia, Illinois, and also why we include the bulletin inserts from our sister, FIRE churches.

## **VI. Elder-“rule” with congregational consent**

We’ve seen, now, that the elders are to “manage” and “lead” and “oversee” the Church and that all of this assumes a *certain* authority. I say a “certain” authority because as a church (as Reformed Baptists), we also believe that the Bible teaches the principle of being governed, or directed, or led, **with voluntary consent of the congregation**. So first of all, the members of the congregation have a voice in choosing who their elders/leaders will be.

- **Acts 6:1–6** — The twelve summoned **the full number of the disciples** and said, “It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. Therefore, brothers, **pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty**. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.” And what they said pleased **the whole gathering**, and **they chose** Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. **These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them.**

Remember that the church is a “family” community, and so the elders (in order to be truly elders) must be those recognized by that community and put forward by that community. The very concept of elders assumes a community voice in any official appointment. So, does this mean that the church is a democracy where anyone can put himself forward for a vote and be appointed by the congregation with a 51% majority? This is the Congregational view of church government. “Congregationalism is that form of church government which maintains that each congregation is ruled by the people [exclusively emphasizing and wrongly applying the priesthood of all believers]. A consensus of opinion of the members [usually 51%] is needed in decision-making. The office-bearers are appointed by the church members to carry out functions agreed by the congregation, rather than to [‘manage/lead’] in the biblical sense.” (Poh, 10) In congregationalism, the role of the elders is not to govern, but to do what the congregation wants. But we already know that this is not what the Scriptures teach us. So, in the example of the Deacons in Acts 6, while the whole congregation chose the candidates for Deacon and put them forward, it was the Apostles who laid down the qualifications and who ultimately confirmed or approved their choice. We read in Acts 14:

- **Acts 14:23** — And when [Paul and Barnabas] had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed.

On the one hand, we assume, here, the consent and agreement of the congregation (otherwise it’s impossible to imagine how these men could be called “elders” in the community). On the other hand, we see that it’s actually Paul and Barnabas (and not the congregation) who “appointed/ordained” these elders. In a church that already has elders, the process for electing and appointing future elders would then include the voice of **both** the congregation **and** the elders. If it doesn’t include the voice of the already existing elders, then we haven’t rightly understood the role of the elder in overseeing and managing the affairs of God’s church. If the existing elders have no final say in who is ultimately appointed to the office then their oversight has failed at the most fundamental point. On the other hand, if the elders can appoint who they

like without the consent of the members of the congregation, then the very idea of an “Elder” becomes utterly meaningless.

We believe it’s this same principle of Elder-“rule” with congregational consent that guides us in other areas of decision making in the church.

- **Acts 15:2, 6, 22** — And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with [the Judaizers], Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question... The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter... Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, **with the whole church**, to choose men from among them and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas.

It was the Apostles and elders who took the leadership in this matter, but it was the whole church (not necessarily every individual, but the church as a whole) that was united with them and of one mind. How did this happen? On the one hand, this is a testimony to the Apostles and elders and how they must have communicated with the church and brought the whole church along with them. On the other hand, this is a testimony to the church’s recognition of the authority of the Apostles and the elders. On the one hand, can you imagine the Apostles and elders publishing these decisions while all the rest of the church in Jerusalem was in opposition? One of the ways that the Spirit of God works is through the united (not necessarily the unanimous) voice of His Spirit-filled people.

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

We see this principle also in that most of Paul’s letters are addressed not exclusively to the elders and overseers of the churches, but to the church as a whole. (cf. 1 Cor. 5:4-5; 2 Cor. 1:1; 2:5-11; 8:19) On the other hand, can you imagine the Jerusalem congregation publishing any such decisions apart from the divinely ordained authority and oversight of the Apostles and elders? We know that another way the Spirit of God works is through those elders who have been appointed to manage and oversee the life of the Church. We see this principle also in that some of Paul’s letters *are* addressed exclusively to the leaders in the churches, entrusting them with the responsibility to manage and oversee the congregations in the light of the teaching that he has given to all.

As a church, we apply the biblical principle of elder-“rule” with congregational consent in a couple of ways. First of all, and most importantly, all elders (and deacons) must be confirmed by the congregation and then reconfirmed by congregational vote every three years. Second of all, there are various things that require special confirmation by the members of the congregation (amendments to the Articles of Faith or the Constitution; adopting Church position statements [definition of marriage] the annual budget; changing the church name, joining FIRE, etc.) Third, the required level of approval for a measure to be confirmed is 80% (other Reformed Baptist churches usually adopt something like a 2/3’s majority. This affirms the principle of the Holy Spirit working through the church as a whole, but not always—or necessarily—the whole church unanimously. Fourth, as of now, the elders are not permitted to vote on their own

recommendations. Finally, before anything can come to a vote there must be time set aside for discussion and feedback so that by all means possible the church—both elders and the rest of the membership—might be of the same mind.

But now the other side to all of this is that *only* the elders can bring something to an official vote by making formal recommendations to the congregation. It's the role of the elders to recommend and the role of the congregation to confirm or veto the recommendations of the elders that they have elected to govern and manage the affairs of the church. Having said this, of course, *most* of the elder's work and responsibilities will not require any special confirmation beyond their election by the congregation to serve as elders.

## Conclusion

You can see, then, that as Reformed Baptists we are neither Presbyterian in our church Government or Congregational (or Episcopal). What we believe the Bible teaches is a form of Church government historically called "Independency." What we believe the Bible teaches is the privilege and the responsibility of each local congregation to be wholly self-governing by means of elder-"rule" (i.e. a plurality of elders with a "first among equals") with voluntary congregational consent.

Can you see, now, how these biblical principles raise the obvious and pressing question: "Who are the members of the congregation?" Who are the people who have a "voice" in consenting to the governance and the leadership of the elders? Are they all regular attenders? That obviously won't work. Are they all baptized regular attenders? But what do we mean by regular attender? Just someone who shows up every week, but otherwise shows no other commitment to or involvement in the body? And how long does someone have to be a regular attender? Do you see how in all of these questions we're already assuming the necessity of some kind of formal/official membership? We're already assuming that there must be some basis on which to decide who has the biblical privilege and responsibility of having a voice in consenting to the governance of the elders.

So what about this: Should someone "automatically" become a member after a given period of time and also a demonstration of commitment to the body (default membership)? There are three fatal problems with this. First, this still lacks any "definition" and objective criteria. Second, this undermines and contradicts all that we've just learned from the Bible about the order and government of the church. When it comes to recognizing who are the members of the congregation, this is perhaps one of the most important areas where the elders are to exercise their oversight. And so also, this is one of the most important areas where the existing [formal] members of the congregation should have a voice of consent. So our constitution states that the process for becoming a voting member (a member with a voice in congregational consent to the oversight of the elders) requires "a recommendation [to the congregation] for membership by the Elders." All of this, then, brings us to the third fatal flaw in a "default membership." Membership assumes more than "involvement" and regular attendance. Membership assumes "**the voluntary consent to be governed** by those standards and means which have been officially adopted by the congregation in recognition of the authority of God's word" (the Church Constitution, the Articles of Faith [Calvinistic; Baptist], and the elders of the Church (not undermining or

contradicting the teaching of the elders; cf. LWBC Member Statement of Commitment”). Therefore, membership should never be automatic, but only expressly entered into with a public statement of this voluntary consent and commitment to this particular local expression of the body of Christ.

The importance of all this is not simply in guarding against potential dangers. In other words, this isn’t just a “necessary evil” or even just a minor technicality. The importance of formal membership is in actively affirming the beauty of the church and the way that God Himself has ordained that His church should function. Formal membership under the oversight of the elders and with congregational consent is ultimately a necessary and a wholly desirable and beautiful thing in all the true churches of Jesus Christ. And so this helps us see why all of our church votes on all elder recommendations and all Elder reconfirmations (even if we always vote “yes”) should always be treasured as a high privilege and responsibility.

I want to end with the conclusion to a message I preached seven years ago on the topic of Church membership. (It’s on our church website under the archived messages.) We believe that in light of what we can learn from nature itself, in light of Christian prudence, and in light of the clear teaching and principles of God’s Word, church membership is a beautiful and *essential* expression of our voluntary consent to be governed and our covenantal commitment to one another in the *visible* church – which is the flock, the temple, the body, and the bride of Christ. Brothers and sisters, let us be diligent, then, to display in every possible way our love for, and our commitment to “the church of God, which He obtained with His own blood.” (Acts 20:28) “To Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.” (Eph. 3:21)