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REFORMED BAPTIST CHURCH

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THE MARKS OF A NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH

Biblical Church Government, Part 1: A Plurality of Elders

Sermon Notes

December 31, 2006

“[F]rom the Old Testament perspective, [the church] is the redeemed ‘assembly’ standing reverently in the presence of God and his holy angels to worship and serve Yahweh. From the New Testament perspective, the church, also God’s ‘assembly,’ is specifically founded on Jesus Christ as the Messiah and Son of the living God and on his confessing apostles as his authoritative teachers of doctrine.”
Dr. Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, p. 836

MARKS OF A HEALTHY NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH:

- I. SOUND THEOLOGY
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BIBLICAL ELDERSHIP

- I. The Old Testament Background
- II. The New Testament Model
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I. The Old Testament Background

- ❑ There are a total of 138 references to the Hebrew word translated *elder* [זָקֵן] in the Old Testament.

Then Moses and the elders of Israel charged the people, saying, 'Keep all the commandments which I command you today.' Deuteronomy 27:1

- ❑ In the Old Testament, the elders in Israel were mature males, heads of their families (Exodus 21); men of solid integrity; men who feared YHWH and made decision based upon truth (Exodus 18:20-21); men who were full of the Holy Spirit (Numbers 11:16-17); and men who, as John MacArthur writes, '[were] impartial and courageous...who would intercede, teach, and judge righteously and fairly (Deuteronomy 1:13-17).'
- ❑ In Exodus 3-4 it appears that Elders were the leaders of the various tribes and clans in the nation of Israel.
- ❑ These 'tribal rulers' were eventually 'replaced' with the seventy elders recorded in Numbers 11:16 (and Exodus 24:9-11):

"The LORD therefore said to Moses, 'Gather for Me seventy men from the elders of Israel, whom you know to be the elders of the people and their officers and bring them to the tent of meeting, and let them take their stand there with you.'"

- ❑ It appears the Sanhedrin in first century Israel was based upon this concept of seventy-one elders [seventy elders + a high priest (initially Moses)].

'It is from this point, classical Rabbinic tradition holds, the Sanhedrin began: with seventy elders, headed by Moses, for a total of seventy-one.' www.wikipedia.org

'It seems evident from the biblical record that the earliest Christian churches modeled themselves after the Jewish synagogues. Consequently, **it is almost certain that the role of the Christian Elders was parallel to the role of Elders in the dispersed Jewish synagogues.** In and around Jerusalem, the Jewish Elders were subjected to the rulers, or the Sanhedrin, who made almost all decisions for the Jews. But the historical record seems to indicate that the Jews who spread outside Jerusalem still used their Elders in strong and significant ways. The Elders were apparently still the spiritual and, to some small extent, the civic leaders of the dispersed Jewish synagogues.'

David L. Miner

- ❑ The elders in ancient Israel were charged by YHWH with the responsibility of leading the people and judging them (Deuteronomy 1:9-18). They also lead in the Passover meal (Exodus 12:21), and Moses communicated through them to the people (Exodus 19:7; Deuteronomy 31:9).
- ❑ They also lead the cities (1 Samuel 11:3; 16:4; 30:26) by applying wisdom to disputes of the people as well as providing guidance, direction and oversight in the many areas of the ancient Hebrew society.

- ❑ Throughout the Old Testament, elders are referred to as ‘elders of Israel’ (1 Samuel 4:3), ‘elders of the land’ (1 Kings 20:7); ‘elders of Judah’ (2 Kings 23:1); ‘elders...of each city’ (Ezra 10:14); and ‘elders of the congregation’ (Judges 21:16).
- ❑ As Israel was originally theocracy, the elders also served roles in the civil affairs of the people.

‘The New Testament church was initially Jewish, so it would be natural for it to adopt the concept of elder rule was adopted for use in the early church. *Elder* was the only commonly used Jewish term for leadership that was free from any connotation of either the monarchy or the priesthood. That is significant, because in the church each believer is a co-regent with Christ, so there could be no earthly king. And unlike national Israel, the church has no specially designated earthly priesthood, for all believers are priests. So of all the Jewish concepts of leadership, the elder exemplifies the kind of leadership ordained for the church.’
John MacArthur

II. The New Testament Model

- ❑ Throughout the New Testament, the issue of leadership is often addressed. Some of these references are as follows:

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... 1 Timothy 3:1-7

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 ...	Titus 1:5-7
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When they had appointed elders for them in every church ...	Acts 14:23
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From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called to him the elders of the church .	Acts 20:17
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Is anyone among you sick? Then he must call for the **elders of the church**... James 5:14

...And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and **some as pastors and teachers**,... Ephesians 4:7-13

...To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, including the **overseers** and deacons:
Philippians 1:1

But we request of you, brethren, that you appreciate **those who diligently labor among you, and have charge over** you in the Lord and give you instruction,... 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13

The **elders who rule well** are to be considered worthy of double honor... 1 Timothy 5:17

And this they did, sending it in charge of Barnabas and Saul to **the elders**. Acts 11:30

Do not receive an accusation against **an elder** except on the basis of two or three witnesses.
1 Timothy 5:19

Obey your **leaders** and **submit** to **their authority**.

Hebrews 13:17

Therefore, I exhort the **elders among you**, as your fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed, shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness; nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock. And when **the Chief Shepherd** appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory. You younger men, likewise, be subject to your elders; and all of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, for **GOD IS OPPOSED TO THE PROUD, BUT GIVES GRACE TO THE HUMBLE**. Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time,

1 Peter 5:1-6

...nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be **examples** to the flock.

Mark 10:42-43

□ From the New Testament record, several truths can be observed:

- 1.) The leaders in the early church were known by several different, **interchangeable**, names: overseers, elders, and pastors (1 Tim. 3:1-7; Titus 1:5,7; Acts 14:23; Eph. 4:7-13; Phil. 1:1).
- 2.) In the New Testament Church, authority and leadership appeared to be shared among **multiple elders**, each of which had a different role (1 Tim. 5:17).
- 3.) The body of believers were commanded to submit to the authority of **a plurality of leadership**, as opposed to one man (Heb. 13:17; 1 Thes. 5:12-13).
- 4.) There were elders (plural) in every church (Acts 14:23). NOTE: Many scholars believe that in the first century, every city had its own church. If this was the case, Titus 1:5-7 would only further support the idea of a plurality of elders.
- 5.) There are only four passages in the New Testament where the term overseer was used in the singular **with** the definite article (the overseer as opposed to an overseer). 2 John 1:1, 1 Timothy 3:1 (NASB), 1 Timothy 3:2 (NIV), Titus 1:7 (NASB).

- With regard to the fifth point above (the cases of ‘elder’ with the definite article ‘the’), **the Apostle Paul was speaking in general terms, as opposed to one specific man.**

1.)	The elder to the chosen lady and her children, whom I love in truth...	2 John 1:1
2.)	It is a trustworthy statement: if any man aspires to the office of overseer , it is a fine work he desires to do.	1 Timothy 3:1
3.)	Now the overseer must be above reproach, the husband of but one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach,	1 Timothy 3:2 (NIV)
4.)	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,	Titus 1:7

I. Howard Marshall comments on John 2:2:

‘[The elder] simply means an old man...Elsewhere in the New Testament it [the term ‘elder’] refers to groups of leaders in local churches. **This meaning is unlikely here** since the writer refers to himself in the singular as ‘the elder,’ and since he is probably writing to a church of which he was not a member. It is possible that he was simply a venerable figure in the church known with affectionate reverence as ‘the old man.’

John Stott also comments on John 2:2:

‘Of course the word literally means an ‘old man’, ‘senior’ or ‘veteran’, and it is possible that John assumed, or was given, the title in his old age, much as Paul called himself ‘Paul the aged’ in his letter to Philemon...as a serious title, it would be particularly appropriate to the apostle who had outlived the other apostles...[John] was only ‘an apostle’, as Paul and Peter also styled themselves. But he could be called ‘the elder’ par excellence. There were other elders in Ephesus, but he was unique among them because he was an apostle as well, and a veritable patriarch in age.’

Regarding 1 Timothy 3:1, 2 and Titus 1:7, Alexander Strauch writes the following:

The phrase, “the office of overseer,” represents one word in Greek, *episkope*, which can be literally rendered “oversership.” It represents the position and function of the church official called the overseer (*episkopos*) who is mentioned in **verse 2**. The overseer of **verse 2** is not -someone different from the elders of **1 Timothy 5:25** who lead and teach the church. Paul plainly demonstrates that overseer is used interchangeably for elder when he switches from the term “elders” to the term “overseer” within the Titus list of elder qualifications (**Titus 1:5,7**).

The singular form of the word “overseer” does not imply that there was only one overseer in the church at Ephesus. We know that in Paul’s previous speech to the Ephesian elders (the same church leaders mentioned in 1 Timothy), he addresses a plurality of overseers (**Acts 20:17,28**); to the church in Philippi, Paul greets a plurality of “overseers.” The reason that the term “overseer” in **1 Timothy 3:2** and **Titus 1:7** is singular is because

Paul uses a generic singular, that is, the singular name representing an entire class or type when speaking about the overseer. Thus, the singular “overseer” stands for all overseers – all elders.

This use of the **generic singular** is not an unusual way for Paul to express himself. Paul freely uses the generic singular – “woman,” “widow,” “elder,” and “the Lord’s servant” – when referring to special classes of people (1 Timothy 2:11-14; 5:5, 19, and 2 Timothy 2:24). The only occasions that Paul uses “overseer” in the singular are in his lists of qualifications for the office (1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:7). In both cases, overseer is preceded by the singular construction “if any man” (1 Timothy 3:1; Titus 1:6). When he addresses the overseers directly, however, he uses the plural form because he is addressing a council of overseers, not a single overseer (Phil. 1:1; Acts 20:28). From Paul’s use of singular and plural constructions, we can conclude that the church structure of 1 Timothy is pre-Ignatian and still follows the simple, brotherly, elder system of oversight that is recorded in Acts.

❖ Therefore, it is clear, that in the New Testament, the model is one of a plurality of elders in every church with no mention [even implicitly] of a hierarchy [i.e., a ‘senior elder’ or ‘senior pastor’ in a local church].

- ❑ It is common today for Pastors to use Moses as an applicable example as to why a ‘single Pastor’ model is appropriate [this is often referred to as the ‘Moses Model’]. However, it is, not possible to make such a comparison without abandoning sound hermeneutical [biblical interpretive] principles.
- ❑ Moses was a leader for the nation of Israel **prior to Christ**. In fact, **Moses was a type of Christ**. Therefore, if anyone is represented by Moses today, in would be **Christ Himself, who fulfilled the Old Testament**.

‘If Paul and Peter and James did not teach that their role was derived from the leadership model of Moses, then we cannot take that position. We may possibly conclude that the New Testament equivalent to Moses might be for the entire Church to have a leader and the local Bodies have Elders, some of which are chosen by the leader to assist him in certain functions. But we cannot take the text describing Moses as the leader of the entire nation of Israel and apply that to any given Local Body. The parallel simply cannot apply; it is too much of a stretch. Perhaps a more accurate parallel would be Jesus as the leader of the Church in general and Elders would be the leaders of the Local Bodies.’
A Discussion of the Role of Elders in the Local Church, David L. Miner

‘Still other scholars draw from the Old Testament and teach that churches should follow what is called the “Moses Model.” It is not uncommon to hear them say, “Wasn’t Moses the sole leader of Israel and the elders his assistants?” “Isn’t the local pastor like Moses, and aren’t the elders his assistants?” **Yet the pastor of the local church certainly doesn’t represent Moses. If anyone today is Moses, it is the Lord Jesus Christ.** He leads us in all that we do and is always present with us (Matthew 18:20; 28:20). Christ is our Moses, our great Deliverer!’

We must remember that **Moses was a unique, one-time deliverer** for the nation of Israel. He was not a permanent institution... After the people of Israel settled in their cities, they were no longer led by Moses or his successor Joshua. **They were to be led primarily by their local elders and the priestly family, with God as their King and Shepherd.**
Alexander Strauch

III. The Historical Record

- ❑ Samuel Waldron writes, “The Puritan movement and Reformed tradition of which [the English Particular Baptists were] a part believed that the Bible provides a divinely mandated church government. Indeed, the very origins of the congregational and Particular Baptist wing of Puritanism cannot be understood apart from this.”
- ❑ Waldron continues, “The authority and sufficiency of the Scriptures with regard to church government is emphasized in the famous *Apologeticall Narration* written by the congregational members of the Westminster Assembly in 1643:

First, the supreme rule *without us*, was the Primitive pattern and example of the churches erected by the Apostles. **Our consciences were possessed with that reverence and adoration of the fullness of the Scriptures, that there is therein a complete sufficiency, as to make the *man of God perfect*, so also to make the Churches of God perfect,** (mere circumstances we except, or what rules the law of nature doth in common dictate) if the directions and examples therein delivered were fully known and followed.

- ❑ John Owen, in his preface to *The Institution of the Churches, and the Order Appointed in Them by Jesus Christ* wrote:

What we have laid down about the churches and their government, we humbly conceive to be the order which Christ has himself appointed to be observed. We have endeavored to follow Scripture light; and those that went before us according to that rule.

- ❑ Fundamental to the Reformed tradition [which originated in the sixteenth century] was the doctrine of *sola scriptura*.
- ❑ As a result of the doctrine of *sola scriptura*, the Reformers embraced what is known as the regulative principle. Essentially the regulative principle states that **‘those elements that are instituted or appointed by command or example in the Bible are permissible in worship, or in other words, that God institutes in the Scriptures everything he requires for worship in the Church and that everything else is prohibited.’** www.wikipedia.org
- ❑ In his work, *A Quest For Godliness: A Puritan Vision of the Christian Life*, James I. Packer states that the Puritans would ‘admit nothing that the Bible does not directly prescribe...’ and that they required, ‘direct biblical warrant, *in the form of precept or precedent*...to sanction every substantive item in the public worship of God.’
- ❑ Packer continues, “The same principle was applied to church government.”
- ❑ This principle, known as the **regulative principle**, continues today as the guiding standard of biblical interpretation among many inheritors of the Reformed tradition.

- The regulative principle is stated in nearly identical language in all three of the major confessions of faith of the Puritan movement (the Westminster Confession of the Presbyterians, the Savoy Declaration of the Congregationalists, and the Second London Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689 of the Baptists):

The acceptable way of worshipping the true God, is instituted by himself, and so limited by his own revealed will, that he may not be worshipped according to the imagination and devices of men, nor the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representations, or any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scriptures.

- Therefore, in accordance with the regulative principle, verses such as Acts 14:23 [‘they had appointed *elders* for them in *every* church’], were interpreted as scriptural *mandates*, not simply optional examples.
- Thus, as James Renihan states, ‘the Particular [Reformed] Baptists believed that their church polity was mandated by the Scripture...this was their ‘primitive impulse.’”

□ **It is certainly no coincidence, therefore, that churches, even today, of the Reformed tradition almost unanimously adopt a plurality of elders in church governance.**

Baptists in the United States:

- William Bulletin (W.B.) Johnson, the first President of the Southern Baptist Convention. In 1846, he wrote about the Rulers of a Church of Christ in “The Gospel Developed Through the Government and Order of the Churches of Jesus Christ” In it, he reviews the following passages: Hebrews 13:7, 17, 24; 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13; Acts 14:23; 15:4; 20:17, 18, 28; 1 Timothy 5:17; Titus 1:5-7; 1 Peter 5:1-3; Ephesians 4:11; James 5:14-15

He then writes:

...over each church of Christ in the apostolic age, **a plurality of rulers was ordained**, who were designated by the terms *elder, bishop, overseer, pastor*, with authority in the government of the flock.. these rulers were all equal in rank and authority, no one having a preeminence over the rest. This satisfactorily appears from the fact, that the same qualifications were required in all, so that though some labored in word and doctrine, and others did not, **the distinction between them was not in rank, but in the character of their service.**

- Later, in 1874, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary Professor, William Williams wrote:

The **elders of the New Testament were all equal in rank and authority**, and discharged the same duties, - the ministry of the gospel and the oversight of the government and discipline of the church. <http://wwwFOUNDERS.org/library/polity/williams.htm>

- ❑ More recently, Earl Radmacher, president of Western Conservative Baptist Seminary in Portland, Oregon wrote:

The context of elders, in my past experience, has been Presbyterianism. Consequently, when I would hear someone refer to his church leaders as elders, I would automatically think of church government that is alien to that which is Baptist. I confess that I assumed this without ever doing a careful historical study of the early nomenclature of Baptist leadership (which used the term elders), or worse yet, **without ever reckoning with the fact of the predominance in the Scripture of the use of “elder” as a title of church leaders.**

- ❑ Radmacher also wrote:

It seems quite plain that **no local church in the New Testament was ruled and managed by one person.** Rather, the plurality of elders appears as the norm. Thus, the “one-man” ministry is a violation of this important guideline.

- ❑ It is also significant that even the Baptist Faith and Message, up until 1925 appeared to support elder-led congregations. In the 1925 version, it stated:

A church of Christ is a congregation of baptized believers, associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the gospel; observing the ordinances of Christ, governed by his laws, and exercising the gifts, rights, and privileges invested in them by his word, and seeking to extend the gospel to the ends of the earth. **Its Scriptural officers are bishops, or elders, and deacons.** <http://www.sbc.net/bfm/bfmcomparison.asp>

IV. The Significance

- ❑ Pastor and writer Ray Stedman commented on the significance of elder rule in his commentary on Mark 10:42b-43a (“Those who are supposed to rule over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them [Jesus said to his disciples]. But it shall not be so among you!”):

Throughout twenty centuries the church has virtually ignored these words. Probably with the best of intentions, **it has nevertheless repeatedly borrowed in to the authority structures of the world**, changed the names of executives from kings, generals, captains, presidents, governors, secretaries, heads, and chiefs to popes, patriarchs, bishops, stewards, deacons, pastors, and elders, and gone merrily on its way...

...in most churches today **an unthinking acceptance has been given to the idea that the pastor is the final voice of authority in both doctrine and practice.**

- ❑ By blindly accepting the ‘idea that the pastor is the final voice of authority’, we place man-made limits on the ability of believers to exercise their spiritual gifts, and force them to conform their ministries to the vision and plans of one man. This type of system places the local Pastor in the position of mediator between the body of believers and the throne of

God, as it assumes that God speaks primarily through one chosen leader within a congregation.

- ❑ It certainly makes sense that most churches have a Senior Pastor who is the primary figure of authority. The reason is that this form of government ‘works.’ It provides for quick decision-making and centralized authority which leads often to growth in numbers. However, it is simply not biblical.
- ❑ It should be noted that, although the biblical New Testament model of church governance is a plurality of elders, whereby all elders are equal in authority, this does not mean that all are equal in influence. Often referred to as the ‘first among equals’ principle, inevitably certain individuals emerge who have [due to age, experience, etc.] greater influence than others within a group of equals.

1. The Preeminence of Christ in His Church

- ❑ When churches elevate their pastors a role he was never intended to have, the preeminence of Christ in that local congregation is always lessened.
- ❑ Alexander Strauch states:
...biblical eldership guards and promotes the preeminence and position of Christ over the local church...Because the apostles knew that Jesus Christ, by the Holy Spirit, was uniquely present with them as Ruler, Head, Lord, Pastor, Master, Overseer, High Priest, and King, they chose a form of government that reflected this distinctive, fundamental, Christian truth. This concept was no theoretical idea to the early Christians – it was reality. The first churches were truly Christ-centered, Christ-dependent churches.
...in the first century, no Christian would dare take the position or title of sole ruler, overseer, or pastor of the church. We Christians today, however, are so accustomed to speaking of “the pastor” that we do not stop to realize that the New Testament does not...There is only one flock and one Pastor ([John 10:16](#)), one body and one Head ([Col. 1:18](#)), one holy priesthood and one great High Priest ([Heb. 4:14ff.](#)), one brotherhood and one Elder Brother ([Rom. 8:29](#)), one building and one Cornerstone ([1 Peter 2:5ff.](#)), one Mediator, one Lord. Jesus Christ is “Senior Pastor,” and all others are His undershepherds ([1 Peter 5:4](#)).

2. The Sufficiency of Scripture

- ❑ As stated previously, if Scripture is our sufficient source of authority, and the example in the apostolic church was that of multiple elders, than it is our obligation to follow such a model.

3. The Protection of the Elders

- ❑ When a church elevates a Senior Pastor to unbiblical heights, it [the church] is setting him [the Pastor] up for failing.

‘Contemporary hero-worshipping churches, influenced as they have been by this hero-worshipping culture, have elevated talented men to such celebrity status that mortal flesh cannot bear the heights.’
Robert Reymond

4. The Protection of the Members

- ❑ When men are elevated to unbiblical levels, the members of the local body begin to look to the Pastor as the supreme authority, often forgetting their individual status as a part of the ‘priesthood of all believers.’
- ❑ All too often, when a question in the Scriptures emerge, the first question out of many peoples’ mouths is, ‘What does the Pastor think about this?’
- ❑ Pastors in a church **do** have authority and are to be submitted to; however, all believers have the Scriptures, and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, enabling them to understand the Word of God.

5. The Overall Health of the Church

- ❑ Finally, a plurality of elders preserves the overall health of a New Testament Church.
- ❑ When only one Pastor is the head of the local church, the church is limited by his gifts, talents, and likes and dislikes. However, when multiple elders, with multiple gifts and personalities, govern a church, the church is not so limited.