
A Biblical Perspective Regarding Elder Rule

Presented by Dr. Howard Bixby
at the GARBC Annual Conference
June 29, 2005



FACULTY FORUM

Biblical answers to contemporary questions

Compliments of Baptist Bible Seminary ♦ 538 Venard Road ♦ Clarks Summit, PA 18411
570-586-2400 ♦ www.bbc.edu ♦ hbixby@bbc.edu

WHAT IS AN ELDER?

As a dean and instructor in seminary, a speaker at church seminars, church consultant, and pastor, this writer has observed an increasing (and sometimes not so harmonious) experimentation with church leadership models. At the center of the experimentation and shifting has been a discontent with the status quo of plateaued or declining churches. A few very large American churches have experienced dramatic growth and have been viewed as models. While examining the growth and apparent success, the leadership factor often surfaces. Sometimes the observation is, "If we changed our church government to match theirs, we would be successful too!" Often the conclusion is that changing to elder rule or at least leadership by a board of lay elders will solve their stagnation problems and help the church become what it should be.

On the other hand, the stories of lay elder boards ruling the churches have been many and unsettling as well. A typical pastor in an elder board run church states in explaining his resignation,

But I also believe that part of the problem is the organizational structure of the church in which the perspective of elders is that they are to lead and make decisions on what needs to be done within the church. This style of leadership elevates lay people to the role of shepherds while at best minimizing and at worst removing the call of God upon the individual(s) who will serve as Elder/Pastor/Bishop. I have observed first hand how this simple use of the term *elder* has convinced men that they need to make arbitrary decisions related to the church in many cases where there is no prior knowledge of any details of the situation.¹

These dueling perceptions of the role and results of church leadership by an elder board indicate the need for clarification and an understanding of the office of *elder* in Scripture for the New Testament church. This brief and limited document addresses one dimension of the discussion – **what is an elder?**

WHAT ELDERS ARE NOT

Prophets: The prophets of the Old Testament and those possessing the prophetic spiritual gift in the New Testament were mouth pieces for God who received revelation directly from Him. They spoke for God, penned Scripture and gave people decisions and directions from God. Since the completion of the Canon, this function has ceased.

Priests: The Old Testament priesthood was an inherited office charged with the duty of bringing sacrifices to God on behalf of people. The priesthood was not a governing/leadership role. In the New Testament, every born again child of God inherits the right to be a believer – priest who presents sacrifices of praise and service to

¹ From a private letter to the author.

