DEVELOPING A MINISTRY PLAN TO IMPLEMENT BIBLICAL

ELDERSHIP AT GRAEFENBURG BAPTIST CHURCH

IN WADDY, KENTUCKY

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by

Philip Andrew Meade

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APPROVAL SHEET

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I dedicate this project to my mom and dad, who taught me to love the preached Word

and to rest in the joy of the Lord.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

iv

LIST OF TABLES

PREFACE

There are many wonderful people who have made the completion of this project possible. I give thanks for the church family at Graefenburg Baptist, who have loved and supported me through times of great happiness and times of great sorrow. Without their patience and prayer, this project would not have been completed.

At times I look back and think of the many men and women who cared enough about me to take the time to teach and disciple me. In particular, the preaching and example of Pastor Bobby Russell, my home pastor at Temple Baptist Church in Kingsport, Tennessee, will always be near to my heart.

My seminary professors have been a consistent source of motivation and encouragement during my educational pursuits. I would specifically like to thank my faculty supervisor, Dr. Stephen J. Wellum, for his willingness to help me on this project. His patience and wisdom while guiding me through the research and writing are deeply appreciated.

Finally, my family is my greatest earthly gift. My beautiful wife, Andi, has been supporting me, helping me, praying for me, and rooting me on as my biggest fan. I cannot thank God enough for her. And of course, our three incredible children, Callie Grace, Justus, and Eli, who are not all that particularly interested in this project, and that remains, perhaps, the best reminder for me to keep it from becoming what it should never become.

Philip Meade

Waddy, Kentucky

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Graefenburg Baptist Church (GBC) is a family of believers in Waddy, Kentucky, who seeks to "glorify God alone by transforming lives in Jesus in order to love more and serve more."[1] The Great Commission is central to the life and ministry of the church, which is evident through the priority of relationship building over program development. Due to the growing nature of the church, both physically and spiritually, leadership adjustments were necessary for the continued flourishing of the GBC family. This project addressed the necessity of biblical eldership at GBC and developed a ministry plan to transition to a plurality of elders.

Context

Graefenburg Baptist Church has experienced significant growth in recent years in both numbers and diversity. A steady increase of young families have committed to church membership and the youth and children's ministries have expanded to the point where a third full-time pastor for families was hired in 2016. Within a period of about five years, the worship attendance for Sunday mornings consistently increased to the point of moving the worship service to a larger facility due to lack of room in the sanctuary. These positive changes provided an opportunity to consider the church's leadership and accountability structure.

GBC currently has three full-time pastors, three part-time staff, and several paid childcare workers. Like many Southern Baptist (SBC) churches, the leadership model is

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[1] Graefenburg Baptist Church, "Who We Are," accessed September 14, 2017, www.gbcfamily.com/who-we-are.

one where the pastors and a board of deacons govern together and collectively function like a plurality of elders. GBC currently has twelve deacons who serve on a three-year "active" term and subsequently rotate off the active list for a year. Deacon elections occur once a year. With some minor adjustments, this has been the model for leadership since the church's inception in 1868.

There were three primary concerns with this model of church leadership. First was the absence of a biblical warrant for pastor plus deacon leadership. The Bible prescribes roles and responsibilities for both deacons and elders in a local church. In GBC's leadership model, there existed a deacon body that did not effectively carry out the roles of a deacon since they were more engaged in elder responsibilities. Thus, the church was absent of both biblically functioning deacons and elders. When a church establishes a structure for leadership outside the biblical mandate, that church will not experience the full power and blessing of God's design.

Second, GBC's leadership model did not use correct biblical terminology to describe the role and functions of the deacons. The congregation was assessing the voting qualifications of the church's twelve deacons through the lens of the Bible's teaching on deacons, yet the deacons were serving in a capacity well beyond the scope of their authority. Thus, the deacons were functioning as elders but were voted and examined through the qualifications of a deacon. This generated significant confusion for the congregation both in terms of how they should consider their vote and what they should expect from their deacon board.

A third concern was the practical implementation of the duties for which the deacons are responsible. The deacon body, in the absence of elders, was responsible not only for the activities of the deacons, but also had to assume the spiritual leadership responsibilities of the elders. In doing so, they struggled to lead well in either area, often confused as to the nature of their role as deacons. Deacons meetings became an ineffective blend of addressing the spiritual issues of the church, including issues of

2

discipline, while also trying to maintain the practical servant aspect of deacon ministry. In other words, sometimes deacons were not sure how or what to discuss in meetings, which led to ineffective leadership.

Finally, a significant portion of the congregation never experienced a plurality of elder leadership. Much of what was believed about eldership was negative due to various stories of abuse in nearby churches. Thus, the context of GBC provided significant challenges for this project due to both the longevity of the current leadership model and the fear of eldership.

Rationale

The current model of church leadership at GBC presented unrealistic and unbiblical expectations for the deacons and a misrepresentation of their qualifications and responsibilities to the congregation. Therefore, for the health of the church and conformity to the biblical witness, the vision was to establish a separate group of qualified elders who would serve the church in addition to the board of deacons. Under this new leadership model, the congregation would better appreciate the biblical qualifications for elders and their function in contrast to the biblical qualifications for deacons and their function. The scope of this project was to develop a ministry plan to assist GBC in the transition from pastor plus deacon leadership to a plurality of elders.

The transitional plan would benefit both the congregation and the specific men serving as deacons. As for the former, the biblical witness for church eldership was historically misunderstood at GBC to reference paid staff members, most notably the senior pastor. Thus, apart from when a new pastor was hired for the church, the biblical qualifications for elders went largely unnoticed. Deacon qualifications were utilized for voting in men who were functionally serving as elders. A plurality of elders in addition to a board of deacons would better serve the church for both spiritual leadership and practical ministry, in addition to providing clarity for the congregation as to the purpose of the church offices.

The transition would also benefit men who serve as deacons by providing specific direction for their ministry and removing the "ruling" aspect of their service (1 Tim 5:17). Without the confusion of attempting to determine if they are to devote more of their time to spiritual leadership or practical service, the deacons would experience an unprecedented freedom for serving the congregation.

The most obvious benefit for transitioning to a plurality of elders was the conformity of GBC's church leadership to a more faithful biblical model. God the Father has placed God the Son as head of the church and has thus established an authority for the structure, purpose, and practice of the church (Eph 1:22). Any church leadership model that fails to adhere to the structure Christ intended will forgo the full blessing and power of God's design. Thus, a ministry plan to implement biblical plural eldership at GBC would conform with the church's purpose to glorify God alone and transform lives in Jesus.

Purpose

The purpose of this project was to develop a ministry plan to implement biblical plural eldership at Graefenburg Baptist Church in Waddy, Kentucky.

Goals

The following four goals were established to help make the project purpose become a reality. The four goals for this project were:

1. Assess the knowledge of the biblical offices of elders and deacons among the members of GBC.

2. Develop a six-session study on the roles and functions of elders.

3. Increase the knowledge among six ordained deacons in a small group setting.

4. Develop a ministry plan for GBC to transition to a plurality of elders.

Research Methodology

The first goal was to assess the knowledge of the biblical offices of elders and deacons among the members of GBC. This goal was measured by administering the Church Offices Survey to seventy church members to determine their biblical comprehension of elders and deacons.[2] This goal was considered successful when seventy members completed the survey and the results were analyzed, yielding a clearer picture of the comprehension of church offices among GBC families.

The second goal was to develop a six-session study on the roles and functions of elders. This goal was measured by an expert panel consisting of a fellow Southern Baptist pastor in a large Kentucky church that incorporates plural elder leadership, the Director of Missions for the Shelby Baptist Association, an associate pastor at GBC, the missions strategist for the Kentucky Baptist Convention who is also on staff at a large Southern Baptist church that incorporates plural elder leadership, and a Concordia University theology professor who has a long history in pastoring churches with elder leadership. This panel utilized a rubric to determine if the study was biblical faithful and sufficiently addressed the offices of elders and deacons.[3] This goal was considered successfully met when a minimum of 90 percent of the evaluation criterion met or exceeded the sufficient level. Should the initial feedback yield less than 90 percent, the curriculum would be revised in accordance with the panel's evaluation until such time that the criterion met or exceeded the sufficient level.

The third goal was to increase the knowledge of six ordained deacons in a small group setting. This goal was measured by administering a pre- and post-study survey which was used to measure the change in biblical leadership knowledge.[4] This goal was

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[2] See appendix 1. All of the research instruments used in this project were performed in compliance with and approved by the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary Research Ethics Committee prior to use in the ministry project.

[3] See appendix 2.

[4] See appendix 3.

considered successfully met when the t-test for dependent samples demonstrated a positively significant difference in the pre- and post-study scores.

The fourth goal was to develop a ministry plan for GBC to transition to a plurality of elders. This goal was measured by six deacons who utilized a rubric to evaluate the ministry plan's scope, effectiveness, clarity, and application.[5] This goal was considered successfully met when a minimum of 90 percent of the rubric evaluation indicators met or exceeded the sufficient level.

Definitions and Limitations/Delimitations

The following key terms are defined to assist the reader.

Congregationalism. Congregationalism is a democratic form of church government whereby final human ecclesiastical authority resides collectively in the membership and not the church leadership.[6] The current model of congregationalism at GBC is characterized by congregational rule alongside the leadership of the pastor and deacons.

Elders. Often used synonymously with "overseer" and "pastor," an *elder* is the church office responsible for the spiritual maturity and needs of the church. Elders provide direction, protection, leadership, and spiritual nurturing for the flock.[7]

Deacons. The *deacon* is a church office responsible for the practical, serving aspects of church. They exist to compliment the spiritual leadership of the elders by providing necessary ministry care to the congregation. GBC has a deacon board consisting of twelve deacons.

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[5] See appendix 4.

[6] Greg Wills, "The Church: Baptists and Their Churches in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries," in *Polity: Biblical Arguments on How to Conduct Church Life,* ed. Mark Dever (Washington, DC: Center for Church Reform, 2001), 20.

[7] Phil A. Newton and Matt Schmucker, *Elders in the Life of the Church: Rediscovering the Biblical Model for Church Leadership*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2014), 49.

The primary delimitation placed on this project was the twenty-week period for completion. This timeline included the assessment, curriculum development, curriculum implementation, pre- and post-study surveys, and the development of a ministry plan. The final vision of a full transition to biblical eldership would extend beyond the scope of this twenty-week project.

Conclusion

Graefenburg Baptist Church is a strong, healthy, growing congregation in central Kentucky, but one key area of leadership was falling short of the biblical expectations. Through an effective and coherent ministry plan, the church would be in a position to successfully transition to a plurality of elders model of church leadership.

CHAPTER 2

BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL SUPPORT FOR A
PLURALITY OF ELDERS IN LOCAL CHURCHES

The New Testament provides sufficient instruction and modeling for an elder-led church polity, contrary to the pastor plus deacon model common to contemporary SBC churches. This sufficient instruction and modeling will be explored by examining three key New Testament texts relating to a plurality of elder leadership in the local church: Acts 14:23, 1 Timothy 3:1-7, and 1 Peter 5:1-5. Three supporting points will be highlighted from these passages. First, Luke's historical account of the church in the book of Acts describes the establishment of elders for each local congregation and their accompanying appointment to service. Second, Paul provides Timothy with a list of detailed qualifications to discern who is fit for elder leadership. Third, Peter provides instructions for the manner in which elders are to shepherd a congregation. Thus, three essential components concerning elders in the church are their (1) establishment, (2) qualifications, and (3) instruction. These descriptive biblical elements for church government should be understood as normative for churches during the interadvental age.

**The Establishment and Appointment of Elders
in the Early Church (Acts 14:23)**

In his Gospel, Luke provides an historical account of Jesus, and in the book of Acts, he provides an historical account of the church. The church planting strategies embraced by the apostles, and in particular Paul, are most clearly presented in the development of the church as described in Acts, and thus the book serves as a fitting place to begin a study of elder leadership.

Jewish Elders

Acts 14 provides the first reference for Gentile elders in churches planted outside of Jerusalem. However, Luke previously mentioned Jewish elders in chapter 11.[1] Early among the community of believers in Jerusalem were elders who had various responsibilities and were recognized by the congregation as leaders for the newly formed church. The first one reads of their leadership is during a prophesied famine that would have an impact "over all the world." In response to the famine, Christians in Antioch sent relief to the region of Judea, which came under the care of the elders. Luke records in Acts 11:30, "So the disciples determined, every one according to his ability, to send relief to the brothers living in Judea. And they did so, sending it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul." Luke does not provide details as to the means in which the elders handled or distributed the money. What is clear, however, is that the money was sent specifically to the elders who in turn acted on behalf of the church to care properly for its distribution.[2]

Another example of early Jewish elder leadership comes from Acts 15 and the famous "Jerusalem Council." Lingering questions and concerns related to the salvation of Gentiles precipitated a meeting of the apostles and elders in Jerusalem. Paul and Barnabas, along with "some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders about this question" (Acts 15:2). That the elders were working so closely with the apostles on the most significant doctrinal issues indicates the significance of the elders' authority in the early church. They were responsible for safeguarding the purity of the gospel and protecting the church from doctrinal decay.

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[1] I. Howard Marshall, *Acts,* Tyndale New Testament Commentary (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2008), 190.

[2] Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership: An Urgent Call to Restore Biblical Church Leadership*, ed. Stephen Sorenson and Amanda Sorenson, rev. ed. (Littleton, CO: Lewis and Roth, 2003), 124.

These and other examples[3] demonstrate at least two truths concerning early Jewish elder leadership. First, there was a shared authority and leadership among the elders in Jerusalem as opposed to a single elder or pastor. Second, this leadership model was met with seemingly little resistance among the initial Christian converts because the presence of elders was an historically common model of leadership for Israel, both during the time of Jesus and throughout the Old Testament.

The specifics of elder authority from Old Testament Israel through the New Testament synagogue is not the focus of this project, and thus will not be comprehensively explored. Nevertheless, Alexander Strauch writes that a leading body of elders was "one of Israel's oldest and most fundamental institutions"[4] and as such was familiar to the Christian converts as an acceptable form of government. The degree to which Jewish Christians modeled their elder leadership after the Jewish synagogue is unknown, but at a minimum the new Christians were quite familiar with the structure and found it to be an appropriate method of leadership for the newly established church in Jerusalem, and as will be seen, in the church throughout the world. Cornelius Van Dam provides a helpful summary:

> That the Christian eldership is rooted in the Israelite and Jewish office need not be doubted. When Luke mentioned this office for the first time (Acts 11:30) he did so without any explanation because none was needed. . . . To the first Christians who were Jewish and had grown up with the synagogue and its elders, it would have seemed a matter of course that the eldership would be instituted in each congregation as it was established.[5]

Thus, as F. Scott Spencer writes, Paul's church planting mission "maintains certain structural associations" with Israel's governing history.[6] The presence of early Jewish

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[3] See Acts 21:17-26.

[4] Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, 122.

[5] Cornelis Van Dam, *The Elder: Today's Ministry Rooted in All of Scripture* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2009), 9.

[6] F. Scott Spencer, *Acts,* Readings: A New Biblical Commentary (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 152.

elders in the church, who themselves are a product of a long history of elder authority in Israel, demonstrates the longevity of a plurality of elders and weakens any argument that would suggest elder authority was a temporary or fleeting model limited to the early church.

First Missionary Journey

Acts 13 and 14 describe the first of three missionary journeys by Paul. At last, the command from Jesus to make disciples in all Judea, Samaria, and to the end of the earth was beginning to take form (Acts 1:8). Paul and Barnabas were preaching the good news and planting Gentile churches in Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe, towns located in the southeastern district of Asia Minor, and towns that provided not only great joy for the motivated church planters, but also great peril.[7] The Gentiles rejoiced over the proclamation of the gospel, but the Jews sought to persecute Paul, stoning him in Lystra to the point of death (Acts 13:50, 14:19). Bravely, Paul and Barnabas retraced their steps on their way back home, visiting once again the churches newly planted in Lystra, Iconium, and Pisidian Antioch; cities that mere days before had violently run Paul and Barnabas out of town.

In these recently established churches, the apostles began ministering by strengthening, encouraging, and instructing (Acts 14:22). Strengthening the Christians to guard their souls, encouraging them to keep moving forward in the faith, and instructing them to view suffering as the means to glory, or as F. F. Bruce fittingly summarizes it, "no cross, no crown."[8]

Then, in Acts 14:23, Luke describes a profound action on the part of Paul and Barnabas: "And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer

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[7] J. B. Lightfoot and Jeanette M. Hagen, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Newly Discovered Commentary*, ed. Ben Witherington III and Todd D. Still (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2014), 166.

[8] F. F. Bruce, *Book of Acts*, New International Commentary on the New Testament, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 326.

and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed." Luke's seemingly brief description of Paul's apostolic work in this verse provides a host of essential information for New Testament churches. In one verse, Luke describes the plurality of church leadership (elders), how they became elders (appointed), and the number of congregations in Asia Minor that received elders (every church). Considering Paul's eventual listing of qualifications for elders in the Pastoral Epistles (see p. 15), and his reemphasis of appointing elders "in every town" in Titus 1:5, it is best to understand Luke's summary of elder appointments as Paul's customary method for establishing church government and thus normative for the church today.[9] Paul did not establish a plurality of elders in each church until his return visit to them during the second part of his missionary journey. From this information, two things should be considered. First, eldership is not required for a body of believers in Jesus Christ to be considered a church. It is instructional to read Luke's description of each body of believers in Acts 14 as a "church" *before* Paul and Barnabas appointed elders.

Second, Paul and Barnabas' determination to return to the churches for the appointment of elders after experiencing recent persecution demonstrates how important establishing leadership at the local level was for them and how essential proper polity is for a church to function. The ministry of the apostles in preaching the gospel and planting churches would not be enough to sustain doctrinal integrity and cohesiveness among the local people. John Calvin highlights this concern in his commentary on Acts, writing, "It is not enough if men have been once taught the doctrine of godliness, and to have the sum of faith, unless they go forward continually, therefore . . . they assigned pastors to every church, lest, after their departure, doctrine should cease and be silent."[10] A contemporary example might be the arrival of an evangelist at a church for a series of revival meetings,

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[9] Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, 136.

[10] John Calvin, *The Acts of the Apostles 14-28*, *Calvin's Commentaries*, trans. John W. Fraser (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966), 18.

but moving on to the next city without any permanent leadership in place at the church to carry on the mission.

Plurality of Elders

That Paul appointed elders (plural) for the churches is, of course, of paramount importance. The word "elder" (*presbuteros*) and its various cognate forms are found 66 times in the New Testament.[11] In some uses, the word can simply convey greater age, although the New Testament more commonly uses the word to describe leadership in a community based on age and status.[12] For example, Luke 15:25 says, "Now his older son was in the field." In describing the brother of the prodigal son, Luke uses the word *presbuteros* in the singular simply to highlight the brother's older age. However, in Acts 14:23, Luke uses the plural form to describe a group of men who had been set apart for ongoing leadership in the local churches.

From the 66 uses of *presbuteros*, approximately 20 are used to refer to the leadership of the Christian church. Of those, 16 are in the plural form.[13] However, the 4 singular uses are due to an individual elder being the focus of the verse and does not relate to the pattern of leadership authority in the church. In 1 Peter 5:1, Peter refers to himself as an elder. Two times the apostle John refers to himself as an elder (2 John 1; 3 John 1). Finally, Paul warns against acknowledging a charge against an elder unless two or three provide evidence (1 Tim 5:19).

Paul had a variety of options available to him. Like the Jewish synagogue he was so familiar with, Paul could have appointed a single "chief elder" to rule the

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[11] Benjamin L. Merkle, *The Elder and Overseer: One Office in the Early Church* (New York: Peter Lang, 2003), 43.

[12] Phil A. Newton and Matt Schmucker, *Elders in the Life of the Church: Rediscovering the Biblical Model for Church Leadership*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2014), 46.

[13] James Strong, *The New Strong's Expanded Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, expanded ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2010), 300.

congregation; he could have vested leadership to a body of deacons already established by the Jerusalem community in Acts 6; or he could have simply dispensed with a formal leadership structure altogether. However, he decided to establish a pattern for the local church of a plurality of leadership from among the congregation. In addition, as was noted, this descriptive pattern will pass on to the future churches planted by Paul and the apostles, noticeable by Paul's greetings and instructions in future letters, thus making it a normative pattern.

Dissenters from the plurality model highlight how Paul does not specifically refer to elders in any of his letters to the churches and speaks of them only in the Pastoral Epistles written to individuals (Timothy and Titus). The inference is that Paul was not concerned about elder leadership in the churches, and thus, Luke was guilty of using an anachronism in Acts.[14] This argument fails in several ways. First, it is an argument from silence, which does not persuade in light of the significant evidence supporting a plurality of elders. Second, Paul's instructions to Timothy and Titus are not intended to be instructional simply for their personal edification—the mention of elders in these letters is designed to strengthen the churches. Reflecting on 1 Timothy 3, I. Howard Marshall concurs, "Although the material is presented as if it were instruction for Timothy, here, if anywhere, it is meant for the congregation."[15] Thus, it is disingenuous to suggest that Paul does not mention elders in relationship to the churches simply because his use of the word is found in letters written to individuals. Third, Paul certainly does reference elder leadership in his letter to the churches but does not specifically use the word *presbuteros*. As will be seen, other words employed by Paul carry the same meaning.

[14] Marshall, *Acts*, 190.

[15] I. Howard Marshall, *The Pastoral Epistles* (London: T & T Clark, 2004), 472.

Appointment and Number

Acts 14:23 also provides information on the means by which the elders came into their role and the number of churches who received elder leadership. Paul choose elders from among the members of the local congregations and these men, having already been well versed in the Old Testament, would have been spiritually prepared for the task at hand. Understanding the significance of the office they were appointing, Paul and Barnabas did not leave the matter exclusively in the hands of the congregation for these initial churches. Luke does not provide specifics as to the process of the appointments but based on the pattern of deacon selection in Acts 6, there is reason to believe the congregation played some role in the process. Since the presence of the apostles was unique to the early church, this specific descriptive pattern is non-repeatable today.

The elders were appointed (*cheirotoneo*) in every church, which is the same word used by Paul in Titus 1:5 when instructing Titus to appoint elders in every town. Similarly, the preposition "every" (*kata*) is also used in both Acts 14:23 and Titus 1:5. Thus, the New Testament describes a pattern for appointing elders in every town and in every congregation, which seems to be more than merely descriptive, but normative.

Summary

The book of Acts provides a history of the church through which contemporary congregations find instruction for the proper means of authority and government. Paul's actions on his first missionary journey of establishing a plurality of elder leadership should be understood as normative for subsequent church plants, both in the time of Paul and today, unless there is evidence to the contrary. The rest of the New Testament supports a plurality of elders through the various texts relating to leadership qualifications and instructions given by Paul. The appointment of elders by Paul and Barnabas in every church planted on their first missionary journey is clearly established through Acts 14:23. The texts explored in the following section demonstrate how this pattern is best understood as normative and healthy for churches today.

The Qualifications for Elders (1 Tim 3:1-7)

Paul's first letter to Timothy provides one of the most famous and yet one of the most overlooked passages to support a plurality of elders in the local church. Among SBC churches, 1 Timothy 3 is well known for its list of qualifications concerning deacons. Typically, this list is read and even preached during annual deacon elections. It is ironic how the first seven verses of 1 Timothy—verses that deal with elder qualifications—go largely unnoticed.

A Trustworthy Statement

Throughout 1 Timothy, Paul addresses the growing problem of heresy and false teachers in the church. He instructs the younger Timothy in the way the local church should be prepared to support the truth of the gospel. After the list of qualifications for both elders and deacons are given in chapter 3, Paul says, "I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these things to you so that, if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth" (1 Tim 3:14-15).

The antecedent of "these things" (*autos*) is the instruction Paul has given to Timothy relating to the order of church life, which he beautifully describes as the "household of God." Paul then continues in his description of this household, dramatically depicting its behavior, conduct, and order as a means to being a "pillar and buttress of truth." Thus, the qualifications just given by Paul for elders and deacons are not mere suggestions for a specific time and place, but rather describe the way every church should be prepared to stand as a pillar of truth for the glory of God. When the purpose of church order is clarified in this way, it provides a helpful corrective to careless ideas pertaining to government and leadership, and certainly contradicts the possibility that Paul himself cared little for leadership structure in the church. In addition, not only has Paul described

what church leadership is to look like, but he has also shown what they *are not* to be, and thus, provides what I. Howard Marshall calls "a contrast with the vices of the heretics."[16]

If the list of qualifications for elders ends with a declaration of what is at stake in verses 14-15, then it certainly begins with an equally powerful call to attention in verse 1. This call to attention is achieved through Paul's use of the phrase, "the saying is trustworthy" (*pistos ha logos*). This phrase is found five times in Paul's letters to Timothy and Titus and is used to emphasize the truthfulness of the text which it accompanies.[17] George Knight adds that the saying is used when the "fullest, most whole-hearted" response is not evident within the saying itself.[18] Thus, the list of qualifications for elders begins with an emphatic call to pay close attention to the instruction and it ends with a timeless declaration of how these things enable the church to uphold the eternal truths of God.

The *Episkopos* Problem

Immediately after the trustworthy saying phrase (*pistos ha logos*), 1 Timothy 3:1 seems to present two significant problems for the thesis of this chapter. First, the qualifications listed in verses 1-7 appear to be for a person called an "overseer" (*episkopos*) and not for an elder (*presbuteros*). Second, the word "overseer" is in the singular form, not plural. So, why use 1 Timothy 3:1-7 as a support for a plurality of elders when the text appears to discuss the qualifications for a singular overseer?

First, the word *episkopos* is so closely related to the word *presbuteros* that the epistles use them interchangeably. Thus, to speak of an overseer is to speak of an elder. The word "overseer" was common among the Greeks who used the term to describe an

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[16] Marshall, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 473.

[17] Marshall, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 327.

[18] George W. Knight, *The Faithful Sayings in the Pastoral Letters* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 29.

office that had a supervisory role. It meant "to look upon" or "to consider," which denotes keeping an eye on others for their protection, care, and flourishing.[19] The Septuagint uses the word *episkopos* to describe supervisory roles, such as Nehemiah's description of Joel, the city overseer (Neh 9:11). Thus, it is not surprising that the New Testament utilizes this culturally common word to describe men given supervisory roles in the church for the spiritual care of the people.

Interchangeable Terms

One of the most obvious reasons for understanding *episkopos* and *presbuteros* as referring to the same leadership office in the church is to see how the two terms are used interchangeably in the New Testament. Three texts provide a clear demonstration of this interchangeable usage.[20]

First, Acts 20:17 depicts Paul's return from his third missionary journey. He is in a hurry to return to Jerusalem for Pentecost but stops in Miletus and summons the Ephesian elders to draw near so he can offer them encouraging words of instruction. Luke writes, "Now from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church to come to him" (Acts 20:17). Once the elders arrive, Paul begins to exhort them: "Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood" (Acts 20:28). The implication is clear. Paul calls for the elders in verse 17, but they are referred to as overseers in verse 28. Thus, Luke understood the terms *episkopos* and *presbuteros* as referring to the same group of people.

Second, not only does Luke understand the terms to be interchangeable, but Paul does as well. In Titus 1:5, Paul instructs Titus: "This is why I left you in Crete, so

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[19] Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed., ed. Frederick William Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 379-80.

[20] Benjamin Merkle, *Why Elders? A Biblical and Practical Guide for Church Members* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2009), 19.

that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I

directed you." Just two verses later, when Paul begins describing the qualifications for

the elders, he says, "For an overseer . . ." (Titus 1:7).

Third, and similar to the first two, Peter instructs his fellow elders in 1 Peter

5:1-2 by saying, "So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder . . . shepherd the

flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight." Although the verb form

"exercising oversight" is used by Peter instead of the noun "overseer," the duties of the

elders are nevertheless shown to be that of overseers.

Two Offices

A second reason *episkopos* and *presbuteros* should be understood as equal terms

is because the three words are never mentioned together in the New Testament to suggest

a three-office system of government. In the second century, a distinction between elders,

overseers, and deacons became evident through the epistles of Ignatius.[21] In that system,

the overseer (or bishop) is separate from the elders and deacons. Yet, even in post-apostolic

writings toward the end of the first century, such as the famous *Didache*, the terms

episkopos and *presbuteros* are used interchangeably with no distinction. Thus, the terms

were never used in a tri-government system until the second century and the writings of

Ignatius.

Qualifications for Elders

A third reason that these two terms refer to the same leadership group is because

qualifications for elders (*presbuteros)* are never mentioned in the New Testament. Paul's

writings to both Timothy and Titus include qualifications for overseers, but never elders.

If the two terms were to be understood as two separate church offices, then surely Paul

would have provided a separate list of qualifications for elders, similar to what he provided

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[21] Merkle, *Why Elders?*, 22.

for deacons. When considering Paul's warning to Timothy that he "not be hasty" in the selection of elders, it would seem unlikely that Paul would leave him without qualifications to ensure a proper selection was made (1 Tim 5:22). Of course, these problems are alleviated when the terms elder and overseer are properly understood to refer to the same office. As mentioned, an argument from silence should not be the primary means of defending a position. However, when taken in concert with the previous issues, the lack of qualifications for the term *presbuteros* becomes an important point to highlight.

Singular Overseer

The singular form of *episkopos* in 1 Timothy 3:1 appears to contradict a plurality of elders at first glance, being used by some as evidence for a single bishop with authority over a congregation. However, the singular use of *episkopos* in this verse does not evince a single bishop system of church government, and the context reveals just the opposite. As Marshall points out, "The concept of a diocesan bishop is not present and would be anachronistic."[22]

First, as mentioned, when Paul addresses the elders in Miletus, he refers to them as "overseers" (plural) in Acts 20:28. Likewise, in Philippians 1:1, Paul sends greetings to the "overseers" along with the deacons. These statements alone indicate that Paul understands the office of overseer to be comprised of a plurality of men.

The singular is used in 1 Timothy 3:1 and Titus 1:7 to describe the qualifications necessary for a *person* to be considered eligible for the *office* of overseer. The office itself is made up of more than one person, but each person must be specifically qualified for the leadership position. This usage is sometimes referred to as the "generic singular," whereby by a singular construction represents an entire class or type.[23] Thus, the only time Paul uses the singular form for the word "overseer" is when he is listing qualifications. When

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[22] Marshall, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 476.

[23] Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, 187.

addressing the leadership, either in person (Acts 20:28) or through a letter (Phil 1:1), Paul uses the plural form.

Timothy and Titus

Once the *episkopos* problem is dealt with, the implications of 1 Timothy 3:1-7 are significant. Paul takes the time to describe the qualifications for elders because churches are to be governed by elders. He provides a similar list of qualifications in Titus 1. The distinction between the office of elder and deacon is clear through the existence of a second list of qualifications for deacon leadership. Therefore, the New Testament not only provides evidence for the existence of a plurality of elders at the local church level, but also provides details for spiritual qualifications. Thus, both the existence of plural leadership in churches and the existence of their qualifications has been established. What remains are instructions pertaining to work set aside for the body of elders.

<div align="center">

Elders as Shepherds (1 Pet 5:1-5)

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The letter of 1 Peter was written to churches scattered throughout five Roman provinces (Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia). These exiled Christians were experiencing "fiery trials" due to their faith in Christ (1 Pet 1:6; 2:12; 4:12, 14, 16). The word "suffering" is found 18 times throughout 1 Peter, indicating the primary theme of the letter.[24] The placement of Peter's exhortation to the elders in chapter 5 is not a random insertion isolated from the previous words of hope to the Christians in these churches. Rather, the conjunction "*oun*" (therefore, so) provides an intentional connection to the theme of suffering described in chapters 1-4. Peter Davids summarizes, "It is a logically necessary explanation of the intra-church solidarity that is required in the face of persecution."[25]

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[24] Strong, *The New Strong's Expanded Exhaustive Concordance*, 1073.

[25] Peter H. Davids, *The First Epistle of Peter*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 174.

It is significant how Peter can address in one letter the elders of five separate provinces, indicating the establishment of elders in every local congregation. Peter's direct exhortation to the elders can be understood in a variety of ways, each of which may be a contributing factor to these verses. First, Peter may believe that the persecution and suffering will begin at the leadership level, and thus the elders need to be spiritually prepared to lead and shepherd even through their own discomfort.[26] Or, the appeal to the elders may be a reminder to the leadership that purifying judgment begins in the household of God among the elders (see Ezek 9:6). Or, the exhortation could simply be due to their leadership status. Whatever the case, the necessity of the elders' leadership during times of great persecution is evident through Peter's specific instructions to them.

Shepherding and Overseeing

After referring to himself as a "fellow elder," Peter provides the key instruction for what these elders are to do during times of suffering: shepherd the flock of God. The idea of God's people needing a shepherd is common to both Old and New Testament writings, the most famous being Psalm 23 and Ezekiel 34. However, the command for the elders to shepherd (*poimaino*) the church is found only in 1 Peter 5:2 and in Acts 20:28. The instruction from Peter carries emotional weight since the resurrected Jesus commanded Peter three times to tend to the flock of God (John 21:15-17).

Peter's words place a substantial burden on the elders since "the charge encompasses the full shepherding responsibility of feeding, folding, protecting, and leading."[27] Unlike the shepherds of Ezekiel 34:8 who looked out for themselves, Peter reminds the elders that the congregations in which they serve are not their own, but instead

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[26] Thomas R. Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude,* The New American Commentary, vol. 32 (Nashville: Holman, 2003), 196.

[27] Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, 242.

are the "flock of God."[28] Cranfield captures the importance of the command by saying, "If we lose one [sheep], we lose another's property, not our own; and He is not indifferent to what becomes of His flock."[29]

Peter uses the participle "exercising oversight" (*episko-pountes*) as a follow up to the command to shepherd the flock. Once again, the responsibilities of elders are connected to the responsibilities of overseers, indicating a single office of elder that includes the task of superintending the church. After the instruction to shepherd and exercise oversight, Peter then uses three contrasting statements to show what elders are not to do and what they are to do. First, they are not to serve because they are forced, but rather because they are willing. Second, the elders are not to pursue leadership for their own financial benefit, but because they are eager to serve the people of God. Third, they are to serve without a domineering spirit, but rather as an example of humility and love.

The instructions are finalized with an appeal to the "chief Shepherd" in verse 4, who is Jesus, as a reminder that in shepherding the flock of God they are following the example handed down from the one who has "laid down his life for his sheep" and has the authority to present "the unfading crown of glory." A fitting summary of the shepherding role for elders is provided by Merkle: "Thus, the elders lead the people of God as a shepherd leads a flock of sheep. This is a significant analogy. Church leaders are not cowboys who drive the sheep. Rather, they are caring shepherds who lead and protect the sheep. Furthermore, the shepherd's primary task is not to run an organization but to care for people's souls."[30]

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[28] Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter*, 198.

[29] C. E. B. Cranfield, *The First Epistle of Peter* (London: SCM Press, 1950), 110.

[30] Merkle, *Why Elders?*, 46.

Eldership Summary

   Three New Testament passages written by three different authors describe three compelling reasons why a plurality of elders is biblically normative for local church leadership. First, multiple elders were established in the earliest churches and appear to be present in every subsequent church mentioned in the New Testament. Second, qualifications for these elders are provided in two separate books written to men in different contexts. Third, instructions for the elders are provided to explain the way they are to minister and serve the flock God has given them.

   Acts 11:30 provides the first appearance of Christian elders in Jerusalem as the church in Antioch sent relief to the elders during a famine. Next, in Acts 14:23, Paul and Barnabas appointed elders in every church during their first missionary journey. In Acts 15, the elders are present during the important discussions concerning Gentile acceptance of the gospel. Next, at the end of Paul's third missionary journey, he gives a speech to the elders from Ephesus concerning the ongoing work of shepherding and oversight they are to give the church. Out of the book of Acts, Paul writes to Timothy and Titus to describe the qualifications for elder leadership. First Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9 provide detailed qualifications for anyone who desires to pursue the office of elder. Peter also writes to the elders and exhorts them in light of the suffering taking place among the churches in five provinces.

   This progression of eldership texts describes a strengthening of the office as the church continued to flourish and grow. God has shown great care and interest in the way the church of Jesus Christ is led and protected. Elders are called by God to shepherd, oversee, protect, feed, lead, nurture, and care for their flock. They are to be competent in the Word of God and model their lives after the chief Shepherd, Jesus Christ. Thus, due to the overwhelming presence of established elders in the New Testament, their qualifications, and their instructions for leading, the best design for church leadership in the contemporary church is a plurality of elders.

Application for Southern Baptist Churches

Churches today in the SBC typically employ a "pastor plus deacon" model of church leadership. This model involves a senior pastor, and perhaps additional associate pastors, who serve alongside a deacon body. As mentioned in chapter 1, this model presents significant weaknesses for effective spiritual supervision. Although many churches will assume the paid staff members make up the "elders" of the church in terms of fulfilling the biblical office, the "pastor plus deacon" model for church leadership is foreign to the New Testament and raises several questions.

First, if the paid staff members of a church are considered the elders of the church, then why are they meeting with deacons to discuss elder-related issues? As was demonstrated, elders were established to shepherd the flock and provide spiritual protection as a distinct body separate from the deacons. In this way, deacons are never instructed to shepherd and protect the flock in the way elders are instructed. However, SBC churches that embrace a "pastor plus deacon" model are not comfortable with paid staff acting as a plurality of elders without the additional voices of the deacons. Thus, deacons end up serving as elders in function, but are not considered as such by the church during voting, examination, and so forth. This chapter is not advocating for a paid staff member board of elders, as this point would have to be established on different grounds. The point raised here is simply to highlight an inconsistency in the "pastor plus deacon" model when compared to the biblical data.

Second, if the paid staff members of a church are considered the elders of the church, then why do they not receive voting privileges in deacons' meetings? On the one hand, the answer is simple—pastors are not deacons, ergo, they do not vote in deacons' meetings. However, if the church understands the pastoral staff to fulfill the elder function of the church, then their voice does not have the ability to be considered in the final decision on matters since they are not voting deacons.

Third, if the paid staff members of a church are considered the elders of the church, then what happens when staff members relocate to a different ministry? One of

the advantages of a plurality of elders that includes members of the church is the longevity and continuity of the elder voice.

Fourth, if paid staff members of a church are considered the elders of the church, then what happens if the church budget does not allow for multiple pastors? If a single pastor or two pastors make up the church staff, then the elder body would consist of one or two members. In this way, the financial health of the church dictates the elder number instead of the needs of the church.

These are but a few practical questions and applications of a common leadership model among SBC churches. For these and many other reasons, the biblical witness to a separate, appointed plurality of elders that adhere to the qualifications of 1 Timothy 3 and the instructions of 1 Peter 5 are necessary for a healthy, protected, and nurtured church.

CHAPTER 3

PRACTICAL AND HISTORICAL ISSUES RELATED
TO A PLURALITY OF ELDERS IN
BAPTIST CHURCHES

Contemporary Baptist ecclesiology is associated with the autonomy of the
local church and a democratic form of church government. These ideas are so deeply
embedded into Baptist life that church government discussions incorporating the language
of plural elder leadership are often met with confusion or contempt.[1] Does history testify
that Baptists and a plurality of elders are foreign to one another, or is there evidence to
suggest the two have more in common than one might think? This chapter argues for the
latter and demonstrates how plural elder leadership is compatible with Baptist principles,
and in particular, a congregational form of church government.

A Shift in Church Leadership

Following the death of the apostles, significant changes in church leadership
occurred. During these crucial centuries, not only were doctrinal issues at stake, such as
the mode of baptism, the meaning of the ordinances, and the inclusion of works for
salvation, but structural changes in terms of church organization and leadership also took
place. By the end of the second century, many churches were governed by a single bishop
over a set of local churches, an office understood to be distinct and separate from a council
of elders. The move to an "Episcopalian" form of government was well on the way.

However, one is hard pressed to find this kind of organization of the church in
the New Testament. As argued in chapter 2, the New Testament indicates the functional
role of elder and bishop as identical (and thus one office), and this model appears to have

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[1] Mark Dever, *By Whose Authority? Elders in Baptist Life* (Washington, DC: 9 Marks, 2006), 18.

continued in the years immediately following the New Testament, as a number of first and second century documents confirm.[2]

For example, the first century *Didache,* an early church manual for Christians, mentions church government but only lists two offices—elders and deacons. It says, "And so, elect for yourselves bishops and deacons who are worthy of the Lord, gentle men who are not fond of money, who are true and approved."[3] This text offers no indication of a tripartite designation for the offices of the church.

Likewise, a letter known as *1 Clement* written from Rome to the church at Corinth also provides instruction regarding church government. It says, "So preaching everywhere in country and town, they appointed their first fruits, when they had proved them by the Spirit, to be bishops and deacons unto to them that should believe. And this they did in no new fashion; for indeed it had been written concerning bishops and deacons from very ancient times."[4] Again, there was no indication of three separate offices for church leadership.

A final example is the second-century book *The Shepherd of Hermas*, which records a series of teachings and parables. Although not considered canonical, it provides an important historical marker during the mid-second century and offers further proof that there were only two offices in the church and that there were a plurality of elders by acknowledging the "presbyters who lead the church."[5]

Thus, considering New Testament teaching and the evidence from first- and second-century documents, the pattern of organization and government in the local church

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[2] Michael Kruger, *Christianity at the Crossroads: How the Second Century Shaped the Future of the Church* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2018), 76.

[3] "The Didache," 15:1, accessed March 17, 2019, http://www.thedidache.com.

[4] Early Christian Writings, "Clement of Rome, First Epistle," trans. J. B. Lightfoot, 42:4-5, accessed March 17, 2019, http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/1clement-lightfoot.html.

[5] Early Christian Writings, "Shepherd of Hermas," trans. J. B. Lightfoot, Vision 8:3, accessed March 17, 2019, http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/shepherd-lightfoot.htm.

was a two-office government led by a plurality of elders. However, the church would not follow this model for long. As early as the late second century, a church father named Ignatius wrote of a group of elders in the church who were to provide counsel to a separate bishop or lead pastor, making a distinction between the terms *elder* and *bishop*.[6] This distinction would prove to be critically important as the centralized authority structure would make way for the bishop of Rome, along with bishops of other churches, to become the most prominent voices in church leadership.

The reasons for the shift in leadership are not abundantly clear, but the threat of heresy and the need for orthodoxy were contributing factors in the transition. Henry Chadwick summarizes, "The exact history of this transition within two generations . . . is shrouded in obscurity, though our sources give occasional glimpses of the process."[7] Mark Dever explains, "Leading pastors/elders of churches in the urban centers that experienced early evangelization seem to have become the informal arbiters of questions of orthodoxy."[8] There were also practical concerns within the churches themselves that led to a shift in government organization. Church leadership in the fourth century acknowledged this enigma, affirming the Bible's teaching of the two-office model but pointing to increasing difficulties with leadership as justification for a single authority of truth. For example, in his commentary on Titus, Jerome writes,

> The presbyter is the same as the bishop, and before parties had been raised up in religion by the provocations of Satan, the churches were governed by the Senate of the presbyters. But as each one sought to appropriate to himself those whom he had baptized, instead of leading them to Christ, it was appointed that one of the presbyters, elected by his colleagues, should be set over all the others. . . . It is the result of tradition, and not by the fact of a particular institution of the Lord.[9]

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[6] Kruger, *Christianity at the Crossroads*, 80.

[7] Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church* (London: Penguin Books, 1993), 46.

[8] Mark Dever, *Baptist Foundations: Church Government for an Anti-Institutional Age* (Nashville: B & H, 2015), 232.

[9] Thomas P Scheck, *St. Jerome's Commentaries on Galatians, Titus, and Philemon* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), 289.

Jerome concedes that the terms *elder* and *bishop* represent the same church office but point to practical concerns as a need for adjustments in the church.

Back to the Bible

In Western Christianity, a millennium passed where the church taught as settled doctrine that the church was organized by three separate offices, namely, bishops, elders, and deacons. However, with the arrival of the Protestant Reformation, this "received" doctrine was questioned as the Reformers sought to conform church organization and government to the pattern of the New Testament. Sixteenth century reformer John Calvin affirmed Jerome's summation of church government but was not satisfied with the conclusions. Since the rallying cry of the Reformation was *sola scriptura*, any acknowledgment of tradition not warranted by Scripture had to be addressed and corrected. Regarding a separate office of bishop, Calvin writes in his magnum opus, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, "The ancients themselves admit that this was introduced by human agreement and to meet the need of the times."[10] Thus, with a commitment to take the church back to the Bible, its practice, organization, and structure came under biblical scrutiny, which paved the way for Protestant churches to return to a biblically faithful model of church leadership, and various groups began to recover the idea of a plurality of elders.

Even considering this renewed biblical emphasis, opinions on specific church organization remained varied. The Reformers agreed on the necessity and sufficiency of the Bible to organize the polity of the church but arrived at different conclusions in the application of their findings. Thus, in addition to the episcopal and hierarchical system present in the Roman Catholic Church, the impact of the Reformation birthed two additional forms of government: Presbyterian and congregational. Despite their

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[10] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), bk. 4, chap. 4, sec. 2.

differences, both systems of government denied the tripartite model of the episcopal system and affirmed the two-office approach of elders and deacons. Baptists, incorporating a congregational form of government, were born out of this period and it is to their story that this chapter now turn.

Baptist Beginnings

The emergence of Baptists in the seventeenth century was precipitated by the English Separatist movement and discontent with the reforms of the Church of England.[11] Two Baptist traditions developed: The Particular Baptists, who were influenced by the Reformed teachings of John Calvin, and the General Baptists, who represented the more Arminian form of Baptist life in England.[12] Although the General Baptists were the first to form, the Particular Baptists grew more rapidly during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, in part due to their Calvinistic leanings. Early Baptist historian John Asplund calculated that there were 73,471 Baptists in 1793, of which 67,574 identified as Particular Baptists. Influenced by the presbyterian model of the Calvinistic churches, it is not surprising that Particular Baptists, though committed to a congregational model of government and the autonomy of the church, were prone to install a plurality of elders in their churches.[13] However, perhaps more surprising is the inclusion of eldership language in the confessions of early General Baptists. For example, a confession written by Thomas Helwys in 1611, *A Declaration of Faith of English People Remaining at Amsterdam,* speaks of elders in leadership who were charged with knowing and feeding the flock: "That the officers of every church or congregation are either Elders, who by their office do especially feed the flock concerning their souls . . . or Deacons, Men and Women,

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[11] Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1987), 32.

[12] McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage*, 33.

[13] Shawn D. Wright, "Baptists and a Plurality of Elders," in *Shepherding God's Flock*, ed. Benjamin L. Merkle and Thomas R. Schreiner (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2014), 253.

who by their office relieve the necessities of the poor and impotent brethren concerning their bodies."[14]

Another confession, *Propositions and Conclusions Concerning True Christian Religion,* was written by Smyth's followers after his death and may have been a modified version of a confession written by Smyth himself.[15] The statement is noteworthy due to its influence on English General Baptists. It says, "That Christ hath set in his outward church two sorts of ministers: viz, some who are called pastors, teachers, or elders, who administer the Word and sacraments, and others who are called Deacons, men and women: who ministry is, to serve tables and wash the saints' feet."[16]

The Particular Baptists wrote their *London Confession in 1644* and it also uses the language of elders in the church: "That being joined, every Church has power given them from Christ for their better well-being, to choose to themselves meet persons into the office of Pastors, Teachers, Elders, Deacons, being qualified according to the Word, as those which Christ has appointed in his Testament."[17] Similarly, the *Second London Confession of 1677 and 1688* maintains elder language: "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 call them to, to be Continued to the end of the World, are Bishops or Elders and Deacons."[18] Additional confessions, such as *The Philadelphia Confession of 1742* and the *New Hampshire Confession of 1883* also use similar language concerning the two offices of elders and deacons.

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[14] William Latane Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Chicago: Judson Press, 1959), 121-22.

[15] Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 123.

[16] Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 138.

[17] Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 166.

[18] Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 287.

Evaluating the Early Baptist Confessions

Careful evaluation of these confessions is required to prevent the proverbial pendulum swing when drawing various conclusions. For on one hand, the confessions could be read erroneously to suggest that every early Baptist church was mandated to install a plurality of elders in their congregation, and thus, Baptist churches were uniformly governed by multiple elders. On the other hand, the confessions could be read erroneously to suggest that they are largely useless in drawing *any* conclusions about the nature and thought of eldership among Baptists in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Thus, when left to themselves, the confessions are limited, but not useless, in providing early Baptist church polity details. However, when considered alongside other historical evidence (see next section), the confessions become one piece of multiple layers for understanding early Baptist church government.

Shawn Wright provides a word of caution when studying Baptist polity through the lens of the early confessions. He wisely observes, "The most influential Baptist confessional documents were decidedly ambiguous concerning the number of elders each church should have."[19] He suggests one reason for the ambiguity was that the confessions could account for the various positions of early prominent Baptist leaders. In fact, Wright suggests that this ambiguity partially explains why there was a decline of multiple elders in Baptist churches throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to this ambiguity.

Wright's cautionary word provides much needed clarity. The inclusion of the term *elder* does not necessarily denote multiple elders since, as already argued, the words for pastor-bishop-elder are used interchangeably in the New Testament. Thus, a Baptist leader who supported a plurality of elders, such as Nehemiah Coxe, could endorse the Second London Confession with a clear conscience, as could a Baptist leader who supported a single elder, such as Benjamin Keach.[20]

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[19] Wright, "Baptists and a Plurality of Elders," 271.

[20] Wright, "Baptists and a Plurality of Elders," 271.

However, despite the ambiguity described by Wright, the confessions certainly offer additional details that provide, at a minimum, an awareness and acceptance of the plurality model among Baptists. For example, in the *Hewlys Confession of 1611*, article 16 speaks of a single "flock" of God and prescribes that the "elders" be able to know the entire congregation since the Holy Spirit has made them "overseers." Since article 16 specifically references a single church, the plural nature of the words "elders" and "overseers" is instructive as to how the confession understands the government model for the church.

Likewise, in the *Second London Baptist Confession*, article 9 describes how an elder is to be appointed by the church:

> The way appointed by Christ for the Calling of any person fitted, and gifted by the Holy Spirit, unto the Office of Bishop, or Elder, in a Church, is, that he be,chosen thereunto by the common suffrage of the Church itself; and Solemnly,set apart by Fasting and Prayer, with imposition of hands of the Eldership of the,Church, if there be any before Constituted therein.[21]

This article provides a clear description of the possibility, and perhaps even probability, that a local Baptist church would be led by a plurality of elders since the "eldership" were responsible for laying on hands during the appointment of a new elder.

A few conclusions may be drawn from this brief reflection on the earliest Baptist confessions. First, early Baptists were comfortable with the language of *elder* and understood it to be synonymous with the office of pastor or bishop. Second, early Baptist confessions were careful not to delimit the type of elder government in a church— whether single or plural-due to the number of Baptist leaders and churches who endorsed a plural eldership. Third, early Baptist confessions specifically reference the existence of Baptist churches with plural eldership. Thus, plural eldership is compatible with Baptist principles as supported by the earliest Baptist confessions since they demonstrate a familiarity of plural elder leadership among Baptist churches in the seventeenth and

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[21] Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 287.

eighteenth centuries.

Baptist Leadership and Associations

Additional evidence for a plural elder model in early Baptist churches is found in the writings of key leaders and in the minutes of local Baptist associations. Again, like the confessions, the data does not support the uniformity of an eldership model across Baptist churches, but rather that the model was used by many Baptists and is consistent with Baptist principles.

One of the most convincing proofs for eldership centers on a specific kind of disagreement concerning the role and function of elders in the church. Based primarily on 1 Timothy 5:17 and influenced by a Presbyterian interpretation of elder roles, some Baptists distinguished between "ruling" elders and "teaching" elders. Ruling elders were those whose leadership focused on the administration side of the church while teaching elders focused on the pastoral roles, such as preaching and administering the ordinances.[22] The significant amount of material written on ruling elders in Baptist life provides a clear picture of the popularity of plural eldership among Baptist churches. The arguments from Baptists are primarily against a ruling elder/teaching elder distinction, but the arguments presuppose and affirm a plurality model.

English Baptists as early as the seventeenth century were working through this distinction. For example, the Abingdon Association in 1654 issued a statement against the separate offices of ruling and teaching elders, saying, "The office of pastors, elders, and overseers or bishops is but one and the same and that it is the duty of every elder as well to teach as to rule in the church whereof he is an elder."[23] Particular Baptist preacher Benjamin Keach, held a similar position and wrote in 1697 against a separate elder office

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[22] Phil A. Newton and Mark Dever, *Elders in the Life of the Church: Rediscovering the Biblical Model for Church Leadership*, 9Marks (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2014), 29.

[23] B. R. White, ed., *Association Records of the Particular Baptists of England, Wales, and Ireland to 1660*, pt. 3, *The Abingdon Association* (London: Baptist Historical Society, 1974), 134.

specific to "ruling." Of this ruling elder distinction, he writes, "There might be such in the Primitive Apostolical Church, but we see no ground to believe it an abiding Office to continue in the Church."[24] The Devonshire Square Church in London wrote of a "parity" in the eldership, denying the distinct and separate responsibilities of ruling and teaching elders.[25] Even in the *1611 Helwys Confession*, article 21 addresses this issue and says, "And there being but one rule for Elders, therefore but one sort of Elders."[26]

Emigration of both General and Particular Baptists from England to the United States occurred in the seventeenth century. Many of these early American Baptist churches continued to practice an eldership model, and the debates concerning ruling and teaching elders also continued. An influential voice among Baptists was Benjamin Griffith, who wrote *A Short Treatise Concerning a True and Orderly Gospel Church, 1743*. Griffith argues in favor of ruling elders, a position in contrast to most English Baptists.[27] He says, "Ruling elders are such persons as are endued with gifts to assist the pastor or teacher in the government of the church."[28] This position was also common in the Philadelphia Baptist Association throughout the eighteenth century.

A few years later in 1774, the Charleston Baptist Association in South Carolina released a *Summary of Church Discipline*. This document did not take a clear position on ruling elders but describes a pattern of plural elder leadership in Baptist churches. When providing instruction on the ordination process for a new elder, the document says, "If there is not a sufficient presbytery in the church, neighboring elders are to be called and

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[24] Benjamin Keach, "The Glory of a True Church," in *Polity: Biblical Arguments on How to Conduct Church Life,* ed. Mark Dever (Washington, DC: Center for Church Reform, 2001), 68-69.

[25] Newton and Dever, *Elders in the Life of the Church*, 33.

[26] Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 122.

[27] James M. Renihan, *Edification and Beauty: The Practical Ecclesiology of the English Particular Baptists, 1675-1705*, Studies in Baptist History and Thought 17 (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2008), 99.

[28] Benjamin Griffith, "A Short Treatise," in Dever, *Polity*, 98.

authorized to perform the service."[29] Such a statement assumes that many Baptist churches did have a "sufficient presbytery" or multiple elders leading in the church.

The Philadelphia Baptist Association, who had been using the aforementioned *Short Treatise* by Benjamin Griffith, decided to write and endorse a new manual on Baptist church polity, and in 1795 asked Samuel Jones to be its author. Jones was an influential pastor of the Pennepek Baptist Church in New Jersey who had significant influence over the association.[30] His new manual, *A Treatise of Church Discipline and a Directory*, included a section on ruling elders:

> Concerning the Divine right of the office of ruling elders, there has been considerable doubt and much disputation. We, therefore, had a thought of passing it over in silence; but, on farther consideration, concluded to state briefly the arguments on both sides, then subjoin a few general observations, so and so let the churches judge for themselves, and practice as they shall see fit.[31]

Jones goes on to summarize the arguments for and against ruling elders, concluding that the Scriptures are "favorable to the office" but leaving the final decision in the hands of each local congregation.

In the South, the SBC was formed in 1845, and its first president, W. B. Johnson, strongly supported a plurality of elders. In *The Gospel Developed*, Johnson writes, "A plurality in the bishopric is of great importance for mutual counsel and aid, that the government and edification of the flock may be promoted in the best manner."[32] A couple of paragraphs later, Johnson would become even more insistent on the plurality model: "A plurality of bishops is required for each church."[33] Johnson does not appear to

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[29] Charleston Association, "A Summary of Church Discipline," in Dever, *Polity*, 120.

[30] Greg Wills, "The Church: Baptists and Their Churches in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries," in Dever, *Polity*, 37.

[31] Samuel Jones, "A Treatise on Church Discipline," in Dever, *Polity*, 145-46.

[32] W. B. Johnson, "The Gospel Developed," in Dever, *Polity*, 193.

[33] Johnson, "The Gospel Developed," 194.

make a strong case for or against ruling elders, but does mention a "division of labor," which suggests he could be in favor of such a distinction.

Another prominent Southern Baptist leader was J. L. Reynolds, pastor of the Second Baptist Church of Richmond, Virginia. In 1849 he wrote *Church Polity or the Kingdom of Christ,* and in it he agrees with Johnson concerning the plurality of elders model. However, there was one difference. Reynolds was opposed to a ruling elder distinction and in fact makes a strong argument against the practice. He writes, "The distinction is not one of officers, but of duties belonging to the same office."[34]

Southern Baptists also issued their own confession in 1925, called the *Baptist Faith and Message*. This statement of faith was a revised version of the *New Hampshire Confession* of 1833, but makes an interesting change from its predecessor. The *New Hampshire Confession* dropped the word "elder" and replaced it with "pastor." But the 1925 *Baptist Faith and Message* restored the word "elder": "Its scriptural officers are bishops or elders and deacons."[35] When the *Baptist Faith and Message* was updated in 1963, it reverted to the New Hampshire Confession by replacing the word "elder" with "pastor." The significance of this change is perhaps minimal, but it does provide another glimpse into the familiarity of the concept of eldership language among Baptists even into the early twentieth century.

Summary of Eldership in Baptist History

This brief study of early Baptist confessions, leaders, and associations demonstrates that a plurality of elders was accepted, promoted, and adopted by many churches. Shawn Wright concludes, "Plural eldership was common, if not the norm, in

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[34] J. L. Reynolds, "Church Polity or the Kingdom of Christ," in Dever, *Polity*, 350.

[35] Southern Baptist Convention, "The Baptist Faith and Message 1925," accessed on March 25, 2019, http://www.sbc.net/bfm2000/bfmcomparison.asp.

the late seventeenth century."[36] James Renihan says, "The majority of the Particular Baptists were committed to a plurality and parity of elders in their churches."[37] Mark Dever concludes, "It is indisputable that at the beginning of the twentieth century, Baptists either had or advocated elders in local churches-and often a plurality of elders."[38]

Interestingly, these conclusions do not extend to today's contemporary Baptist churches. The language of "elder" has been largely removed from the Baptist vernacular and plural eldership is rare, although making a comeback. Before addressing the compatibility of Baptist congregationalism with a plural elder model, a few possible reasons for the decline of Baptist eldership will be considered.

The Decline of Baptist Eldership

Various explanations have been offered for the decline of plural eldership in Baptist churches, although in the study of history, Mark Dever suggests that "causation is often difficult to explain."[39] Wright lists five factors that "influenced Baptists not to maintain the practice of plural leadership over time."[40]

First, Baptists were concerned that a plural elder system would interfere with true congregational authority, and thus, the church would be subjected to elder domination. This concern was heightened by the reality of some churches still practicing or debating the presence of ruling elders, which increasingly became a concept believed to be in competition with the biblical authority of the congregation. Second, as Shawn Wright contends, Baptists developed a "complex hermeneutic for interpreting the plurality

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[36] Wright, "Baptists and a Plurality of Elders," 254.

[37] Renihan, *Edification and Beauty*, 101.

[38] Dever, *By Whose Authority*, 22.

[39] Dever, *By Whose Authority*, 22.

[40] Wright, "Baptists and a Plurality of Elders," 255.

passages in the New Testament."[41] This hermeneutic consisted of embracing the regulative principle for most areas of church life, except in the case of plural eldership. The exception was defended by pointing to the contextual differences between house churches in the first century and modern church settings. Baptist theologian Millard Erickson supports a similar claim, saying that the plurality passages in the New Testament are "descriptive passages," but "churches are not commanded to adopt a particular church order."[42] Third, Wright notes the ambiguity of Baptist confessions which was previously discussed. Fourth, the non-plurality position of prominent pastors influenced churches away from a plural model. Men like Benjamin Keach, John Gill, and Andrew Fuller denied the necessity for a plurality of elders. Fifth, the lack of qualified leaders in the local churches led to the abandonment of the practice by some churches.

Others have also sought to explain the decline of plural elders in Baptist churches. For example, Mark Dever posits that church life on the frontier where churches were rapidly growing and being planted impacted the continuing plural eldership model.[43] Wills points to the uncertainty of Baptists in the scriptural interpretation of elders, especially in the case of ruling elders, saying the churches who were practicing such a model "had difficulty sustaining it."[44] Phil Newton describes the impact of two Baptist leaders in particular, Isaac Backus and John Leland. Backus "favored a very 'weak' clergy, with the real power lying in the church members themselves."[45] Likewise, Leland called for a "unmitigated congregational polity" centered on individualism.[46]

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[41] Wright, "Baptists and a Plurality of Elders," 255.

[42] Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 1084.

[43] Mark Edward Dever, *A Display of God's Glory: Basics of Church Structure Deacons, Elders, Congregationalism & Membership* (Washington, DC: Center for Church Reform, 2001), 20.

[44] Wills, "The Church," 34.

[45] Newton and Dever, *Elders in the Life of the Church*, 30.

[46] Newton and Dever, *Elders in the Life of the Church*, 30.

Building on the notion of American individualism, some argue that the impact of the Baptist principle of "soul competency" was instrumental in moving away from elder leadership. Soul competency was a teaching heralded by The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary president E. Y. Mullins. Mullins speaks of soul competency as each individual is accountable before God, and as such, everyone has equal access to God through the Lordship of Jesus. James Pittman writes, "Mullin's teaching on the competency of the soul gave theological credibility to the democratic process and helped catapult it into the forefront of Southern Baptist ecclesiology."[47]

In reflecting on all these reasons, one might say that the decline in plural eldership fits into three broad categories: practical concerns, theological concerns, and cultural concerns. First, practically speaking, the church's rapid growth and seemingly inadequate number of qualified men led the church to move away from eldership. Ironically, this is similar to the reasoning provided by Jerome in the fourth century. Although Baptists might concede that the biblical data points to plural eldership, practical issues in the church have, in part, prevented it from being adopted. Second, theologically, the church was uneasy with applying the regulative principle to verses relating to plural leadership, pointing to contextual issues in the first century that mandated such a model. And third, culturally, the church was not only committed to the independent, individualist spirit of the American experiment, she also clung to the Baptist principle of soul competency. As such, many churches believed that the presence of multiple elders would result in oppression rather than individual freedom before God.

These multiple explanations clarify that no single moment in Baptist life was the ultimate cause for a decline of plural eldership, but a host of overlapping factors led to the practice falling out of favor. In addition, it must be remembered that plural

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[47] James Pittman, "Biblical Eldership: Leading a Southern Baptist Church through the Transition of Incorporating a Plurality of Elders into Congregationalism" (DMin diss., Reformed Theological Seminary, 2015), 59.

eldership was not the exclusive practice for Baptist churches, so a great number of churches already operated without a plurality model, making the decline of eldership that much easier.

Baptists and Democratic Congregationalism

Baptists are a deeply congregational people. Wayne Grudem describes all forms of congregational church government as having "final governing authority resting with the local congregation.[48] Mark Dever says that congregationalism is rooted in the New Testament church where "local congregations realized they had particular responsibilities that could not be delegated to groups outside of themselves."[49] Those responsibilities included settling matters of personal dispute (Matt 18:17), handling church discipline concerns (1 Cor 5:1-13), and determining church membership (2 Cor 2:6).

A commitment to congregationalism is also evident through the writings of many early Baptist leaders. John Smyth, who was previously mentioned as planting the first Baptist church, wrote in his 1609 *Short Confession*, "The church of Christ has power delegated to themselves of announcing the word, administering the sacraments, appointing ministers, disclaiming them, and also excommunicating; but the last appeal is to the brethren or body of the church."[50] Thomas Helwys' *Declaration of Faith* speaks against a presbyterian form of government by saying, "No church ought to challenge any prerogative over any other."[51] Despite the differences between Particular and General Baptists over the nature of the atonement and other Calvinistic teachings, both were committed to a congregational form of government. Although Baptists have freely cooperated with sister

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[48] Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity, 1994), 923.

[49] Mark Dever, "The Church," in *A Theology for the Church*, ed. Daniel L. Akin (Nashville: B & H, 2007), 794.

[50] Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 101.

[51] Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 120.

churches and local associations, there has been unwavering support for local autonomy and independent governance.[52]

Despite this emphasis on congregational appeal whereby every member has a voice, biblical congregationalism is not purely democratic. Ultimately, the local church is governed as a monarchy, since Christ alone is head of the church (Eph 1:22). The congregation has no authority to act contrary to the Lordship of Jesus and his instructions to the church are absolute. In another sense, the church is governed as an aristocracy since God has seen fit to ordain leaders in the church through the office of elders. Yet, in another sense, the church is a democracy since the final appeal in ecclesiastical issues is the membership itself. This is beautifully summarized in the *Cambridge Platform*, a seventeenth-century statement written by Congregationalists describing the form of congregational church government. The statement says,

> The Government of the church, is a mixt Government (and so hath been acknowledged long before the term of independency was heard of): In respect of Christ, the head and King of the church, and the Sovereaigne power residing in him, and exercised by him, it is a Monarchy: In respect of the body, or Brotherhood of the church, and power from Christ graunted unto them, it resembles a Democracy: In respect of the Presbytery and power committed to them, it is an Aristocracy.[53]

Local congregations experience tension when congregationalism is misunderstood biblically, or democracy is misunderstood politically. Biblical congregationalism consists of local elder leadership to which the church is commanded to submit and obey (Heb 13:17). Of course, this submission is not due to the elder's worthiness, but rather to the worthiness of Christ who places leaders in their respective positions of authority. Politically speaking, democracies value the voice of the people but are still governed by presidents, legislators, governors, local law enforcement, and so forth.

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[52] Daryl C. Cornett, "Baptist Ecclesiology: A Faithful Application of New Testament Principles," *Journal for Baptist Theology and Ministry* 2, no. 3 (2004): 29.

[53] Free Church, "The Cambridge Platform," accessed March 30, 2019, https://freechurch.org/assets/documents/2014/The%20Cambridge%20Platform%201648.pdf.

Thus, democratic congregationalism looks to the congregation as the final court of appeal, but the congregation is still expected to submit to the leadership God has put in place.

Elder-Led Democratic Congregationalism

In describing congregationalism, Wayne Grudem admits, "The actual form of local church government may vary considerably."[54] Although most Baptist churches still adhere to a pastor plus deacon board model for government, plural eldership remains consistent with democratic congregationalism. On this point, the historical distinction between ruling/teaching elders and a single office of elders is significant. As mentioned, Baptists are concerned that any one person or group of people might wield too much power, which creates a distrust in the plural eldership concept. In part, this is due to an understanding of eldership that follows a more "ruling elder" approach; the idea that a group of men are set aside to make the administrative decisions of the church apart from the congregation. Thus, for Baptist churches to become comfortable with plural eldership, they must understand that eldership does not negate the final authority of the congregation. Dever effectively summarizes the need to "distinguish biblical *elder leadership within a congregational context* from an *elder rule* that does not recognize the biblical role of the congregation."[55] Indeed, a common concern among Baptist leaders is the potential for a congregational model of eldership to eventually blend into a presbyterian model of eldership. Bart Barber, writing at SBC Voices, expresses this concern: "Since the move to elder-led polity is indisputably a movement toward Presbyterianism, it is perhaps not surprising that the move sometimes fails to stop short of full-fledged presbyterian polity."[56]

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[54] Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 923.

[55] Dever, *By Whose Authority*, 34-35, emphasis original.

[56] Bart Barber, "Of Pastors and Presbyters," SBC Voices, accessed March 30, 2019, https://sbcvoices.com/of-pastors-and-presbyters.

Plural eldership within a democratic congregational government must be a picture of mutual trust and love. On the one hand, the congregation is called to submit, trust, and love the leadership they have elected to guide the church in the cause of Christ. The submission is not absolute since elders are prone to sin and mistakes. On the other hand, the elders are called to love and trust the congregation and acknowledge their authority as the final voice on church matters. This acknowledgment is also not absolute since the congregation is prone to sin and mistakes. Both the congregation and the elders are called to submit to Christ as he leads and commissions the church. This submission is absolute since Christ is not prone to sin or mistake.

Therefore, since biblical plural eldership does not negate the principles of congregational government, and in light of the historic relationship between plural eldership and Baptist churches, a plurality of elders is compatible with a congregational form of church government.

Resurgence of Plural Eldership

Eldership in Baptist churches has seen a resurgence over the last twenty years. Similar to the causation for declining eldership in the twentieth century mentioned, multiple possibilities have been offered for the recent resurgence. Barber credits the rise of "New Calvinism" as a contributing factor. He says the New Calvinism leaders "have lifted up a number of Presbyterian or presbyterial voices as heroes to younger Southern Baptists. The correlation between the elder-led movement and the New Calvinism is tight."[57] Barber also cites the "sorry state of congregationalism in many of our Southern Baptist churches" as a key factor.[58]

Dever points to the inerrancy controversy as a key to forcing Baptists to "reconsider our denominational identity, and that inevitably included studying our Baptist

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[57] Barber, "Of Pastors and Presbyters."

[58] Barber, "Of Pastors and Presbyters."

past."[59] In addition, the inerrancy controversy drove church leaders back to their Bibles to discover the nature and structure of church life. Dever also believes prominent pastors and theologians outside of the SBC have had a significant impact on younger pastors.[60]

Summary

Elder-led democratic congregationalism is on the rise in Baptist churches. Although this trend elicits caution from some Baptist leaders, at least three factors provide credibility to the movement. First, the biblical data supports the concept of elder plurality, as was highlighted in chapter 2. Second, the historical data supports plural eldership, since many of the earliest Baptist churches in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were led by a plural model. In addition, the confessions of faith and minutes from local associations demonstrate the existence and acceptance of eldership. Third, a plurality of elders is practically consistent with a congregational form of government, so long as the model does not evolve into a more presbyterian "elder-rule" government. At the heart of congregationalism is the voice of the people who constitute the church, and biblical eldership must maintain that distinctive governing element.

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[59] Dever, *By Whose authority*, 27.

[60] Dever, *By Whose authority*, 23.

CHAPTER 4

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE MINISTRY PROJECT

Introduction

This chapter describes the project preparation and then follows with a detailed discussion of the four project goals and the associated results. The purpose of this project was to develop a ministry plan to implement biblical plural eldership at Graefenburg Baptist Church in Waddy, Kentucky. Four key goals included assessing the knowledge of the biblical offices of elders and deacons among the members of GBC, developing a six-session study on the roles and functions of biblical elders, increasing the knowledge among six ordained deacons in a small group setting, and developing a ministry plan to transition to a plurality of elders. The implementation of the project began on July 28, 2019 .and continued through November 30, 2019.

Project Promotion

Promotion and recruitment for the project began on July 28, 2019. From this date until August 18, several promotional tools were implemented. I promoted the project through Sunday morning pulpit announcements, mass congregational emails, social media postings, and personal conversations. In addition to mass promotion, I asked every Sunday school leader to assist in the distribution of the congregational survey to accomplish the first goal of the project. The promotion of the project ceased when the congregational survey was distributed on August 18, 2019.

Summary of Project Goals

This project was structured around four goals. The first goal was to assess the knowledge of the biblical offices of elders and deacons among the members of GBC.

This goal was considered successfully met when seventy members completed the survey and the results were analyzed. The second goal was to develop a six-session study on the roles and functions of elders, supported by the research described in chapters 2 and 3. This goal was considered successfully met when the combined rating of a five-member expert panel yielded a minimum of 90 percent "sufficient" rating for each lesson plan. The third goal was to increase the knowledge among six ordained deacons in a small group setting. This goal was considered successfully met when the t-test for dependent samples demonstrated a positively significant difference in the pre- and post-course survey scores. The fourth goal was to develop a ministry plan for GBC to transition to a plurality of elders. This goal was considered successfully met when a minimum of 90 percent of the rubric evaluation indicators met or exceeded the sufficient level.

Goal 1 Results

The first goal of this project was to assess the knowledge of the biblical offices of elders and deacons among the members of GBC. This goal was measured by administering the Church Offices Survey (COS) to a minimum of 70 church members to determine their biblical comprehension of elders and deacons. The COS provided a picture of the strengths and weaknesses of current elder and deacon knowledge among active adult congregants. The results of this survey were used to develop the six-week biblical eldership curriculum.

I administered 125 copies of the survey through the adult Sunday morning small group classes on August 18, 2019, with a request for them to be returned the following Sunday, August 25. Fifty-nine completed surveys were returned to me by August 25, with another 13 arriving on September 1, bringing the total number of completed surveys to 72. This yielded a satisfactory response rate of 57.6 percent and met the goal of a minimum of 70 completed surveys. During the initial survey review I noted that 13 questions were left unanswered by 7 participants. With the exception of three questions, no more than two participants left the same question unanswered. Thus, for the

ten questions that were unanswered by two or less participants, I did not assign any

significance to their omission. However, the three questions that had multiple

unanswered responses indicated confusion on the basics of church government.

Table 1. Unanswered COS questions

Survey Question	Total Unanswered
Q16. A church should only have a group of deacons.	5
Q17. A church should only have a group of elders.	5
Q22. The Bible teaches that elders and deacons should have equal authority in the church.	6

These three repeatedly omitted questions confirmed my suspicions that the

greatest need for GBC in the area of government was to better educate the congregation

on the biblical structure and role for the offices of deacon and elder. That these specific

questions had the highest number of omissions indicates confusion on the part of the

participants since they were unable to articulate any opinion on a Likert scale ranging

from "strongly disagree" (SD) to "strongly agree" (SA).

Two sections divided the COS: personal experience and biblical knowledge. I

was interested in learning more about the congregation's previous experience with deacons

and elders to better appreciate the congregation's receptivity to the project's purpose and

to help shape the scope of the curriculum I would develop. The most surprising and

encouraging responses in the personal experience section came from two questions

related to previous experience with eldership.

Table 2. Previous congregational experience with eldership

Survey Question (N responses)	Yes	No
Q10. Have you ever been a part of a church with a group of elders? (72)	37	35
Q11. If yes, was it a positive experience? (72)	36	1

The number of respondents who answered "yes" to previous experience with elders in a church was two greater than the respondents who answered "no." I was not expecting this result since a significant portion of GBC's congregation have been long time members spanning back for generations. My assumption was that the bedrock of the church was made up of lifelong Southern Baptists. However, the growth described in chapter 1 helps clarify this survey result since many new and younger families are joining GBC who are not affiliated with current GBC families and are arriving from a diverse ecclesiological background. Question 4 concerning denominational background highlighted this result, as demonstrated in table 3.

Table 3. Diversity of denominational backgrounds at GBC

Denomination	Responses
Southern Baptist	24
Christian Church	16
Methodist	10
Non-Denominational	6
Church of God	6
Presbyterian	4
Nazarene	3
Assembly of God	2
Catholic	1

Question 4 indicates that several survey participants had a denominational history with elder leadership. This provided a platform for question 11, one of the most important questions in the personal experience section since it provided feedback on the positive or negative experience of GBC members who had previously worshiped in churches with eldership. As table 2 demonstrates, only 1 respondent indicated a negative experience with eldership out of the 37 who had previous experience. This was surprising and very encouraging to me since one of my significant concerns for the project was anecdotal evidence that might be offered from church members who had experienced unfortunate turmoil in an elder-led environment. The high positive response for question

11 gave me confidence for the future success of the project since a vast majority of respondents indicated a positive experience with eldership. Since eldership discussions in Baptist churches have the possibility of eliciting concern and even fear, the response to question 11 suggests that GBC will be open to at least pursuing additional education on the topic and increases the probability of successfully making the transition.

A second helpful series of questions in the personal experience section of the COS concerned the participant's understanding of local church government. I wanted to determine if the congregation felt they had received sufficient teaching on church government in the past that would lead to a strong understanding of the topic, and if they felt confident of the way GBC is currently governed. I anticipated a stronger understanding from the respondents of GBC's government than their understanding of church government in general since the congregants are able to witness our church leadership structure in action. Table 4 demonstrates that my assumptions were correct.

Table 4. Congregational knowledge of church government

Survey Question (N responses)	Yes	No
Q5. Would you say you have a strong understanding of church government? (72)	53	19
Q6. Would you say you have a strong understanding of the way GBC is governed? (72)	58	14

Two observations can be made based on the responses to questions 5 and 6. First, the numbers indicate a strong self-assessment of church government knowledge among the congregants. Over 73 percent of participants felt strongly about their understanding of church government in general, while over 80 percent felt strongly about their understanding of GBC's governing practices. This self-evaluation was compared to the biblical knowledge portion of the COS to determine if the participants are properly assessing their knowledge of elders and deacons. Second, the numbers indicating a greater understanding of GBC's government should be understood in light of the congregation's

proximity to the leadership of the church and not due to an emphasis on education in this area. During the last eight years, specific teaching or preaching on the specifics of GBC's governing practices have been sparse. The topic generally comes up during the annual nomination of deacons, but this typically lends itself to describing the nomination process and teaching on the qualifications of deacons found in 1 Timothy 3:8-13. The question of *why* we govern the way we do is rarely addressed.

A final consideration is necessary to properly evaluate the personal experience portion of the COS. It was important for me to understand the history of the participants' faith to better understand their own self-evaluation. For that purpose, I asked three questions relating to the maturity of the participants and their time at GBC.

Table 5. Questions relating to participants' Christian history

Survey Question (N responses)	Mean
Q1. How many years have you professed Christ? (72)	47.2
Q2. How many years have you been a member of a Bible-believing church? (72)	47
Q3. How many years have you been a member at GBC? (72)	17.9

The results for questions 1-3 indicate a long history of Christian faith and practice for the respondents. A mean of 47 years of membership in a Bible-believing church would suggest that the participants are in a better position to properly evaluate their understanding of church government than if that number were significantly lower.

A few conclusions can be drawn from the personal experience portion of the COS. First, the congregation comes from a varied background of denominational affiliations, which gives a significant number of church members previous experience with elder leadership. Second, this previous experience has been overwhelmingly positive with only one participant expressing an unfavorable history with eldership. Third, most of the participants felt that they have a strong understanding of both church government in

general and the specifics of GBC's government. Fourth, the COS participants had a long history of Christian faith and practice.

The second portion of the COS presented a series of questions on a Likert scale related to the participant's biblical knowledge of elders and deacons. The first three questions of the biblical knowledge section, questions 12-14, concerned the sufficiency of the Bible to instruct the church on elders and deacons, while questions 15-22 concerned the actual biblical teaching on the church offices. The scores for questions 12-14 were high, indicating a strong appreciation for the Bible's sufficiency and authority in the area of church life and practice.

Table 6. Highest scores on the biblical knowledge portion of the COS

Survey Question	Total
Q12. The Bible describes the way a church should be governed. (71)	5.45
Q13. The Bible describes roles for deacons in a church. (72)	5.68
Q14. The Bible describes roles for elders in a church. (70)	5.26

GBC teaches a great deal about the inerrancy, authority, sufficiency, and inspiration of Scripture, so the high responses for questions 12-14 were not surprising, but encouraging nonetheless. This high view of the Bible is so important to the ministry of GBC that despite the high responses on the survey, the first session of the eldership curriculum was written on the authority and sufficiency of the Bible to instruct the church on biblical eldership. Given the strong view of the Bible by the participants on the COS, I had the option of forgoing teaching on the authority of the Bible in the curriculum, but opted against such an action due to the foundational nature of biblical authority.

Only question 17, concerning sole elder leadership, among questions 15-22 yielded a similarly high score as questions 12-14. This indicates that the congregation understands the necessity for deacons in a church, but is nevertheless unsure of how elders fit into the leadership structure since the same question related to sole deacon

leadership received a much lower score. In other words, GBC is much more comfortable with the idea of sole group of deacons than they are a sole group of elders.

Table 7. Comparison of scores for sole deacon leadership and sole elder leadership

Survey Question	Total
Q16. A church should only have a group of deacons. (67)	4.01
Q17. A church should only have a group of elders. (67)	5.34

The results from questions 16 and 17 were helpful in developing the eldership curriculum since the data indicates confusion on the meaning of elder. If the participants understood the term *elder* to be synonymous with *pastor*, then the score for question 16 would probably not have been quite as low since there is little question that the congregants understand the necessity of pastors for a biblical church. Table 8 provides a breakdown of question 16, demonstrating that over 37 percent of the respondents strongly agreed, agreed, or somewhat agreed that a church should only have a group of deacons.

Table 8. Sole deacon leadership breakdown

Survey Question	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
Q17. A church should only have a group of deacons. (67)	19	16	7	7	8	10

The lowest score on the biblical knowledge section came from question 18 concerning whether a deacon should provide spiritual oversight in the church.

Table 9. Lowest score on COS

Survey Question	Total
Q18. Deacons should provide oversight in the spiritual direction of the church.	2.54

Question 18 was intended to gauge the congregation's understanding of a deacon's role as that of meeting practical needs of the congregation rather than providing

oversight and shepherding, which are elder roles. However, the question was poorly written and easily misunderstood. Many respondents may have believed that by providing practical service for the church, the deacons are, in fact, offering spiritual direction for the church through their example and humility. I would agree. Thus, even though the question was anticipating a response of disagreement, the ambiguity of the question renders the results questionable for research purposes.

Two questions in particular were encouraging for the future success of the project. Questions 20 and 21 asked about the plural nature of elder leadership. Table 10 demonstrates that 78 percent of respondents disagreed that a senior pastor should be the sole elder and 65 percent of respondents agreed that a senior pastor should be one of a group of elders.

Table 10. Plural nature of elder leadership

Survey Question	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
Q20. The senior pastor is the only elder the church should have. (69)	29	16	9	6	5	4
Q21. The senior pastor should be one of a group of elders in the church. (69)	7	10	7	9	17	19

These results indicate that the congregation understands the necessity of plural leadership. This is positive for the potential transition to eldership since the primary point of education would not be to convince the congregation of a plural model, but rather to demonstrate the distinctiveness of deacon leadership from elder leadership. In other words, the congregation is already accustomed to the pastors leading alongside a group of men in a plural model, but those men have historically been deacons instead of elders.

Overall, the results of the COS were consistent with my expectations. The congregation needs education in both the terminology and roles of elders and deacons. The church understands the importance of plural leadership but does not have a strong understanding of biblical eldership. However, strong numbers on the authority and

sufficiency of Scripture provide an important starting place for seeking biblical guidance on the future government of GBC.

Goal 2 Results

The second goal of this project was to develop a six-session study on the roles and functions of biblical elders. The goal met expectations when the curriculum was complete and had been successfully evaluated by an expert panel. Curriculum conceptual development began on March 4, 2019, while finalizing edits for chapter 3 of this project and awaiting formal approval to begin the project. I wrote the initial draft of the curriculum from September 2 to September 13, 2019. After the initial draft was completed and upon receiving evaluations from an expert panel, I continued to edit the material through November 17, 2019, which overlapped with the period I was also teaching the curriculum to accomplish the third goal of this project.

An expert panel composed of five individuals reviewed the curriculum. The panel included a fellow Southern Baptist pastor in a large Kentucky church that incorporates plural elder leadership, the Director of Missions for the Shelby Baptist Association, an associate pastor at GBC, the missions strategist for the Kentucky Baptist Convention, who is also on staff at a large Southern Baptist church that incorporates plural elder leadership, and a Concordia University theology professor who has a long history in pastoring churches with elder leadership.

The panel used an evaluation rubric to assess the biblical faithfulness, methodology, scope, and applicability of the curriculum (see appendix 2). The assessment goal was for a minimum of 90 percent of the evaluation criteria to meet or exceed the sufficient level. All feedback indicated scores in the exemplary or sufficient level, as displayed in table 11, achieving the set goal. The areas of the rubric that showed less than exemplary were helpful in fine-tuning the curriculum, in addition to the comments made by the reviewers. The scoring options on the rubric were 1-insufficient; 2=requires attention; 3=sufficient; and 4=exemplary.

Table 11. Expert panel curriculum review results

Rubric Criteria	1	2	3	4
The content is hermeneutically sound and Scripture is properly interpreted.	0	0	1	4
The content is theologically sound and consistent.	0	0	0	5
The content sufficiently covers the stated objective.	0	0	0	5
The content includes essential information for understanding the topic and objective.	0	0	2	3
The content makes use of various learning approaches such as lecture, discussion, group activity, and illustrations.	0	0	1	4
The content is clear and could be re-taught by another person.	0	0	0	5
Participants will be able to better understand the Bible's teaching on plural eldership, or the history of Baptist thought on eldership.	0	0	1	4

The feedback indicated that the curriculum makes good use of a variety of learning styles. One such learning approach was the use of a Baptist history quiz for lesson 6 and one reviewer indicated the possibility that this quiz was too difficult for the average Baptist. Appropriate adjustments were made. A second critique was that the early chapters addressed the concept of an "elder-related issue" without having defined what elder-related issues were. However, this was more difficult to correct since the flow of the curriculum gradually reveals the nature and roles of elders in the church. I did not think it was practical to avoid mentioning the reality of elder-related issues until those issues were fully addressed.

Goal 3 Results

The third goal was to increase knowledge of biblical eldership among six ordained deacons in a small group setting. The third goal succeeded when instruction was complete and a t-test for dependent variables assessment demonstrated a positive correlation between the eldership curriculum and changes in the participant's knowledge of the biblical office. Class sessions took place on Sunday evenings from 3:45-4:45 p.m. The sessions were designed to last an hour, but extra time was used for the purposes of ongoing discussion and fellowship bringing the typical length of each session to 75 minutes. The first class met on October 6, 2019, and the class sessions concluded on

November 17, 2019. Six active deacons attended every session with the exception of one deacon who was unable to attend session 2 and one deacon who was unable to attend session 5.

I designed the curriculum to include six sessions. During the conceptual development phase I intended to make the curriculum at least nine weeks but changed my mind after considering the primary goal of the sessions. This curriculum was designed to increase awareness and knowledge among the congregation of the biblical office of elder. As I mentioned in my introductory remarks to the curriculum itself (see appendix 5), a more robust study of the qualifications and specific roles of elders would be provided at a later date. This introductory material was designed to help open the door to the possibility of transition by initially raising awareness of biblical eldership.

Session 1 was titled "Biblical Eldership: An Introduction for Graefenburg Baptist Church," and had the primary objective of demonstrating the authority and sufficiency of Scripture for leadership in the local church. Session 2 was titled "Early Plural Elder Establishment," and had the primary objective of providing scriptural support for the establishment of plural eldership in the early New Testament churches. Session 3 was titled "Elders. Oversees. Bishops. Oh My!," and had a primary objective of demonstrating how three New Testament words, *elder*, *oversee*, and *bishop*, all refer to the same office in the local church. Session 4 was titled "The Qualifications," and had a primary objective of describing the qualifications for elders as outlined in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:6-9. Session 5 was titled "The Duties," and had a primary objective of explaining the shepherding duties of the office of elder and how those duties differ from the responsibilities of deacons. The final session was titled "Baptists and elders?," and had a primary objective of revealing the historical presence of plural eldership among early Baptist churches.

The success of this third goal was measured by inputting the results of the pre- and post-course total scores into a t-test for dependent samples formula. The results of the t-test are displayed in table 12.

Table 12. Results of the t-test for dependent samples

	Pre-test	Post-test
Mean	80.333	100.166
Variance	119.866	57.366
Observations	6	6
Pearson Correlation	0.710692	
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
Df	5	
t Stat	-6.30521	
P(T<=t) one-tail	0.0007384	
t Critical one-tail	2.0150483	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0.0014768	
t Critical two-tail	2.5075813	

This t-test for dependent samples showed a significant positive change in biblical eldership knowledge ($t_{(5)}=6.305$, $p < 0.0007$). The mean score rose from 80.3 to 100.2 and as a result of these findings, the third goal was considered successful.

Goal 4 Results

The final goal of this project was to develop a ministry plan to transition Graefenburg Baptist Church in Waddy, Kentucky, to biblical plural eldership. I began writing the ministry plan on November 4, 2019, and completed it on November 18, 2019. Due to time constraints, I began work on the ministry plan before goal 3 was fully completed. This fourth goal was considered successfully met when a group of three deacons and two pastors evaluated the ministry plan and a minimum of 90 percent of the rubric evaluation indicators met or exceeded the sufficient level.

The ministry plan was partly developed based on my previous experience in leading significant change with the congregation. During my time as lead pastor, several

significant congregational changes have been implemented, including the transition to a different worship space due to growth, the reduction of the number of business meetings per year, and the adoption of covenant membership language. In each of these changes, adequate time for making the congregation aware of the potential change and education for the necessity of change were instrumental for a smooth transition. Thus, I wanted the ministry plan to engage three key components for change: (1) awareness, (2) education, and (3) dialogue. Each of those three components would be explored in three settings: (1) all ordained deacons, (2) key GBC leadership, and (3) congregational. The flow of the ministry plan would be contingent on finding unity in each setting to move to the next group of people. In other words, the ministry plan desires unity among the ordained deacons before the key leadership are addressed, and so forth.

The panel used an evaluation rubric to assess the content, scope, resources, and application of the ministry plan (see appendix 4). The assessment goal was to have a minimum of 90 percent of the evaluation criteria meet or exceed the sufficient level. All feedback indicated scores in the exemplary or sufficient level, as displayed in table 13, thus achieving the set goal.

Table 13. Evaluation rubric for ministry plan results

Rubric Question	1	2	3	4
The plan is easy to understand	0	0	0	5
The plan is simple to implement	0	0	1	4
The plan accounts for both the deacons and elders	0	0	1	4
The plan is broad enough to cover all the related areas	0	0	2	3
The plan takes into account the church's resources	0	0	2	3
The plan takes into account the church's limitations	0	0	1	4
The plan involves the church's leadership in the establishment of eldership	0	0	0	5
The plan adequately provides the congregation with the knowledge and confidence to transition to eldership	0	0	2	3

A written comment that was repeated twice on the evaluation rubric was confusion on questions 5 and 6, in how the ministry plan did or did not take into account

the church's resources or limitations. The evaluators did not have a strong understanding of how the resources or limitations of the church applied to this ministry plan project. The other concern raised in the comments was how the ministry plan does not provide any guidance for how the constitutional changes would be written. This concern is understandable but falls outside of the scope of this project. Specifics on constitutional changes to implement biblical eldership will be a group effort involving pastors, deacons, and key leadership, and thus could not yet be included in the planning stages for implementation.

Conclusion

All project goals were accomplished, and the overall project was a success. The t-test for dependent samples and the six-week curriculum evaluation indicate that the participants grew in their knowledge of biblical eldership. This provided the foundation for a ministry plan to implement biblical eldership at GBC, which was positively evaluated by the deacons and pastors. Although the success of this project does not yet provide for a full transition to eldership, it is clear that the ministry plan is part of an ongoing process. The congregational survey provided encouragement in the areas of biblical authority and the necessity of plural leadership in the church. The results indicate that the congregation will be open to pursuing additional education on the way GBC is structured.

CHAPTER 5

EVALUATION OF THE PROJECT

This chapter summarizes my evaluation of the ministry project. In this conclusion I evaluate the project's purpose, goals, strengths, and weaknesses. I then reflect on various actions I would take if I were to implement the project again. Finally, this chapter includes both theological and personal reflections learned throughout the process of researching biblical eldership and presenting the ideas to GBC. A brief conclusion completes this evaluation.

Evaluation of the Project Purpose

The stated purpose of this project was to develop a ministry plan to implement biblical plural eldership at Graefenburg Baptist Church in Waddy, Kentucky. The initial idea for the project was to transition GBC to plural eldership, but it was quickly determined that the time involved for such a transition exceeded the scope of the project timetable. Thus, the purpose of the project was altered to develop a ministry plan to effectively make the transition, a process which will take multiple years to complete.

The project purpose was birthed out of several overlapping factors. First, there is general confusion at GBC concerning the nature of the church offices. Deacons are nominated annually by the congregation using the deacon qualifications found in 1 Timothy 3:7-12. Using deacon qualifications to nominate deacons seems to make perfect sense until the actual function of deacons at GBC is understood. Deacons have historically served as the spiritual shepherds of GBC and are the ones involved with the pastoral staff on the most important biblical leadership decisions, such as discipline and membership issues. Second, due to the spiritual shepherding function of the GBC deacons, less time is

available for them to serve the practical needs of the congregation, a role which is essential for deacon ministry. Third, since GBC deacons are nominated based on the qualifications and roles for deacons, there is the possibility of some men serving who are qualified for deacon ministry service, but not qualified for elder ministry service, putting them in an unfair position. This dilemma was raised at the 2019 deacon nomination meeting when a long-time deacon referred to GBC's structure as a "hybrid" system of pastoral roles and deacon roles. Fourth, the biblical data supports two distinct offices in the local church and GBC would benefit from aligning her structure as close to the biblical model as possible. After describing the qualifications for elders and deacons, Paul says, "I am writing these things to you so that, if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth" (1 Tim 3:14-15). These initial reasons for pursuing biblical eldership provided a strong foundation for moving forward with the project.

Evaluation of the Project Goals

In cohesion with the purpose of the project, the project goals were fitting for developing a ministry plan and were effective. The project included four goals: (1) assess the knowledge of the biblical offices of elders and deacons among the members of GBC; (2) develop a six-session study on the roles and functions of elders; (3) increase the knowledge among six ordained deacons in a small group setting; and (4) develop a ministry plan for GBC to transition to a plurality of elders.

Goal 1: Assess Knowledge

The COS sought to measure the status of church members' biblical knowledge regarding various church office principles, as well as their belief in the Bible's authority and sufficiency to guide the church in its polity. I was pleased with the response rate for the survey, and the survey responses provided the necessary feedback to adequately support the second goal of my project, which was the course development.

The survey affirmed my suspicions that the congregation did not have a strong understanding of the biblical offices, but also served as an encouragement when noting the church's high view of the Scriptures to provide guidance in leadership structure. One church member spoke with me after completing the survey to inquire as to the timing of future education since she was largely unable to make informed responses. Another source of encouragement came not from verbal feedback I received concerning the survey, but came from silence. After the survey was administered, I was prepared for some potential push back among church members who might not like the implications of such a survey. However, no such push back came. Although I want to be careful to not draw conclusions based on silence, I nevertheless took the absence of negative statements about the survey as a positive sign for the future success of the project goals.

Goal 2: Course Development
and Evaluation

The curriculum structure and content were developed from the research of chapters 1 and 2, with each session building on the premise of the previous session. The scope of the curriculum was challenging to determine. On the one hand, there is plenty of material on the topic of eldership to develop a twelve-week course. This would provide greater clarity and detail on various aspects of eldership, such as the qualifications for elders and the process for electing elders. However, I decided against a longer curriculum and instead developed a six-week course to cover the basics of elder establishment in the New Testament. The reasons for opting for a shorter course were twofold. First, the curriculum would be used as the initial education stage for a congregation that has never been introduced to biblical eldership. A more accessible initial curriculum seemed wiser than a course filled with specific details on issues that the congregation is not yet prepared for, such as the process for electing elders. Second, in my experience at GBC, studies that exceed a six to eight weeks in length are not as successful as those finished in a shorter timeframe. I have had multiple conversations with other pastors all over the country who

experience the same reality. I wanted the curriculum to be broad enough to cover the purpose of the project, but short enough to keep the participants' attention.

Another challenge to the curriculum development process was the order in which to place the various sessions. I quickly discovered that whatever order I placed the curriculum in lent itself to questions that would not be answered until subsequent sessions. For example, I first placed the biblical data of an elder's qualifications and roles before addressing the multiple terms used for the office of elder. However, I noticed that when addressing the qualifications for elders, it becomes necessary to understand how that word is synonymous with the word "overseer." In light of this, I inserted the session on titles for elders before the discussion on elder qualifications. After teaching the curriculum, my suspicions were confirmed since many questions were asked that would be addressed in a later session. However, I was pleased with the flow of the curriculum and believe it was placed in the best possible order.

I found the comments from the expert panel to be particularly helpful in the process of editing the curriculum. I was curious to see if the reviewers would evaluate the curriculum based on the rubric or if their own opinion on the nature of eldership would color their ability to evaluate without bias. I had an initial concern that a potential weakness of the review process would be that the reviewers might not understand the purpose of the curriculum as being the first step in a multi-faceted approach to transition GBC to biblical eldership. Thus, in my introductory remarks to the expert panel, I clarified the nature of the course and indicated that a more detailed and robust study would follow this initial education phase of the transition plan. Each reviewer was also given a copy of the rubric and instructions on how to evaluate the lessons.

The feedback on the curriculum was overall helpful as discussed in chapter 4. The comments from the evaluation process combined with the actual teaching of the material provided the necessary feedback for positive edits to the course.

Goal 3: Teaching the Course

The third goal was to increase the knowledge among six ordained deacons in a small group setting. As noted in chapter 4, the attendance for the six weeks was consistent and encouraging. Every deacon displayed enthusiasm about the sessions and were anxious to continue the conversation after the sessions were completed.

Several factors were considered for the selection of deacons who would participate in this particular goal. My initial thought was to have every active deacon work through the six-week material, but after becoming aware that this would create scheduling and attendance problems, I decided to target a smaller group that I knew would be consistent and enthusiastic about the project. I was pleased with this decision since the turnout was faithful and the discussions were fruitful. I also specifically asked a few men to participate who I knew might not be immediately on board with the concept of eldership. This was extremely helpful since important questions were raised during the six weeks that helped tighten the curriculum and my own teaching methods. For example, one deacon raised a question about the eldership language in 1 Peter 5, inquiring as to why this could not simply be interpreted as someone who is advanced in age instead of referring to a specific office of the church. Questions like these provided an opportunity for me to adjust the curriculum for future sessions and to examine my chapters 2 and 3 to ensure I properly addressed some important issues related to eldership language.

One surprising but welcomed conversation ensued from session 6 of the curriculum. When discussing a few of the older Baptist confessions that utilize eldership language, I directed the participants' attention to the fact that deacons were described as both men and women in some seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Baptist churches. The reason for making this point was to demonstrate how the function of deacons and elders in the earliest Baptist churches were so distinct that women were considered eligible for deacon service since it was not considered a shepherding role. Since GBC has had a "pastor plus deacon" model of leadership for 150 years, the possibility of women deacons came as quite a shock to most of the men. For some in the group, it was an eye-opening

conversation that provided another window through which the distinction between deacons and elders could be understood.

In addition to the group conversations and feedback I personally received, the pre- and post-course surveys were a helpful tool to assess the effectiveness of the curriculum and class instruction. Table 14 provides a summary of the pre- and post-course survey averages per participant.

Table 14. Pre- and post-course survey averages per participant

Participant	Pre-test average	Post-test average
Participant 1	5.1	5.5
Participant 2	3.8	5.1
Participant 3	3.65	4.95
Participant 4	3.95	4.75
Participant 5	3.95	5.3
Participant 6	3.65	4.45

Table 14 demonstrates an increase of knowledge for every participant, with three of the six increasing knowledge by over a point. I was encouraged to see significant increases for specific questions, indicating a positive impact by the curriculum and a growing knowledge of eldership. Table 15 shows a few of the questions that received a significant increase in the post-course survey results.

Table 15. Significant increases per question

Survey Question	Pre-test average	Post-test average
1. Elders are the same thing as pastors.	2.5	4.5
4. I am confident in my knowledge of the role of elders in the church.	3.8	5.3
14. Elders are tasked by God to shepherd the flock and provide leadership in spiritual care.	4.6	5.8
15. Elders can only be men.	3.3	5
16. Deacons can only be men.	3.6	5.2

All these questions show significant increase in the participants' understanding of both the nature of a deacon and the role of a deacon, indicating that the sessions on titles and qualifications as well as the sessions on roles and functions were effective. Considering the goal of the project, these results were encouraging. The questions that did not receive significant increases were related to the Bible's sufficiency to provide guidance on the structure of the church since the pre-course survey results were high on these questions, corroborating the COS results from goal 1.

Goal 4: Ministry Plan Development

The final goal of this project was to develop a ministry plan to transition GBC to biblical plural eldership. The ministry plan would heavily utilize the curriculum development and survey results to prepare a three-year process for an effective transition. As mentioned in chapter 4, my initial desire was for the final goal of this project be the actual transition to eldership, but I quickly determined that the process would take much longer than the time restraints allowed. My confidence in the potential success of the ministry plan increased following the positive results of goal 3. The ministry plan is built around the duplication of the six weeks I spent with the deacons to fulfill the third goal. In other words, my intent was to recreate a successful six-week study through biblical eldership with key groups in the church.

My research concerning the practical issues of leading toward significant change in a local church led me to embrace an incremental approach as opposed to educating the entire congregation at one time. In addition, my history of pastoral leadership at GBC has enlightened me on the value of providing ample time for key leadership to consider a potential change and then, after the leadership is in agreement and unified on the change, to present the concept to the congregation with plenty of time for dialogue, questions, and possible adjustments before the matter comes before the church for a vote. One interesting and unfortunate reality for most Baptist churches who embrace a congregational form of government is the possibility of significant motions being made at a church business

meeting without prior education and dialogue, leaving the church incapable of casting an informed vote. This problem also occurs at the Convention level of the SBC. For example, at the 2019 Annual Meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention held in Birmingham, Alabama, the Committee on Resolutions presented a complicated resolution on a controversial issue pertaining to race relations and Critical Race Theory.[1] The messengers were not prepared or equipped to cast an informed vote on the resolution because there was no opportunity for education or dialogue before the motion was presented. The resolution passed, but this rushed and uninformed approach has led to unnecessary conflict and dissention.

To avoid these kinds of situations, the ministry plan was developed with three key audiences in mind: (1) the remaining ordained deacons, (2) key GBC leadership, and (3) the congregation. Each group would be taken through a process of awareness, education, and dialogue on the topic of biblical eldership, with the six-week curriculum being used for the education portion in each group. The evaluation of the plan through the assessment rubric provided additional support for the incremental approach and affirmed my decision to take enough time with each group before moving on to the next stage of the transition plan. Goal 4 was considered successful based on the 90 percent satisfactory criteria on the evaluation rubric and the personal feedback I received from the deacons and staff.

Strengths of the Project

The project had several strengths and positive outcomes. First, church polity is a topic that had not received enough attention at GBC and church members had not been adequately educated on the basics of a healthy, biblical leadership structure. The reasons for this lack of education are at least two-fold. First, the leadership structure at GBC has

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[1] See SBC Annual Meeting, "Annual Meeting Resolutions," accessed March 29, 2019, http://www.sbcannualmeeting.net/sbc19/resolutions.

been an issue of tradition and repetition. Since the process did not seem to be broken, there has seemed to be little reason to investigate the governance of the church. Second, issues related to deacons and elders has the potential to be divisive and can impede the process of evaluating the leadership structure of the church. Thus, a strength of this project was overcoming these two issues to examine the biblical data to best evaluate the governance at GBC.

A second strength of the project was the insight gained into the congregation's high view of Scripture and their areas of needed growth in church government knowledge. GBC has historically been a church that values the authority of the Bible, so it was encouraging and helpful to better appreciate the confidence of the congregation in the Scriptures to provide sufficient teaching in the area of church life and practice. The project demonstrated a greater possibility for a successful transition to plural eldership due to the church's view of Scripture than if the COS had yielded a low view of the Bible's authority and sufficiency. This, in turn, demonstrates a willingness of the congregation to be taught and corrected by the Bible in areas of church leadership.

A third strength of the project was the educational awareness on the part of the deacons who participated in the six-week study. I was impressed and encouraged by the willingness of the deacons to wrestle with the material and ask important questions in a way that was winsome and not combative. The six weeks we spent together provided open doors to not only the possibility of biblical eldership at GBC, but also to re-evaluate other significant leadership areas, such as the possibility of women serving as deacons.

A fourth strength of the project was the reminder for me to lead with pastoral patience. This project reinforced an important pastoral leadership principle that congregations need time to process change and should not be expected to move too quickly, especially in areas where entire structures are potentially being adjusted. The successful completion of goal 4 highlighted the importance of working slowly and patiently to bring along the church body in areas of needed growth and change. I was

reminded of the joy of the process, and how transformation in Christ is discovered during the journey of change and not just in the final act of change itself.

Weaknesses of the Project

The project exhibited a few weaknesses. The primary weakness that impacted a few aspects of the project was in the time management of the project goals. Due to the necessity of teaching the curriculum over the course of six weeks, I did not provide sufficient time for the evaluation process of the second goal to be fully completed before I needed to start teaching the course. I would have preferred a second submission to my expert panel complete with the suggested edits before moving into the teaching phase of the project. Having said that, I was still able to make edits before the teaching sessions were complete, and the feedback I received from the participants while conducting the course was also helpful for ongoing adjustments to the curriculum. Additional time could have also been given to the promotion of the project to ensure the congregation understood the specifics of what the project was attempting to convey. It is possible that my promotion could have erroneously communicated my intent of making a full transition to eldership instead of developing a ministry plan to be prepared for the concept. Additional time and clarity would have been helpful in this regard.

Another weakness of the project was in the development of the COS. At the beginning of the survey I included some fill in the blank questions to aid in the assessment. However, I discovered that using these responses, which were written in a variety of ways from the congregation, was difficult for statistical purposes. Most of the questions could have easily been transformed into a Likert scale formula and would have been more fruitful for the project evaluation. The fill in the blank questions were still useful to gauge general ideas from the congregation but were not as educational as the Likert scale questions.

Finally, the ministry plan has one weakness that could potentially lead to some gray areas when implemented. The intent of the ministry plan is to seek unity among two

groups before moving to the congregation; those two groups are the ordained deacons and key GBC leadership. As mentioned in the strengths of the project, this incremental, patient approach is an important and helpful aspect of the plan. However, there is not a clear enough measure to determine when enough unity is achieved to move to the next group. I did work measures into the ministry plan, such as a rubric among the pastors and deacons to assess the comprehension level of the key leadership phase, but there still seems to be a deficiency in determining how to calculate unity for the purpose of moving forward in the ministry plan.

What I Would Do Differently

Based on weaknesses described for the project, I would do a few things differently. First, I would spend additional time clearly promoting the project's purpose. The congregation understood that I was pursuing my doctoral degree and that I was writing on the topic of eldership and church offices, but they were not informed specifically enough of the project's ultimate goal—the development of a ministry plan. A good change would have been to have an informal Q&A after a morning worship service to allow the congregation to ask me questions about the project and to begin generating early dialogue about the purpose even before a single project goal was implemented.

A second change would be to adjust the measure of the ministry plan to more clearly specify the unity needed before advancing to the next group of people for eldership education. This can be accomplished by discussing the issue with the pastors and deacons to determine the manner in which unity will be evaluated before moving to the congregational phase.

A third change would be adjustments to the COS, especially related to removing the fill in the blank questions and changing them for a series of Likert scale statements. After having completed the project I am much more educated on the positive use of the surveys and would be in a better position to tighten the survey questions for an even more helpful statistical analysis.

In light of these possible changes and edits to the project, the positive outcome still stands, and the overall process was beneficial both to me as a pastor and to the GBC congregation. By the grace of God, the ongoing implementation of the ministry plan from this project will lead to fruitful changes to the ministry leadership structure at GBC for the glory of God and the advance of the gospel.

Theological Reflections

Two areas in particular provided the most benefit for my theological growth during the project. The first was the biblical exposition necessary to complete chapter 2. Most of my familiarity with eldership stemmed from the qualifications for pastors in 1 Timothy 3:1-7. However, the research necessary for chapter 2 increased my appreciation for the importance of a properly governed church. For the first time I was considering the initial establishment of elders in the earliest New Testament churches, the risks Paul and Barnabas were willing to take to ensure a properly governed church was in order, and the language used to describe the office and functions of elders. For many years the SBC has advocated important reforms at the local level such as ensuring a regenerate church membership and returning to the necessity of church discipline. Changes like these are only possible with a strong, biblical leadership structure in place.

A helpful approach when writing chapter 2 was to repeatedly consider the text from the other point of view. This helped me strengthen my own positions while also better understanding the positions of those who do not agree with my findings. Church government is a topic that is not explicitly prescribed in the Bible. No doubt, I have argued for a specific position based on the biblical data and modeling from New Testament churches, but this project has also been beneficial in reminding me of the importance of humility.

A second important factor for theological growth was the teaching sessions through the six-week curriculum. The feedback, questions, and conversation elicited from the curriculum provided additional motivation for me to study and strengthen my positions.

After each teaching session I returned to my Bible and my books to clarify my own positions on a number of important issues related to the project. Once again, this reflection developed a stronger sense of my need to be humble, especially since the teaching sessions served as a necessary reminder that this project is not ultimately about research and papers, but it is about people who make up the church of Jesus Christ. Thus, I am thankful for the deepening of my theological grid as it pertains to church leadership and structure, but I am even more thankful for the awareness of my role as pastor to shepherd with gentleness and graciousness, especially toward those who might not share my convictions on the nature of the offices of the church.

Personal Reflections

The genesis of this project was the bi-vocational pastor position my father held for a few years and his ongoing leadership in the local church as a deacon. As a young boy, I was always curious in the way things worked and why the church did things the way it did. I was curious about business meetings and wondered why the church was voting. I wanted to know what was happening at deacons meetings and how a pastor became a pastor. Once I felt the call to ministry and began academic training, I started to wonder if the way my Baptist church at home in Kingsport, Tennessee, did things was the most biblical way of doing things. That seed was planted a long time ago and this project is the fruit of that deposit.

I have been at GBC for eight years as lead pastor and eleven years total in a pastoral capacity. One of the blessings of my tenure is the love I have for the church and the remarkable nature of the congregation to be led by their pastors. To be certain, they are not willing to follow blindly. Clear communication and expression of the biblical data for change is expected, but the church is willing to embrace a new direction when the people see the biblical need for change. For this reason, I count it not only a great privilege to pastor at GBC, but I also have confidence in the congregation to listen to the material presented by the ministry plan and process it with an open mind and heart.

Finally, this project helped fulfill my desire to increase my education so I can be a more biblically faithful pastor for GBC. There were times when I thought the work and time were not worth the effort, but my knowledge of church government coupled with my personal growth as a pastor has made the project a great blessing.

Conclusion

This project accomplished the stated project goals and has prepared me to be in the best possible position to transition to biblical plural eldership at GBC. My intent was for this project to be a blessing to the people of GBC, and I believe the next steps through the ministry plan will provide blessings in a number of ways, including increased knowledge among the membership pertaining to the church offices and the possibility of a transition to biblical eldership. My hope is that the initial efforts in this project will bear lasting fruit not only in my personal pastoral leading, but also in the congregation as a whole.

APPENDIX 1

CHURCH OFFICES ASSESSMENT

Agreement to Participate
The following survey will be used by Philip Meade for research purposes as it pertains to church offices in the local church, and more specifically, Graefenburg Baptist Church. Participation in this survey is strictly voluntary. By completion of this survey, you are providing informed consent for the use of your responses in this project.

Although not required, your name, gender, and age are requested and will be helpful for the purposes of research and project development.

Date: _____

Name: _____

Gender _____ Age _____

General Questions:

1. How many years have you professed Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior? _____

2. How many years have you been a member in a Bible-believing church? _____

3. How many years have you been a member of Graefenburg Baptist Church? _____

4. Have you been a member of a church other than a Baptist church? If so, what denomination? _____

5. Would you say you have a strong understanding of church government?
   a. Yes
   b. No

6. Would you say you have a strong understanding of the way Graefenburg Baptist Church is governed?
   a. Yes
   b. No

7. Briefly define congregationalism (if able):

_____

_____

8. Briefly define biblical deaconship (if able):

_____

_____

9. Briefly define biblical eldership (if able):

_____

_____

10. Have you ever been a part of a church with a group of elders?
    a. Yes
    b. No

11. If yes, was it a positive experience?
    a. Yes
    b. No

Directions: Please mark the appropriate answer.
    SD = strongly disagree
    D = disagree
    DS = disagree somewhat
    AS = agree somewhat
    A = agree
    SA = strongly agree

12. The Bible describes the way a church should be governed.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
13. The Bible describes roles for deacons in a church.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
14. The Bible describes roles for elders in a church.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
15. A church should have a group of deacons and a group of elders.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
16. A church should only have a group of deacons.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA

17. A church should only have a group of elders.　　SD　D　DS　AS　A　SA

18. Deacons should provide oversight in the spiritual direction of the church.　　SD　D　DS　AS　A　SA

19. Elders should provide oversight in the spiritual direction of the church.　　SD　D　DS　AS　A　SA

20. The senior pastor is the only elder the church should have.　　SD　D　DS　AS　A　SA

21. The senior pastor should be one of a group of elders in a church.　　SD　D　DS　AS　A　SA

22. The Bible teaches that elders and deacons should have equal authority in the church.　　SD　D　DS　AS　A　SA

ELDERSHIP BIBLE STUDY EVALUATION

Name of evaluator: _____ **Date:** _____

Eldership Bible Study Evaluation					
1 = insufficient; 2 = requires attention; 3 = sufficient; 4 = exemplary					
Criteria	1	2	3	4	Comments
Biblical Faithfulness					
The content of the lessons is hermeneutically sound. All Scripture is properly interpreted, explained, and applied.					
The content of the curriculum is theologically sound.					
Scope					
The content of the lessons sufficiently covers the stated objective					
The lessons include essential information for understanding the topic and objective.					
Methodology					
The lessons make use of various learning approaches such as lecture, discussion, group activity, and illustrations.					
The lessons are clear and could be re-taught by another person.					
Practicality					
Participants will be able to better understand the Bible's teaching on plural eldership, or the history of Baptist thought on eldership.					

Please include any additional comments regarding the curriculum below:

APPENDIX 3

PRE/POST BIBLE STUDY SURVEY

The following survey was administered before and after the Bible study on Biblical Eldership to determine the effectiveness of the study.

Date: _____

Control Number: _____

General Questions:

1. What are the offices of the church? _____

2. What book and chapter of the Bible lists the qualifications for elders and deacons?

   _____

3. Briefly describe the difference between a deacon and an elder.

   _____

   _____

Directions: Please mark the appropriate answer. Some questions may ask you to give your opinion using the following scale:

        SD = strongly disagree
        D = disagree
        DS = disagree somewhat
        AS = agree somewhat
        A = agree
        SA = strongly agree

4. Elders are the same thing as pastors.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
5. A church can be congregational and have plural eldership.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
6. The early NT churches had plural eldership.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
7. I am confident in my knowledge of the roles of deacons in the local church.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
8. I am confident in my knowledge of the roles of elders in the local church.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
9. Baptist churches have historically not had a group of elders.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
10. The Bible provides clear guidance on the offices of the local church.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
11. An important role for a group of elders is to make the decisions for the church.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
12. An important role for a group of elders is to spiritually lead the congregation.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
13. Elders are still accountable to the congregation.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
14. If you are an elder, you can never be removed from your position.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
15. Elders will help make a church more spiritually mature.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA

16. Elders are accountable to the deacon body of a church.   SD   D   DS   AS   A   SA

17. Elders are tasked by God to shepherd the flock and provide leadership in spiritual care.   SD   D   DS   AS   A   SA

18. Elders can only be men.   SD   D   DS   AS   A   SA

19. Deacons can only be men.   SD   D   DS   AS   A   SA

20. Graefeburg Baptist Church already has plural elder leadership.   SD   D   DS   AS   A   SA

21. The Bible has different roles for elders, bishops, and overseers.   SD   D   DS   AS   A   SA

22. The qualifications for elders and deacons are the same.   SD   D   DS   AS   A   SA

23. Paid pastoral staff are the only elders in a church.   SD   D   DS   AS   A   SA

APPENDIX 4

MINISTRY PLAN EVALUATION

Name of evaluator: _____ Date: _____					
Ministry Plan Evaluation					
1 = insufficient; 2 = requires attention; 3 = sufficient; 4 = exemplary					
Criteria	1	2	3	4	Comments
Content					
The plan is easy to understand.					
The plan is simple to implement.					
Scope					
The plan accounts for both the deacons and the elders.					
The plan is broad enough to cover all the related areas.					
Resources					
The plan takes into account the church's resources.					
The plan takes into account the church's limitations.					
Application					
The plan involves the church's leaders in the establishment of eldership.					
The plan adequately provides the congregation with the knowledge and confidence to transition to eldership.					

Please include any additional comments regarding the ministry application plan below:

APPENDIX 5

ELDERSHIP CURRICULUM

Biblical Eldership Curriculum

Introduction

The following curriculum is for the initial education of Graefenburg Baptist Church in the area of plural eldership. The curriculum is designed to provide a biblical overview of the normative pattern of plural eldership in the earliest NT churches, and to briefly highlight the history of Baptist thought pertaining to elders in the church. Additional teaching subsequent to this curriculum will be offered to provide a more robust understanding of specific areas, such as the qualifications for elders and deacons, and the distinctions between the roles of elders and deacons.

The curriculum has been written and developed based on the eldership assessment survey provided to the GBC congregation. The results from that survey coupled with the research for this project has led to the completion of the curriculum. Each eldership lesson should last approximately one hour if the group adequately looks up and explores each passage and offer thoughtful discussion to the provided questions.

Lesson 1
Biblical Eldership: An Introduction for Graefenburg Baptist Church

Lesson Objective: The first lesson will seek to accomplish two goals: 1) To demonstrate the authority and sufficiency of Scripture for leadership in the local church. 2) To outline current challenges within the GBC "pastor plus deacon" leadership structure.

Introduction

This course is designed to explore the Bible's teaching on biblical eldership and will demonstrate how Baptists have historically practiced plural eldership. The breakdown of the six-week course is:

Session 1: Biblical Eldership: An Introduction for GBC

Session 2: Biblical Eldership: The Establishment of Elders

Session 3: Biblical Eldership: Elders. Oversees. Bishops. Oh My!

Session 4: Biblical Eldership: The Qualifications

Session 5: Biblical Eldership: The Duties and Expectations

Session 6: Biblical Eldership: Baptists and Elders?

Church leadership. Church offices. Church government. Pastors. Elders. Deacons. Bishops. Pick 10 churches at random and you might find 10 different approaches to church leadership. Some of these differences are due to denominational distinctives. The Episcopal Church will implement leadership in one way while the Presbyterian Church will implement leadership in a different way. However, even among churches who share the same denominational convictions, there may still be a multitude of approaches for how the local church is governed. As we will see, Southern Baptist churches are a good example of this.

Group Activity:

       Each participant will briefly answer the following questions:

           1. How many churches have you regularly attended other than GBC?

           2. Were those churches Southern Baptist or a different denomination?

           3. How would you describe the leadership structure of your other churches?

           4. Did those churches explain why they governed the way they did?

There are many different experiences with leadership in the local church. Some are good, some are not so good. We want to be able to biblically explain why we structure our leadership at GBC the way we do. But why is it important to biblically defend our leadership model? Let's examine that question a bit closer.

Learning Procedures:

       Read 2 Timothy 3:16-17. What do you understand these verses to be saying?

Paul wrote 2 Timothy near the time of his death and it provides insight into the things Paul wanted Timothy, a church leader, to know as he was ministering and preaching the gospel. Topics in the letter include: 1) Guarding the integrity of the gospel and entrusting it with others. 2) Pursuing righteousness and putting away ungodliness. 3) Preaching the Word. 4) Becoming fully equipped as a man of God and a church leader.

Paul points to the authority of the Scriptures as the means by which Timothy would grow in each of those areas. In this passage, he describes why the Bible has the authority and sufficiency it does, and also demonstrates what the Bible will accomplish.

       According to Paul, why does the Bible have authority over our lives?

The Bible is authoritative because it comes from God himself. 2nd Peter 1:21 says, "For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke <u>from God</u> <u>as they</u> <u>were carried along by the Holy Spirit</u>." So, the Scriptures are "God breathed" and they are "from God," but they were also written by humans in the power of the Holy Spirit.

According to Paul, what are four areas where the Bible is authoritative? What is the final purpose of the Bible? (verse 17)

According to this verse, the Bible is intended to teach us, point out wrong doings, correct those wrong doings, and train us in righteousness. The final point of all of this is so we can be complete and equipped for the work God has called us to do.

Why are these verses especially important for church leaders? Do you think God places a high value on the church? If so, do you think God intends for the Bible to teach us and correct us concerning the nature of the church, including leadership? Why or why not?

These verses are important for church leaders because we must be fully equipped to preach, teach, and share the gospel with others. We also must be shepherding the church in ways that are consistent with God's design for his flock. Since the Bible is authoritative and sufficient for <u>all</u> areas that would make Christians fully equipped, we want to pay attention to what the Bible teaches us about leadership and governance in the local church.

We may conclude from this brief overview of the Bible's authority that church leaders are to structure the government and leadership of the local church in a manner that best reflects the Bible's teaching. Thus, as we look to Scripture to determine the meaning and use of elders in the local church, we do so with a commitment to the binding authority of the Bible over the church and her practices.

Which of the following would you say best represents the current leadership model at GBC?

1. **Congregational ruled, Deacon led.**
2. **Congregational ruled, Pastor led.**
3. **Congregational ruled, Pastor and Deacon led.**
4. **Deacon ruled.**

5. **Pastor ruled.**

6. **Pastor and Deacon ruled.**

The current model employed by GBC is best described as "Congregational ruled, pastor and deacon led." The reason is because the congregation has the final authority in important matters related to the church, but the church is led and shepherded by both the pastors and deacons. For example, issues of church discipline or significant spiritual matters concerning the membership are discussed by both the pastors and deacons before moving forward to the church.

The "Pastor plus deacon" model is very common among Southern Baptist Churches. Most of the time, the paid pastor(s) are considered by the congregation to be the elders as described in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1. As we will learn later in the coming weeks, the Bible outlines distinctions between elders and deacons, both in qualifications and roles. We will also argue that paid pastoral staff should be shepherding alongside elders from within the congregation itself. But for now, let's finish session 1 by outlining a few challenges presented by the "Pastor plus deacon" model.

1. If the paid pastoral staff of a church are considered the sole elders of the church, then why are they meeting with deacons to discuss elder-related issues?

2. If the paid pastoral staff of a church are considered the sole elders of the church, then why do they not have voting rights in deacon meetings where church leadership decisions are made?

3. If the paid pastoral staff of a church are considered the sole elders of the church, then what happens when the paid staff relocates to another church?

4. If the paid pastoral staff of a church are considered the sole elders of the church, then what happens if the church budget does not allow for multiple pastors?

We will discover throughout the next 5 sessions that the Bible's teaching on eldership and deacon ministries will largely address some of these challenges presented by the "pastor plus deacon" model.

Wrap up: Although there are several different interpretive approaches to how the Bible clarifies church leadership, we must nevertheless be committed to the Bible's teaching and direction on government and structure in the church because only the Bible is authoritative and sufficient for all matters relating to Christ and his church. A few practical concerns were raised with the "pastor plus deacon" model that is incorporated at GBC and many other churches. Is there a better way? Is there a more biblical way? That is what the remainder of our sessions will cover.

Lesson 2
Biblical Eldership: Early Plural Elder Establishment

Lesson Objective: The objective of this lesson is to provide Scriptural support for the establishment of plural eldership in early NT churches.

Introduction

Last week we learned that the Bible is authoritative and sufficient for teaching about the structure of the local church. (This does not mean that interpreting the Bible is always easy, or that every specific detail about church leadership is prescribed in the Bible). We also discussed some challenges to the "pastor plus deacon" model of church leadership.

By the time our sessions are complete, we will have explored the Scriptures to determine if there is sufficient instruction and modeling for plural eldership in the church. Three core elements will be discussed: 1) The establishment of elders. 2) The qualifications of elders. 3) the duties given to elders.

Today we will look at a variety of Scripture references to demonstrate that a plurality of elder leadership was established in every early New Testament church and that this descriptive pattern should be normative for churches today.

Group Activity:

Divide into groups of two and look up the following verses. Record any insights or details you discover about eldership from the verses you have read. Share your findings with the group.

1. Acts 11:30, Acts 15:2.

2. Acts 14:23, Titus 1:5

3. 1 Timothy 5:17, 1 Peter 5:1,5

Learning Procedures:

Jewish Elders – Acts 11:30 and 15:2 describe the elders in Jerusalem who were recognized by the early community of believers. This group of elders is mentioned before the first reference to Gentile elders which occurs in Acts 14.

What was happening in Acts 11 that elicited the leadership of the Jerusalem elders? A prophesied famine that would have an impact "all over the world" motivated the Christians in Antioch to send relief to the region of Judea. That relief effort came under the leadership of the elders.

What was happening in Acts 15 that elicited the leadership of the Jerusalem elders? Lingering questions and concerns related to the salvation of Gentiles precipitated a meeting of the apostles and elders in Jerusalem. That the elders were working so closely with the apostles on the most significant doctrinal issues indicates the significance of the elders' authority in the early church.

These examples of Jewish elder leadership among early Christians teach us at least two things. 1) There was shared authority and leadership among the elders as opposed to a single authority. 2) The first Christian converts were comfortable with this leadership model because the presence of elders was common in the synagogue and throughout the Old Testament. Thus, the establishment of plural eldership in New Testament churches was not a novel idea, but rooted in Jewish history.

Gentile elders – Acts 13 and 14 describe the first of three missionary journeys by Paul. He and Barnabas were planting Gentile churches in Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe (located in southeast Asia Minor).

What happened to them in Acts 13:50 and 14:19? What is surprising about Acts 14:21? Even though Paul and Barnabas were stoned and persecuted in Lystra, they were determined to return to the cities they had initially visited in order to strengthen them and disciple them. Luke tells us one of the most important reasons why Paul returns

91

to the cities where he was recently attacked. Acts 14:23 says, "And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed." In that one verse, we learn three truths regarding Paul's leadership establishment in Gentile churches. Luke describes the 1) plurality of leadership (elders), 2) how they became elders (appointed), and 3) the number of congregations that received elders (every church).

Read Titus 1:5 – what instructions does Paul give to Titus that relates to him putting "what remained into order?" How does this verse compare to Acts 14:23? Paul instructs Titus to mirror the work Paul was doing among the Gentile churches, namely, to appoint plural eldership in every town. The time between Acts 14 and Titus 1 is important. Paul, on his first missionary journey, is found appointing elders in every church. Likewise, Paul, just a couple of years before his death, is instructing other church leaders to do the same thing. This demonstrates that plural elder appointment in churches was customary for Paul from the beginning of his ministry to the end, and thus, the normative pattern for church leaders moving forward.

Plural Eldership – Let's look closer at the plurality of elder leadership established by Paul throughout his life and ministry. As we will discover in the next lesson, Paul uses a variety of words to describe elders in the church. But the word for "elder" that is used in Acts 14 and Titus 1 is found sixty-six times in the New Testament and, depending on context, can mean a couple of things. For example:

Look up Luke 15:25 and discuss how the word "elder" is used in that verse. In this verse, Luke uses the same word for "elder" in Acts 14, but it is used to describe the older age of the prodigal son's brother. Out of those sixty-six uses of the word "elder" in the New Testament, twenty are used to refer to the leadership of the Christian church. And of those twenty uses, sixteen are in the plural form. However, the four singular uses of the word are describing an individual elder and are not referring to

the leadership structure as a whole. (1 Peter 5:1, 2 John 1, 3 John 1, and 1 Tim. 5:19).

In light of this, we should consider the options Paul had available to him as he sought to establish leadership in these new Gentile churches. He could have appointed a single "chief elder" similar to what was familiar with the Jewish "Chief Priest." Or he could have placed church leadership in the hands of the previously established deacons in Acts 6. Or he could have advised against formal leadership altogether. But instead, he decided to establish a pattern of plural leadership from within the congregation itself.

Additional support:

We see additional support for plural eldership in every church when we consider Acts 20:17. **Read Acts 20:17**. Paul calls for the "elders" (plural) from the "church" (singular) in Ephesus to meet him in Miletus. This confirms what we have already learned about Paul's leadership design. Each individual church had a plurality of elders appointed in them by the apostle and by future church leaders.

Wrap Up: The book of Acts provides a history of the church and describes Paul's action of establishing plural eldership on his missionary journeys. The rest of the New Testament supports a plural eldership through various instructions given later in Paul's life, such as the instructions to Titus, not to mention the detailed list of qualifications in both 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1. This type of church leadership was never denied or opposed due to the early Christians association with elders in the life of Israel and Jewish worship. Thus, with the long biblical history of elder leadership, Paul's repeated and consistent actions of appointing elders in every church, the qualifications that are detailed for elders, and the instructions given to elders (which will be outlined in a future session), this descriptive pattern should be seen as normative for churches today unless there is evidence to the contrary.

Lesson 3
Biblical Eldership: Elders. Overseers. Bishops. Oh My!

Objective: The objective of this lesson is to demonstrate how three NT words –

elder, overseer, and bishop – all refer to the same office in the local church. Therefore,

instructions or duties that are given to one of the titles are instructive for all three titles

since they all represent the same leadership office. Furthermore, the office of

elder/overseer/bishop is distinct from the office of deacon, demonstrating two offices for

the church.

Introduction

Last week we explained that we would be using Scripture to demonstrate three

things concerning elders: 1) Their establishment. 2) Their qualifications. 3) Their duties.

We explored Paul's pattern of establishing elders in all the churches last week and

discussed why that pattern should be normative for churches today. Today we *would* be

addressing point number 2, the qualifications for elders, but as soon as we begin to read

the qualifications in 1 Timothy 3, we run into a problem. This problem is one that needs

to be answered before we can continue the discussion on elder qualifications. So, let's

locate the problem and examine the Scriptures to answer the problem. (At least one copy

of the New Kings James Bible and King James Bible should be available for the ensuing

activities).

Learning Procedures:

1 Timothy 3 is the most famous book and chapter for describing the

qualifications for the offices of the church. One person should read 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and

another person read 1 Timothy 3:8-13.

What leadership group are verses 8-13 describing in this chapter? The answer

is deacons.

What leadership group are verses 1-12 describing in this chapter? The answers to this question might vary. Some could potentially say "elders" but the text specifically says "overseers" and if reading from the King James or New King James, it says "bishops."

Since Paul lists two sets of qualifications for deacons and overseers, what does that say about those two groups? The answer is that the two sets of qualifications demonstrate two separate leadership offices for the church. Deacons are not elders and elders are not deacons.

We mentioned that we have a problem in these verses that requires an answer. The problem before us is straightforward – why would we use 1 Timothy 3 to discuss the qualifications of elders when it is apparently describing the qualifications for an overseer/bishop? First, we need to understand that the English translations of "elder" and "overseer/bishop" are derived from two different Greek words *(remind participants that the NT was written in Greek).*
Just in case you are curious, the Greek word that is translated "elder" is *presbuteros* and the Greek word that is translated "overseer/bishop" is *episkopos (write these words on a whiteboard).*

At this point, we have two options in front of us: 1) The two Greek words that are translated as "elder" and "overseer" describe two different leadership positions in the church. If that were the case, then the church would have three offices: elders, overseer/bishop, deacons. 2) The words "elder" and "overseer/bishop" refer to the same leadership position, and thus, the church would have two offices: elders (overseers/bishop) and deacons.

Before we look closer at this issue, which do you believe is the right option? (*discuss***)**

We should understand the language of elder, overseer, and bishop as referring to the same leadership body in the church. The word for overseer and the word for elder are

so closely related that the NT uses them interchangeably. Let's look at the Bible in order to defend that statement.

Text #1 – Read Acts 20:17, 28

Paul is returning from his third missionary journey in Acts 20 and stops in Miletus. From there, Paul summons the Ephesian elders to come to him so he can offer them instruction. Thus, Acts 20:17 says, "Now from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called the _elders_ of the church to come to him." Once the elders arrive and Paul begins teaching them, he says in verse 28, "Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you _overseers_, to care for the church of God…" The implication is clear – Paul calls for the elders in verse 17, but they are referred to as overseers in verse 28. Thus, in the book of Acts, the terms elder and overseer are referring to the same group of people.

Text #2 – Read Titus 1:5, 7

Paul instructs Titus to appoint elders in every city. We have already discussed this verse in session 2. However, Paul immediately begins discussing the qualifications for those elders and refers to them as overseers in verse 7. Again, the implication is that Paul understands them to be the same group of people.

Text #3 – Read 1 Timothy 3:1-5, 5:17

Paul lists qualifications for "overseers" in chapter 3 and describes their roles as including teaching and governing the church (vv. 2 and 5). Then, in chapter 5 verse 17, Paul describes the same functions for the elders, indicating that these two words are referring to the same leadership group in the church.

Additional Consideration.

In addition to these texts, another compelling reason we should understand overseer and elder to refer to the same office is because the NT never provides a separate list of qualifications for *presbuteros* (elders). If the two terms were supposed to denote two separate offices, then surely Paul would have provided another qualifications list for elders, especially considering his instruction to Timothy to "not be hasty" in the selection of elders (1 Timothy 5:22). Obviously, this problem is alleviated when we understand the two terms as referring to the same office.

What about the term "Pastor?"

We have reached some conclusions about the terms "elder" and "overseer", but what about the title of "pastor?" Is that something different? No, the word "pastor" is yet another way to refer to elder or overseer. Let's examine that statement.

The term "pastor" is the translation of the Greek word *poimen* and it occurs only once in the New Testament. **Read Ephesians 4:11**. "And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers…" The word "shepherds" is sometimes translated as "pastors." But there is a verb form of the word *poimen* (pastor) that helps us understand how the role of pastor was related to the role of elder.

Read 1 Peter 5:1-2

It says, "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." The elders are instructed to "shepherd" or "pastor" the flock of God that is among them. Thus, the role of elder and the function of pastor are identical, which suggests that the word "pastor" and "elder" are referring to the same office.

Read Acts 20:28

It says, "Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with

His own blood." Again, just like in 1 Peter 5, the office of elder/overseer is connected to the role of pastoring or shepherding the flock of God. Thus, the role of elder and the function of pastor are identical.

Wrap Up: The Bible uses different words to describe the same office in the church. These words are: elder, overseer, bishop, and pastor. The earliest history of the church indicates this was the way the terms were understood. For example, in the *Didache*, an early church worship manual, the terms were understood to be synonymous. This means that the NT church has two leadership groups or offices that are to serve the flock: elders and deacons. Our next task will be to understand the qualifications and duties of these leaders. That will be our next two session.

Lesson 4
Biblical Eldership: The Qualifications

Objective: The objective of this session is to briefly discuss and describe the qualifications for elders as outlined in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:6-9. The purpose of this session is not to offer a comprehensive study on the specific qualifications (that will occur in a separate study), but rather to demonstrate the care and detail given to the appointment of elders by the apostle Paul. This, together with the establishment of elders and the duties given to elders, presents a solid case for the pattern established in the NT that continues to be normative for churches today.

Introduction

Let's review what we have learned thus far. First, the Bible alone is the authoritative and sufficient source for all issues related to faith and practice, including the structure of the local church. Second, the establishment of elders in every church was the customary pattern of the apostle Paul at the beginning of his ministry and it continues through the end of his ministry. Part of this pattern was the appointment of a plurality of elder leadership. Third, the terms elder, overseer, bishop, and pastor all refer to the same leadership group or office. This creates a distinction between the office of elder and the office of deacon, indicating two offices in the structure of the church.

In this fourth session we will briefly address the detailed list of qualifications for elders and will once again notice how there is a secondary list of qualifications for deacons. The purpose of this session is not for us to offer a comprehensive, detailed account of every qualification, but rather to consider another element of why elder leadership is so important to the local church. The apostle Paul instructs both Timothy and Titus, two faithful pastors, in the qualifications of elder leadership, thereby indicating the importance of elders in the congregations being planted around the world.

Group Activity

Divide the group into teams of two and ask the following questions:

1. List as many qualifications for elders as you can remember.

2. List as many qualifications for deacons as you can remember.

3. What differences (if any) do you see?

4. What do you think is the significance of having qualifications for both elders and deacons?

Learning Procedures:

The two passages that describe the qualifications for elders are 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:6-9. Let's first focus on 1 Timothy 3:1-7. Read those verses out loud.

Before highlighting the qualifications themselves, we should notice how the verses immediately preceding and following the qualifications show the importance of the offices of the church. The chapter begins in verse 1 with Paul writing, "The saying is trustworthy…" That phrase is found five times in Paul's letters to Timothy and Titus and is meant to emphasize the truthfulness of the forthcoming text.

Immediately following the qualifications for elders and deacons, Paul writes in verses 14-15 that he is writing "these things" so that they may be the "household of God" and a "pillar and buttress of truth."

What conclusions might we draw from Paul beginning and ending this section of qualifications in this way? That Paul sees the offices of elder and deacons as essential for the household of God to be a pillar of truth, and that all he says is trustworthy and, therefore, timeless. We can't fully define elders without understanding who they are and what they do – the qualifications help us with both of these things.

A quick reflection of these qualifications will give us a sense of the importance of the office.

1. **A Good Reputation (1 Tim. 3:2, 7)**

Does it matter what the world thinks about you? This is a qualification about character and leadership. Good character is essential.

2. **Family Life (1 Tim. 3:2, 4-5)**

> **"Husband of one wife"**
> Although the verse about an elder being the "husband of one wife" has led to significant debate, Paul connects this qualification back to the reputation of the elder in verse 2 and it indicates that a husband must be fully devoted to his wife and is not involved in any inappropriate relationships.
> **Submissive children and a healthy household**
> If an elder is not able to manage and properly lead the home, then how is he to be expected to lead the church?

3. **Personal Self-Control (1 Tim. 3:2)**

> Self-control is a fruit of the Spirit and necessary to be a leader in the church. The elder is to display conduct, speech, and attitudes that are controlled by the love of Christ and not be marked by reckless behavior. This means drunkenness and other addictive behaviors are forbidden.

4. **People-Skills (1 Tim. 3:2-3)**

> **Hospitable.** Having a home and a presence that is open to others is a requirement for elder leadership.

Gentle. Being approachable, patient, and willing to listen is a fundamental part of leading well.

Not Quarrelsome. Not an argumentative person. There is skill in learning how to speak and communicate with a variety of different people within a church setting.

Able to teach. An elder needs to be able to effectively communicate the gospel and explain the Bible with other people.

5. **Personal Integrity (1 Tim. 3:3, 5).**

Not Greedy. Greed leads to temptations that will harm the church. At the heart of greed is idolatry.

A Mature Christian. Not a recent convert who might be prone to pride and being "puffed up."

Now look at the qualifications for deacons in 1 Tim. 8-13. Do you see any differences? Discuss.

Noticeable differences include: 1) Elders must be able to teach. This is omitted in the deacon qualifications. 2) The portion of comparing an elder's household to taking care of God's church is omitted in the deacon list. This is instructive since it demonstrates a leadership/shepherding aspect of elders that are not given to deacons. 3) An elder must not be a recent convert, but deacons do not have such a limitation. Again, the reason is because of the differences in roles and function.

Wrap Up: Paul writes two clear lists of qualifications for both elders and deacons. Since he also repeats the elder list in Titus 1, we know these are critical words that Paul wants all the local pastors to understand and fulfill. The lists are similar, but do carry important differences and are, of course, directed at two different and distinct groups. In order to better understand the difference in roles between elders and deacons,

we need to look at the Bible's teaching on their duties. To that topic we will turn in our next session.

Lesson 5
Biblical Eldership: The Duties

Objective: The objective of this lesson is to explain the shepherding duties for the office of elder and how those duties differ from the responsibilities of deacons.

Introduction

Thus far in our lessons we have learned several things related to the office of elder. Let's quickly review:

1. The Bible is the only authoritative and sufficient resource for determining the leadership structure of a church.

2. The apostle Paul established elders in every church and every city during his missionary journeys. This was true at both the beginning and the end of his ministry.

3. Eldership was not a new concept, but was built on OT elder leadership that would have been common knowledge to the first Jewish converts.

4. The terms elder, bishop, overseer, and pastor refer to the same office and the same duties.

5. There are two detailed lists of qualifications for elders – one in 1 Tim. 3 and the other in Titus 1.

Today we will consider in greater detail the roles and duties of elders, and then briefly contrast those with deacon responsibilities. The primary texts we will examine is 1 Peter 5:1-5 and Acts 20:28.

Group Activity:

What do you think elders are supposed to do in the church? Discuss.

Do you think GBC deacons have been performing any of the duties you just listed? If yes, what do you think about that?

Learning Procedures:

Read 1 Peter 5:1-5

After referring to himself as a "fellow elder," Peter provides the key instruction for what these elders are to do: shepherd the flock of God. **When you think of the word "shepherd" what comes to mind from the Bible?** (*answers may include Psalm 23 or Jesus being the Good Shepherd*). The command from Peter for elders to "shepherd" the flock of God is also found in Acts 20:28. **Let's read Acts 20:28.**

What action words come to mind when considering the work of a shepherd? (*feeding, protecting, leading, caring, guiding*).

Can anyone think of a reason why Peter would have felt the emotional weight of commanding the elders of the churches to shepherd the flock and tend to the sheep? (*Jesus tells Peter to tend to the sheep and feed the flock three times after his resurrection in John 21:15-17*).

What is another word or phrase in 1 Peter 5:2 that is used to summarize the duties of the elders? (*exercising oversight*). Once again we see how the roles of shepherds, overseers, and elders are all common to one another.

A shepherd is called to feed, protect, and lead.

1. **Feed the flock**. This is teaching and preaching the word of God. That is why one of the qualifications for an elder is the ability to teach since feeding the flock is an essential aspect of elder leadership.

2. **Protect the flock.** Acts 20:28 speaks of "fierce wolves" that will come into the church and try to draw the disciples away. Part of shepherding is to be alert and protect the congregation from these predators.

3. **Lead the flock.** God's people need to be led. Not in a domineering way, but in a gentle way. 1 Tim. 5:17 speaks of the elders who "rule" or "lead" well and they are considered worthy of double honor.

Look at 1 Peter 5:2-3. Peter lists three contrasts for the manner in which an elder is to shepherd. What are they?

1. **Willingly, not under compulsion**. An elder should desire the role and work he is doing for the Lord and for the congregation.

2. **Not for shameful gain, but eagerly**. The prize for eldership is not to gain in pride or riches or respect, but to eagerly do the work of the Lord.

3. **Not domineering, but as examples**. The reality of leadership can lead to attitudes of superiority and harshness with the flock. But elders are to set the example of humility.

Compare the duties of elders to the description of deacons in Acts 6:2-4. What conclusions from these texts might you be able to make? Discuss.
The verb "shepherd" is never used in conjunction with the deacon leadership. That is a function reserved for the elders/overseers/bishops. Thus, the roles and functions of elders and deacons are clearly different and should not be confused.

Wrap Up: The duty of an elder is to shepherd the church. This instruction includes teaching, protecting, and leading the flock under the authority of Jesus Christ. Elders are to manage the church and provide spiritual oversight for the members. These duties are exclusive to the office of elder and are not instructed to the office of deacons. When considered alongside the distinct qualifications for elders and the establishment of elders in every NT church, the pattern of plural eldership should be considered normative for churches today. But what about Baptists? Does the concept of plural eldership and Baptist ecclesiology have any grounding in history? That will be the subject of our sixth and final session.

Lesson 6
Biblical Eldership: Baptists and Elders?

Objective: The objective of this lesson is to reveal the historical presence of plural eldership among early Baptist churches and its consistency with a congregational form of church government.

Introduction

Contemporary Baptist ecclesiology is closely associated with two important distinctives: 1) The autonomy of the local church and 2) a democratic/congregational form of church government. These ideas are so deeply embedded into Baptist life that church government discussions incorporating the language of plural elder leadership are often met with confusion or contempt! What does history teach us about Baptists and plural eldership? Are the two concepts foreign to one another? Or do they have more in common than we might think?

This lesson will be making a case for the latter - that Baptists and plural eldership have more in common than we might think. We will consider three things: 1) important documents from early Baptist beginnings 2) writings from key Baptist leaders 3) congregationalism and its compatibility with plural eldership.

Group Activity:

Team Trivia. Divide the group into even numbered teams and hand out cards with the letters "A", "B", and "C" on them. Ask the following multiple choice questions and have teams select a card with their desired answer. All teams turn their card over at the same time to reveal their answer. Correct answers receive a point.

1. The most likely century for the emergence of Baptists was:

    a. 1ˢᵗ

    b. 16ᵗʰ

    c. 17ᵗʰ

2. From which movement did Baptists probably originate?

    a. The English Separatist Movement

    b. The Wesleyan Holiness Movement

    c. The Anabaptist Movement

3. Which two traditions quickly developed among Baptist churches?

    a. Missionary Baptists and Sabatarian Baptists

    b. Particular Baptists and General Baptists

    c. Independent Baptists and Reformed Baptists

4. Which of the two traditions first formed?

    a. Particular

    b. General

    c. They formed at the same time

5. Which of the two traditions grew the fastest?

    a. Particular

    b. General

    c. They grew at the same rate

6. Which tradition was more influenced by Presbyterian theology?

    a. Particular

    b. General

    c. Neither

7. Who were the two men most closely associated with the earliest Baptist church?

    a. John the Baptist and Jesus

    b. Benjamin Keach and Roger Williams

    c. John Smyth and Thomas Helwys

8. "A Declaration of Faith of English People Remaining at Amerstadam" was a confession of faith written by:

    a. John Smyth

    b. Thomas Helwys

    c. Benjamin Keach

9. The earliest Baptist confessions discussed eldership.

    a. True

    b. False

    c. n/a

10. The earliest Baptist confessions acknowledged plural eldership.

    a. True

    b. False

    c. n/a

Learning Procedures:

Baptist Confessions

The early Baptist confessions can help us learn a few things concerning church polity in the earliest Baptist churches. Although they do not provide comprehensive details on the nature of the leadership offices, they do shine some light on the awareness and acceptance of the plurality model among Baptists. A few confessions are provided below. **Read each confession**.

A Declaration of Faith of English People Remaining at Amsterdam (1611)
"That the officers of every church or congregation are either Elders, who by their office do especially feed the flock concerning their souls…or Deacons, Men and

Women, who by their office relieve the necessities of the poor and impotent brethren concerning their bodies."

Propositions and Conclusions Concerning True Christian Religion (1612-1614)
"That Christ hath set in his outward church two sorts of ministers: viz, some who are called pastors, teachers, or elders, who administer the Word and sacraments, and others who are called Deacons, men and women: who ministry is, to serve tables and wash the saints' feet."

The Second London Confession of 1677 and 1688
"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 call them to, to be Continued to the end of the World, are Bishops or Elders and Deacons."

A few observations on these confessions.

1. The earliest confessions were comfortable with the language of elder and rightly understood the Bible to use the terms Elder, Pastor, and Bishop interchangeably.

2. The earliest confessions allowed for the possibility of women Deacons. This indicates an understanding that all spiritual authority and oversight is reserved for the elders of the church, not the deacons, since no one in the 17th century was arguing for the possibility of women in positions of authority.

3. The confessions assume plural eldership in some churches. For example, article sixteen of the Helwys confession of 1611 speaks of a single "flock" of God and prescribes that the "Elders" be able to know the entire congregation since the Holy Spirit made them "overseers." Since the article is referencing a single church, the plural form of the word "Elders" in the article is instructive.

Key Leaders

The writings of key Baptist leaders and the minutes of local Baptist associations can also provide helpful historical evidence for plural eldership. One issue in

particular that was heavily discussed was the disagreement concerning the role and function of elders – drawing from Presbyterian influence, some Baptists distinguished between "ruling" elders and "teaching" elders. Ruling elders were focused on the administrative side of the church while the teaching elders focused on the pastoral roles. The significant amount of material written on this debate demonstrates the reality of plural eldership among some Baptist churches.

For example, Benjamin Griffith, an influential voice among Baptists in the 18th century, wrote, "Ruling elders are such persons as are endued with gifts to assist the pastor or teacher in the government of the church."

Likewise, Samuel Jones authored a manual of church polity for the Philadelphia Baptist Association in 1795. In that manual, titled "A Treatise of Church Discipline and a Directory," Samuel Jones writes:

"Concerning the Divine right of the office of ruling elders, there has been considerable doubt and much disputation. We, therefore, had a thought of passing it over in silence; but, on farther consideration, concluded to state briefly the arguments on both sides, then subjoin a few general observations, so and so let the churches judge for themselves, and practice as they shall see fit."

In 1774, the Charleston Baptist Association released their own "Summary of Church Discipline." That document describes a pattern of plural eldership in Baptist churches when it provides instructions on ordination. It says, "if there is not a sufficient presbytery in the church, neighboring elders are to be called and authorized to perform the service." The implication, of course, is that many Baptist churches would have a group of elders in the church to handle the service themselves.

The Southern Baptist Convention was formed in 1845 and its first president, W.B. Johnson, strongly supported a plurality of elders. He wrote, "A plurality in the

bishopric is of great importance for mutual counsel and aid, that the government and edification of the flock may be promoted in the best manner." He would go as far to say, "a plurality of bishops is required for each church."

J.L. Reynolds was another prominent Southern Baptist leader and pastor of the Second Baptist Church of Richmond, VA and he agreed with Johnson on the plurality model.

In 1925, Southern Baptists issued their statement of faith called "The Baptist Faith and Message" which includes eldership language.

Why the decline? Ask for possible ideas for why the plural model went into decline among Baptists.

Practical reasons: The church's rapid growth and seemingly inadequate number of qualified men led to decline.

Cultural reasons: American individualism and "soul competency" led to a spirit of distrust for plural elder authority.

Theological reasons: The debate and uncertainty of the ruling/teaching elders distinction led some to abandon the practice all together.

Wrap Up:

Pastor Mark Dever writes, "It is is indisputable that at the beginning of the 20th century, Baptists either had or advocated elders in local churches-and often a plurality of elders."

Shawn Wright writes, "Plural eldership was common, if not the norm, in the late 17th century."

We can conclude from the earliest confessions, the writings of key Baptist

leaders, the local Baptist association minutes, and the work of contemporary historians that plural eldership was a common form of church leadership in the early Baptist church.

Curriculum Wrap Up:

The primary objective of the previous six lessons has been to demonstrate how the Bible provides sufficient modeling and instruction for a plural elder leadership model. This is demonstrated through the establishment of plural elders in the early NT churches, the qualifications given specifically to elders, and the shepherding duties unique to elders. In addition, many of the earliest Baptist churches were led by a plural elder model and even the beginnings of the Southern Baptist Convention were marked by leadership who supported plural eldership.

In light of the multi-faceted challenges presented by a "pastor plus deacon" model, Graefenburg Baptist Church would benefit from additional consideration of how a plural eldership model would function in our ministry context.

APPENDIX 6

MINISTRY PLAN TO IMPLEMENT BIBLICAL
ELDERSHIP AT GRAEFENBURG BAPTIST
CHURCH IN WADDY, KENTUCKY

Ministry Implementation Plan: Biblical Eldership at GBC
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The opportunity: Graefenburg Baptist Church in Waddy, KY lacks a ministry plan for

implementing biblical eldership as part of the church governance model. This plan is

designed and intended to address and correct that shortcoming.

This plan will address three key areas of church engagement and involvement:
(1) Awareness.
(2) Education.
(3) Dialogue.

Promotion: Promotion will target (1) ordained deacons, (2) key church leadership, and (3)
the congregation at large

Short term goals to be fulfilled by year one:
(1) To raise awareness of biblical eldership among the ordained deacons.
(2) To educate ordained deacons on biblical eldership.
(3) To establish unity with the deacons to pursue additional steps toward biblical
    eldership.

Mid-term goals to be fulfilled by year two:
(1) To raise awareness of biblical eldership among key ministry leadership.
(2) To educate key leadership on biblical eldership.
(3) To establish unity with the key leadership in order to pursue additional steps with
    the congregation.

Long term goals to be fulfilled by year three:
(1) To raise awareness of biblical eldership among the entire congregation.
(2) To educate the congregation through Academy classes and the preaching
    ministry.

(3) To provide an opportunity for the congregation to support a transition to biblical eldership.

Short term goal measures:
(1) The first goal will be successful when the deacons are made aware of the upcoming education process at a Tuesday evening deacons meeting.
(2) The second goal will be successful when at least 75% of all ordained deacons have participated in the six-week curriculum study.
(3) The third goal will be successful when there is agreement among the ordained deacons to engage the key leadership with the concept of biblical eldership.

Mid-term goal measures:
(1) The first goal will be successful when the key ministry leaders at GBC have been made aware of the upcoming education process.
(2) The second goal will be successful when 75% of key GBC leadership, including Sunday School teachers, ministry team leads, and committee chairs, have participated in the six-week curriculum.
(3) The third goal will be successful when there is agreement among the key leadership to engage the congregation with the concept of biblical eldership.

Long term goal measures:
(1) The first goal will be successful when a "fire side chat" has been offered and the congregation learns of the initial ideas of biblical eldership.
(2) The second goal will be successful when the congregation has had the opportunity to attend an Academy class on biblical eldership and a six-week sermon series has been preached on Sunday mornings.
(3) The third goal will be successful when the congregation has an opportunity to support a transition to biblical eldership based on the proposal from the pastors and deacons.
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(1) Ordained Deacons Phase: The necessity of beginning this ministry plan with the involvement of the ordained deacons is two-fold. First, the current "pastor plus deacon" leadership structure at GBC necessitates the incorporation and support of the deacon body before any congregational involvement is attempted. In other words, the pastors would not be wise to present the biblical eldership concept to key leadership or the congregation without deacon support due to the current leadership model. Second, since the topic directly addresses the distinctions between elders and deacons, it makes sense for the ministry plan to initially engage the deacons before moving into congregational awareness.

Deacon awareness: The deacons meet on the second Tuesday of each month. The purpose of this step is to briefly raise some concerns and challenges presented by the

"pastor plus deacon" model of leadership. This step is intended to plant a seed for what would follow in the education stage. The outline of this initial awareness step is below.

_____

"Initiating a Conversation with the Deacons"

What is the leadership structure at Graefenburg Baptist Church? Why do we do things the way we do them? These are questions that do not get asked very often, and as a result, we might not think critically or biblically about the way GBC is governed.

My doctoral project that you have been supporting the least three years has allowed me to study the biblical, historical, and practical issues related to pastors/elders in the church. As part of my project, six of the deacons have already worked through a six-week curriculum and have been introduced to a few of the concerns and challenges presented by our current leadership structure. Through those six-weeks I have been able to fine tune the curriculum. I would now like to offer all deacons the opportunity to work through the material as an entire deacon body.

Let me briefly outline a few of the challenges present in our current system. We currently have what I refer to as a "pastor plus deacon" model of church leadership. That means that the pastors and the deacons both serve in spiritual leadership roles to provide shepherding oversight to the church. So, for example, issues such as church discipline or relationship issues or spiritual concerns in the church would be brought before the deacons before any additional action would take place. Although it is very important for multiple men in leadership to work through these kinds of important decisions together, I am not convinced that we have the most biblical model at GBC.

For example, as most of you know, there are two sets of qualifications for church leadership: elders and deacons. Most of the GBC congregation would probably assume that the three paid pastors are the "elders" of the church and should meet those qualifications. And then they would say that the deacon body should meet the deacon qualifications since, after all, you are deacons. But here is where things get a bit strange. As I attempt to demonstrate in my project, not only are there different qualifications for

elders and deacons, but there are also different roles. What we offer at GBC is a kind of hybrid deacon/elder position where men are being placed into deacon leadership based on one set of qualifications, but are being asked to perform roles in the church that are identified with a completely different set of qualifications. This raises a host of questions, such as:

- If deacons and pastors/elders have different roles and qualifications, why do they meet together to discuss pastor/elder-related issues?

- If deacons and elders are meeting together in deacons meetings to discuss elder-level issues, why do the pastors/elders not have a vote on the issues, especially elder-related spiritual issues?

- If the deacons are also serving functionally as elders, to what degree are they properly fulfilling their roles as servant-minded deacons?

- If the deacons are serving functionally as elders, why is the congregation not considering them through the lens of elder qualifications?

These are but a few of the practical concerns we currently have in our leadership model at GBC. But even more important are the biblical questions of governance – are we reflecting the best biblical model of church leadership as exampled in the NT? I think we would all agree that we want to be as close to the biblical model in our church as possible. Even if we think our current model works fine despite the few initial challenges I just mentioned, the question before us is always the question of biblical faithfulness.

Therefore, I would like to spend six weeks together with all ordained deacons, not just the active deacons, but all men who are ordained and work through the curriculum that the aforementioned six deacons have already experienced. I would also like to suggest that after at least one of the sessions, we dismiss to eat dinner together as a group of pastors and deacons. The Joy Classroom (Room 304) is a comfortable and adequate space for us to learn together during the six weeks. I understand that not every deacon will be able to make the sessions, but I hope as many as possible will be able and interested.

_____

Deacon education and dialogue: The deacon education step will take place in two parts. (1) Leading ordained deacons through the six-week curriculum and (2) if necessary or

desired, reading and discussing Benjamin Merkle's "Why Elders? A Biblical and Practical Guide for Church Members."

In order to determine which ordained deacons will participate, the following form will be distributed one month before the sessions begin and asked to be returned within that month.

_____

Biblical Eldership Curriculum Invitation

   As an ordained deacon at GBC, I would like to invite you to participate in a six-week study I have developed on the topic of biblical eldership. This study will examine the biblical data to help us think clearly about the leadership structure at GBC. My intention is to begin the conversation with the ordained deacons and discover what changes, if any, need to be made to the way GBC is structured. I would love for you to be a part of that conversation.

   We will begin the six-week curriculum on (insert appropriate date) and will meet in Room 304 (the Joy classroom) at (insert appropriate time). Please mark your selection below and return this form at your earliest convenience.

   Many Blessings!
   Pastor Philip

_____ Yes, I will be there!   _____ Sorry, I can't make it.

_____

The six-week curriculum will begin on the established date. To review the curriculum to be offered, see Appendix 3. After the curriculum is finished, the deacons and pastors will discuss whether they would (1) like to continue the education phase by reading through

Benjamin Merkle's "Why Elders: A Biblical and Practical Guide for Church Members" or (2) feel comfortable moving forward to engage the key leadership without the need of additional study.

- If additional study and conversation is desired, the book "Why Elders: A Biblical and Practical Guide for Church Members" by Benjamin Merkle will be ordered for each deacon who would like to read through the material. The book will be read alongside the pastoral staff and discussed. At the completion of the book, the deacons will reassess if they are comfortable engaging the congregation.
- If no additional study is deemed necessary after the curriculum has been studied and discussed, then the pastors and active deacons will prepare to enter the second phase of this ministry plan which is to bring the GBC key leadership into the discussion.

(2) Key Leadership Phase: Instead of moving too quickly to the congregation-at-large, the key leadership of GBC will be made aware of the exploration into biblical eldership among the pastors and deacons. Key leaders will include Sunday School teachers, committee chairs, ministry team leads, and the support staff. The reason for incorporating this phase before the congregational phase is so the leadership can be aware of the pertinent issues concerning eldership in order to address questions from those under their leadership care and to provide support to the process in their various ministry roles. All three pastors and three deacons will attend the sessions. This phase would begin year two of the transition.

Key Leadership Awareness: The process for raising awareness among the key leadership will be similar to the process described above for the deacons. A modified version of the "Initiating a Conversation with the Deacons" script will be delivered to the key leadership on a Sunday morning following the worship service. The meeting will take place in the C.A.R room (Children's Activity Room). The participants will be informed that the pastors and deacons are in agreement to move forward with the eldership transition by including the key leadership in the discussion. At this meeting, a modified version of the invitation to work through the eldership curriculum will be passed out. The participants will fill out the form and return it to a pastor before exiting the meeting. The

goal is to have 75% of GBC's key leadership to agree to work through the eldership curriculum.

Key Leadership Education and Dialogue: The process for educating the key leadership will look almost exactly like the process for educating the deacons. Those who agree to work through the curriculum will spend six weeks in a group setting, one lesson per week. This will take place in the C.A.R in order to ensure plenty of space. At the completion of the six weeks, a final session will be held to engage in dialogue with the leadership. They will be encouraged to ask questions and seek clarification on any issue raised during the previous six weeks. For those who are interested, copies of "Why Elders: A Biblical and Practical Guide for Church Members" will be made available. During the final dialogue session, unity will be sought for moving to the congregational phase.

Key Leadership Evaluation: After the seven sessions are completed with the key leadership, the pastors and deacons will meet once again to discuss the dialogue portion of the session. An assessment of the overall support from the key leadership will be established based on the rubric presented below and a determination for whether the congregational phase should be enacted will be made.

- If the assessment is positive, then the next phase will ensue. See below.
- If the assessment is negative, then individuals who voiced the strongest opposition to the transition will be contacted and additional dialogue will be established to determine if the material was clearly communicated. Ongoing conversation with those opposed will seek to understand their concerns and attempt to learn from their concerns. These conversations will be discussed with the pastors and deacons for additional evaluation.

_____

Key Leadership Evaluation

This form is to be completed by the three pastors and three deacons in attendance after the key leadership has been led through the six-week biblical eldership curriculum. Each

pastor and deacon will give a report of their evaluation and then discuss the next phase of the transition process.

Please circle the appropriate response based on your evaluation of the sessions.
Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Disagree Somewhat, Agree Somewhat, Agree, Strongly Agree

The majority of the participants understood the curriculum.
SD   D   DS   AS   A   SA

The majority of the participants acknowledged the "pastor plus deacon" challenges.
SD   D   DS   AS   A   SA

The majority of the participants seemed open to the possibility of eldership.
SD   D   DS   AS   A   SA

The majority of the participants were confused at the end of the curriculum.
SD   D   DS   AS   A   SA

The participants need more instruction and time before the congregation is approached.
SD   D   DS   AS   A   SA

Although some were unsure, the overall mood of the participants was positive about eldership.
SD   D   DS   AS   A   SA

The participants demonstrated enough enthusiasm to take the next step in transition.
SD   D   DS   AS   A   SA

_____

(3) Congregational Phase: The congregational phase will begin in the second year of transition and will last until at least the third year. This phase will only be enacted after the deacons and key leadership are comfortable moving forward. The primary purpose of this phase is to make the transition to biblical eldership. Due to this being the final phase of the ministry plan, this portion of the plan is multi-faceted and requires several layers of implementation.

Congregational Awareness: The congregation will be made aware of the potential transition to biblical eldership through a "fireside chat." A Fireside Chat is a means by

which new and important issues are brought before the congregation for information sharing without any business taking place. In other words, there are no motions and no voting. The pastors will present ideas and allow the congregation to be fully informed of potential changes that are coming and will be eventually voted on. The Fireside Chat will take place on a Sunday evening at 6:00 pm in the sanctuary. Once again, a slightly modified version of the initial deacon awareness script will be presented to the congregation. All deacons and key leadership who have already been through the curriculum will be encouraged to attend the Fireside Chat.

Congregational Education: The congregation will be educated in biblical eldership through two primary avenues: (1) two semesters of "academy classes" and (2) a sermon series on biblical eldership.

(1) Academy Classes. Academy classes are a part of the GBC discipleship strategy. Classes meet on Wednesdays at 6:30 pm and are divided into four disciplines: Biblical Studies/Theology, Marriage/Family, Church History, and Christian Living. The Academy will be the most suitable place for the congregation to work through the six-week curriculum since most Academy semesters are six weeks in length. The biblical eldership curriculum will be offered twice during a fall and spring semester of Academy. The congregation can determine which semester is best for them to attend.

(2) Sermon Series. An six-week sermon series will be delivered on eldership following the completion of the second semester of Academy. A general outline for the sermon series is below.

_____

The Church and Biblical Eldership Sermon Series

Sermon #1 Title: The Need for Biblical Eldership
Text: Matthew 28:18-20
Big Idea: The commission given to the church is so great that it demands a biblically structured church.

Sermon #2 Title: The Evidence for Biblical Eldership

Text: Acts 14:23

Big Idea: The New Testament provides ample evidence for the establishment of elders in the earliest NT churches.

Sermon #3 Title: The Qualifications for Biblical Eldership

Text: 1 Timothy 3:1-7

Big Idea: The qualifications for eldership describe the character and skills necessary for a church elder.

Sermon #4 Title: The Duties of Biblical Eldership

Text: Acts 10:17-28

Big Idea: Elders provide teaching/preaching, spiritual oversight, and leadership for the local church.

Sermon #5 Title: The Congregation and Biblical Eldership

Text: Hebrews 13:7-9

Big Idea: Eldership is compatible with congregationalism and the congregation is to support, respect, and benefit from the elders.

Sermon #6 Title: The Deacons and Biblical Eldership

Text: 1 Timothy 3:8-13, Acts 6:1-6

Big Idea: The deacons are servant-minded leaders in the church who serve in a different role than the shepherding function of elders.

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Congregational Voting: Following the two semesters of Academy classes and the Sunday morning sermon series, a second Fireside Chat will be offered to present the specifics of the upcoming vote. The vote will be to empower the deacons and pastors to write up constitutional changes to implement biblical eldership. The first vote *will not* be to fully

transition, but rather to provide an open door for the documents to be written and presented. Upon completion of the proposed constitutional changes, they will be presented at the next quarterly business meeting for a final vote of transition and implementation. The process for selecting the first elders from the congregation and all other procedural needs will be presented as part of the motion.

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ABSTRACT

DEVELOPING A MINISTRY PLAN TO IMPLEMENT BIBLICAL
ELDERSHIP AT GRAEFENBURG BAPTIST CHURCH
IN WADDY, KENTUCKY

Philip Andrew Meade, DMin
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2019
Faculty Supervisor: Dr. Stephen J. Wellum

The purpose of this project was to develop a ministry plan to implement

biblical eldership at Graefenburg Baptist Church in Waddy, Kentucky.

Chapter 1 explores the context of ministry at Graefenburg Baptist Church

while determining the need for the stated project, as well as the goals and methodology to

achieve success.

Chapter 2 provides the biblical and theological foundation for plural eldership

in the church today by describing the establishment, qualifications, and duties of

eldership in the earliest New Testament churches.

Chapter 3 examines the theoretical and practical issues with plural eldership in

Baptist churches by demonstrating the presence of plural eldership throughout Baptist

history and its compatibility with a congregational form of government.

Chapter 4 describes the implementation of the ministry project and includes

statistical results as well as interpretation of various results within the project.

Chapter 5 presents an assessment of the project purpose, goals, strengths, and

weaknesses of the project, and concludes with theological and personal reflections.

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