

Church Polity Elder-Led Congregationalism

Introduction

Church polity refers to the way that a church is structured. Most Baptist churches recognize at least three biblical offices: the congregation, pastors, and deacons. However, even among Baptists, there are wide-ranging disagreements about the responsibilities and functions of these offices. Although church structure is not a matter of first importance, it is a matter that has an unavoidable impact on the life of the church. For this reason, church polity has an impact that extends beyond the significance of the doctrine itself.

Resurrection Church employs a church structure referred to as elder-led congregationalism. We believe that this way of ordering the church is closest to the biblical descriptions of church structure in the New Testament. However, we also recognize that other church structures are derived from some of the same texts. The disagreement is not about whether or not the Scripture has something to say about structure. The disagreement is about how to interpret and apply these texts. Churches that differ from us are not, in our assessment, failing to pursue faithfulness and submission to Christ—assuming that they are drawing their convictions about church structure from the Scriptures.

In addition to believing that elder-led congregationalism is the most biblically oriented church structure, we also believe that this polity avoids some of the dangers present in the other polities regularly found in Baptist churches.

On one end of the spectrum, elder-rule churches can tend toward a heavy-handed church leadership that can fail to shepherd the flock or carefully lead the church in decisions and ministries. Instead of equipping the saints for the work of the ministry, the elders do the work of the ministry themselves. Sometimes, the lead pastor can raise up elders unilaterally, creating an elder board of bros who never disagree with the pastor, even when he's wrong.

On the other end of the spectrum, pure congregational churches can tend toward weak leadership and the loss of vision as the church flounders forward by democratic process alone. Instead of identifying as the community of Christ under the careful leadership of pastors, the pure congregational church can tend to imagine church structure in terms of a spiritual democracy. Both the congregation and the pastors are hurt as pastors who fail to please the majority are voted out, the congregation perishes for lack of vision, and eventually, the majority voice (whether seeking to honor Christ or themselves) rules the day.

Of course, the presence of the polity does not necessitate that these failures will occur. Nor does a corrective church polity ensure that failings will never occur. In the end, having the “right” church structure is not the final answer. There is no silver bullet flow-chart that wards off the dishonesty and disunity that can subtly (and sometimes not so subtly) creep into any assembly, regardless of the polity. Yet, elder-led

congregationalism offers a structure with built-in features that help to mitigate some of these problems.

Elder-led congregationalism is a church structure that seeks to steer between these two extremes in order to provide careful shepherding, equipping of the saints for the work of the ministry, and stable leadership—all recognizing Christ as the Chief Shepherd of the church.

Authority and Responsibility

The current cultural consensus is anti-authority. The notion of authority is paired with patriarchy and privilege and is therefore rejected wherever it is found. On some level, the allergy to authority is understandable. Authority has been abused time and again in human history. This abuse is a result of man's rejection of God's authority. When Adam and Eve attempted to dethrone God in the garden, their identity as image-bearers with the capacity and responsibility to exercise dominion over the earth became distorted. In that distortion, a pattern of abdicated authority when it is most needed and abusing authority in the most despicable of ways emerged.

Jesus' ministry centered on repairing the damage resulting from the (attempted) dethroning of God in the garden by declaring the gospel of the kingdom. In this declaration, Jesus presented himself as the true king, but as a different kind of king. Unlike the Gentiles, who ruled authority over one another in reflection of the first Adam, the second Adam pursued greatness, not by domination, but by service.

Beyond modeling authority in terms of sacrifice, Jesus went on to welcome others to share his authority with him by making the Church a kingdom of priests who will (and already do) rule and reign with him. This reign includes certain responsibilities, and there is authority derived from Christ's ultimate authority that allows those responsibilities to be carried out. Yet, that authority is not intended to crush people as obstacles in the way or to manipulate people in order to fulfill a responsibility. Instead, that authority is worked out primarily in terms of self-giving.

Each of the offices of the church (the congregation, elders, and deacons) have responsibilities to carry out. Therefore, they have also been given the authority necessary to carry out those operations. The manner in which they wield the authority must always be infused with sacrifice, service, and humility, recognizing Christ as the ultimate authority and head of the Church.

In many cases, the Scriptures clearly articulate the responsibilities incumbent on each office. Even there, however, a general paradigm rather than specific instructions are given. Perhaps this is because Jesus has given the Holy Spirit to the Church, and his people are intended to rely on the Spirit for aid, wisdom, and direction in matters that lack clarity.

There are also some aspects of church life experienced in the modern church that are never addressed in the Scripture. In these matters not addressed in the Bible, once again, careful application of biblical principles, prayer, conversation, and guidance from the Spirit are required.

Congregation

The first office of the church is the congregation. Without a congregation, there is no church at all. The church bears a responsibility to bear Christ to the world and to proclaim the praises of God in response to the gospel by virtue of her identification as a royal priesthood and holy nation (1 Peter 2:9).

General Responsibility

In Pauline terms, the congregation has the responsibility to receive training and instruction (from pastor-teachers) to do the work of the ministry with the result that the church is strengthened (Eph 4:12). The congregation as a whole should be oriented toward receiving instruction and guidance from the pastors and toward ministering for the good of the Church and the glory of Christ. In the next session, this over-arching responsibility will be considered in terms of church membership.

Clear and Categorical Responsibility

There are four categorical responsibilities incumbent on the congregation that are included in the “work of the ministry.”

First, the congregation has a responsibility to participate in the life of the church, particularly in the gathering of the assembly (Heb 10:25). The responsibility to gather with other believers extends beyond the weekly worship service. Without regularly coming together, the congregation will fail in its responsibility to encourage each other, to pursue love and good works, to declare the gospel, and to prepare to do the work of the ministry.

Second, the congregation has a responsibility to preserve the purity of the church by giving careful attention to receiving new members, exercising formative and corrective church discipline, restoring repentant believers, and removing false teachers (Matt 16:13-20; 18:20; 1 Cor 5:4-5; 2 Cor 2:5-11; Gal 1:6-9; 3:1).

Third, the congregation has the responsibility to participate in the ordinances of baptism and the Lord’s Supper in obedience to Christ. Baptism provides entry into the church, and the Lord’s Supper functions as a community-forming event in the life of the church, obliterating the world’s value system that designates worth based on factors other than the new identity in Jesus.

Fourth, the congregation has the responsibility to respond to the shepherding care and leadership of the elders. If the elders are shepherding faithfully, this leadership will result in spiritual flourishing (2 Sam 23:3-4; Eph 4:12; 1 Pet 5:3; Heb 13:17).

Unclear but Prudent Responsibilities

There are several matters that the New Testament is less-than-clear about regarding the responsibility of the congregation and the life of the church. One reason for this lack of clarity is that the record of the formation of the church is often more descriptive than prescriptive. As such, a process described in the New Testament may simply be

impossible to re-create in the modern era, particularly when that process was carried out by the Apostles.

The most significant matter is the appointment of elders and deacons. Some consider Acts 6:1-7 to be descriptive of the first deacons. The process for appointing deacons was for the assembly to raise up seven men who were then affirmed by the apostles. In this case, an argument can be made that deacons should be recommended by the congregation and affirmed by the elders.

This argument is further strengthened by Paul's comment, following his instructions to Timothy for the appointment of deacons, that Timothy should instruct the people on how they ought to conduct themselves in the household of God, the church (1 Tim 3:14-15). However, it seems that Paul intended to come to appoint both elders and deacons himself (1 Tim 3:14), and only as a backup plan does he instruct the church to appoint elders and deacons under the oversight of Timothy.

An additional text speaks to the appointment of elders, though the appointment of deacons is absent. Paul instructs Titus to appoint elders (ostensibly by himself) as a representative of the Apostle Paul in every town (Titus 5).

Drawing from these examples, the elders are always open to recommendations from members of the congregation, identifying individuals who should be considered for appointment as an elder or a deacon. The elders also actively seek to identify individuals who would qualify for these offices. If these individuals desire to serve as elders or deacons, they participate in training programs. Over time, the elders assess the giftedness and qualifications of these individuals and make a recommendation to the assembly. After a series of steps, the congregation as a whole voices their opinion by a vote that either affirms or denies the recommendation.

Though the matter of appointing elders and deacons is not prescribed in the NT, these measures (articulated specifically in the constitution) seem prudent and wise.

There are other matters that require a church vote either by virtue of Minnesota non-profit statutes (e.g., the sale of property) or by virtue of the apparent wisdom in a congregational decision—even though the matter is not specified in the Bible. For example, we vote on the church budget every year. As other matters arise, the elders will sometimes determine that there is wisdom in making a recommendation to the congregation and allowing them to vote rather than making a decision as elders.

Although there are no specified criteria for these situations, the elders desire to hand matters over to the congregation, especially when those matters are a) especially impactful on the ministry of the church (which is ultimately the responsibility of the congregation), b) matters that don't neatly fall under the category of teaching, shepherding, and oversight, and c) matters that are more debatable (by relegating the final decision to the church, the pastors are encouraged to carefully shepherd rather than simply make a unilateral decision).

Most matters are outlined in the constitution. However, those that are not but that significantly impact the ministry of the church will be a matter of congregational vote while, as a general rule, day-to-day operational decisions are made by the elders.¹

Elders

Terminology

In the New Testament, there are three synonymous terms used for the office of the pastor. These terms are used synonymously throughout the NT, though they each emphasize differing responsibilities of the office. Because the term *elder* is used most frequently, this is the default term that we use when referring to the office (as reflected in the terminology of our polity). However, any of the terms are appropriate to use. When speaking with individuals who are unfamiliar with the terminology of *elder* or mean something else by it (e.g., Mormons), we default to the term *pastor*.

1. Shepherd (ποιμῆν; ποιμήν): this term appears only **1x** in the New Testament with reference to the pastoral office (Eph 4:11). The English translation of this term is *shepherd*. However, the Latin translation of the term is *pastor*. This Latin translation of the word has been preserved in most English translations of Eph 4:11. However, this term also appears in other places referencing Jesus as the Great Shepherd (see esp. Heb 13:20; 1 Pet 2:25). In total, this term appears 18x in the New Testament and is consistently translated *shepherd* with the exception of Eph 4:11.

The Latin translation *pastor* can be used (just as we borrow from Latin for *sacramentum*) and serves as a convenient title given the wide recognition of the position of *pastor* in the United States. However, using the translation *shepherd* can be used interchangeably and can highlight the responsibility associated with the term (shepherding the flock) and the relationship of a pastor to Christ as the Great Shepherd (1 Pet 5:2-4).

2. Overseer (episkopos; ἐπίσκοπος): the term *overseer*, sometimes translated as *bishop*, is recognized as indicating the same office in its shared reference with Shepherd to Jesus Christ, the *Shepherd* and *Overseer* of our souls (1 Pet 2:25) and in its shared reference to the individuals who were appointed as *overseers* with the responsibility to *shepherd* the church of God (Acts 20:28). This term occurs **5x** in the New Testament, most notably at the start of what is often referred to as the “Pastoral Qualifications Lists” in 1 Timothy 3:2 and Titus 1:7.
3. Elder (presbyteros; πρεσβύτερος): the term *elder*² has both a general usage (referring to those advanced in age) and a technical usage (referring to the office

¹ When should the congregation vote? 1) When receiving, dismissing, or disciplining members; 2) In selecting elders and deacons; 3) In anything else that significantly impacts the integrity and viability of the church as a gospel ministry (e.g., the annual budget). Of course, the idea of what “significantly impacts” probably looks different from person to person in this room. One person might consider the layout of the bulletin significant while another person has never taken the time to look at the bulletin.

of an elder). This term appears 20x with reference to the office of an elder of the church.

This terminology regularly appears in the Gospels in connection to the leading elders of the Jews. However, the term appears in the technical sense of an elder of the church in Acts 14:23. A pattern emerges in Acts where the Apostles hand off their role as the leaders of the church to the elders.

This term is positioned as a synonym with both *shepherd* and *overseer* in 1 Pet 5:1 and with *overseer* in the pastoral qualification lists. The roles associated with elder include leading, including in solving problems and appointing deacons (throughout Acts), praying for the sick and anointing with oil (James 5:14), teaching sound doctrine and rebuking those who contradict it (Titus 1:9), and preaching and teaching (1 Tim 5:17).

The Apostles were the early witnesses to the gospel and, therefore, served as the initial leaders of the Church. However, the Apostles were commissioned to take the gospel to the ends of the earth, forming churches along the way. As they carried the mission forward, they appointed elders to lead the assemblies they left behind with instructions that would guide churches as they raised up additional elders.

The Qualifications of Elders

The Apostles gave instructions in their letters that would help churches raise up qualified elders (1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1). These qualifications range from character issues to the competencies to fulfill the responsibilities of the office.

There are three important features of these qualifications that prospective members should understand:

1. It is better to have one elder, ensuring character and competency according to the qualifications, than to have several elders who lack character and competency. The qualifications should not be sacrificed on the altar of quantity.
2. It is our belief that the office of elder is restricted to men. Though this issue is not of first importance, we do believe that this is an important issue. We recognize that many churches take a different position based on their own careful study of the Scriptures and out of a desire to obey the Word.

Though a more exhaustive examination is needed to explain our position, it is notable that there are no examples of women appointed as elders, whereas there are examples of women appointed as deacons.

3. The qualifications for an elder are really no different than either the qualifications for a deacon or the character of Christ that is to be present in the

² The term *priest* shares an etymology with *elder*, from Old English *prēost*, of Germanic origin; related to Dutch *priester*, German *Priester*, based on ecclesiastical Latin *presbyter* 'elder.'

life of every believer. The only noticeable distinction is that elders are also required to be able to teach.

The Responsibilities of Elders

Generally speaking, elders have the responsibility to pay careful attention to the flock of God as overseers as the lead in spiritual counsel, teaching sound doctrine, and preaching the Word (Acts 15:2, 6; 22-23; 20:28; 1 Tim 4:16).

Using shepherding imagery, pastors-elders-overseers are commissioned to *lead* the flock (1 Tim 5:17; Heb 13:17; 1 Pet 5:1-3), *feed* the flock (1 Pet 5:1-2; 1 Tim 4:11, 13; 5:17-18; Titus 1:9), *defend* the flock (Acts 2:28-31), and *tend* the flock (1 Tim 3:4-5; 1 Thess 5:12-13; Jas 5:14).

The Organization of Elders

Ideally, there will be a plurality of elders. Every reference to the office in the NT is in the plural. In other words, the default is for each church to appoint qualified elders whenever possible, following the pattern of the early church.

In this plurality, the elders share equal authority. There is no distinction between the authority of the elders that is discernable in the descriptions in the NT. However, there are distinctions in the responsibilities that an elder carries out depending on his gifting and the needs of the church (e.g., elder who teach and preach, 1 Tim 5:17-18). Not every elder carries out the same responsibilities; however, each elder is responsible for the general shepherding of the church. It is the responsibility of the elders to divide up responsibilities based on gifting and capacity.

In this plurality, there are generally staff (compensated) elders and lay (non-compensated) elders. Lay elders share in the shepherding responsibilities of the church, and they share in equal authority. While staff elders take on greater amounts of tasks and responsibilities, they do not function independently from lay elders.

The Benefits of Elders

There are many benefits to a healthy, qualified plurality of elders outside of the pattern set in the New Testament. Some of these benefits include the avoidance of conflicts of interests that sometimes arise for compensated elders, increased shepherding contact and capacity, added voices in the leading of the church.

Our constitution outlines the particulars of raising up elders and the responsibilities of the office. There is no ratio of staff to non-compensated elders that must be maintained, nor is there a minimum or maximum amount of elders that can serve at a given time. In our view, a ratio of 1 elder to 20 people allows for careful shepherding.³

³ We can't precisely guess what the "average" individual church size was in the days of the Apostles. Given the limitation in house size, I would guess about 60 people per church. Even at this size, multiple elders were to be appointed and the qualifications are described in a way that encourages individuals to pursue eldership (it is a noble thing).

Deacons

In many Baptist churches, deacons function as a plurality of elders, though they are not recognized as such. They often operate as a board, leading the church by providing vision, organizing finances, ministries, teaching, and other items. As such, in many Baptist churches, deacons carry out the responsibilities of elders.

In our view, deacons function to care for the disenfranchised and to operate as the lead servants of the church, seeking to manage everything from hospitality ministries to workdays. While we sometimes communicate that elders oversee the spiritual matters of the church and the deacons oversee the physical matters of the church, the spiritual and physical cannot be neatly separated.

Terminology

The title *deacon* is not really a translation of the Greek word for this office (diakonos; διάκονος). The term is properly translated as *servant*. Sometimes this term is used in a general sense. Other times, especially when connected to a particular church, this term is used in a technical sense, referring to the office of the deacon.

The Qualifications of Deacons

There is only one qualification list for deacons (1 Tim 3:8-13). These qualifications are characteristics that every Christian should strive for, regardless of whether or not they seek to serve in this capacity.

Female Deacons

In our view, both qualified men and women are able to serve as deacons. There are several reasons that we encourage both men and women to pursue service in this office:

1. Deacons do not have the same responsibilities as elders, especially relating to teaching, preaching, and leadership. Whereas the terminology for the office of elder emphasizes responsibilities of oversight, leadership, and shepherding, the terminology for the office of deacon emphasizes responsibilities of service.
2. The qualification list for elders does not have qualifications for women/wives, whereas the qualification list for deacons does have qualifications for women/wives. In the Greek language, there is not a separate word for women and wives—there is only one word, *gynē*; γυνή. Only context can decide which meaning is correct.

The Christian Standard Bible translates the term “wives” but notes in a footnote that “women” is also possible.

Therefore, when the word appears in the deacon qualification list (1 Tim 3:11), a determination has to be made. Given that there is no qualification for wives in the elders’ list, it would be surprising for there to be a qualification for a deacon’s

wife. It is better to understand the word to be referring to women, not to wives.

3. Some translations add the pronoun *their* prior to the word translated *wives*. The addition of this pronoun is misleading because the pronoun is not in any Greek text and gives the false impression that the text says *their wives/women* when the text starts a new sentence with *Women/Wives*. Popular translations like the ESV and KJV insert this pronoun and unnecessarily prejudice church members against female deacons.
4. There is a pattern to the qualification list where male deacons are addressed (1 Tim 3:8-10), then female deacons are addressed (1 Tim 3:11), then male deacons are addressed again (1 Tim 3:12), followed by an address to both male and female deacons (1 Tim 3:13).
5. There is at least one convincing example of a female deacon in the New Testament. In Romans 16:1, Paul commends Phoebe, who is a servant of the church in Cenchreae. There are several important features to note:
 - a. The term translated here as *servant* is the same term transliterated as *deacon* in the qualification lists and other places. The CSB notes that some translate the term in Rom 16:1 in the technical sense, referring to the office of the deacon. Other translations, like the NIV, translate the term *deacon*.
 - b. If a male name preceded the term, there would be no reason to translate the term in the general sense of *servant*. It seems that the only reason it is not translated in the technical sense is because it is referring to a female.
 - c. The guide for determining between the technical use of the term and the general use of them is to detect whether the term is connected to a particular church or if it is connected to the Lord. If the term is connected to the Lord, it is being used in the general sense (e.g., Tychicus is a servant of the Lord; Eph 6:21; Cf. Phil 1:1, Col 1:7) whereas those addressed in Paul's letters occupy the office of deacon (Phil 1:1b).

Phoebe's description as a *servant/deacon* is connected to a local church. Therefore, the term should be considered a technical term, referring to the office of deacon.
6. From the earliest days of the church, females served as deacons. There are multiple references to female deacons in the writings of the early church. Sometimes these writings document the presence of female deacons in the early church. At other times, these writings are the sermons or commentaries on the text in which females are understood to operate in the office of deacon (e.g., Chrysostom on 1 Tim 3).
7. Leading Baptists have always included females in the diaconal office. Notable Baptists who pastored churches that encouraged female appointment to the office include C. H. Spurgeon, John Piper, Mark Dever, and John MacArthur.

Although this precedent should not be the only argument, it does demonstrate that even the most conservative of Baptists (and even leading complementarians) have affirmed female deacons. Their inclusion should make clear that the inclusion of females in this office is not motivated by a feminist movement—women have served in this office long before the feminist movement, and they have been supported in this role by the most anti-feminist of Baptist pastors.

It is our aim to encourage both men and women to grow in spiritual maturity such that they demonstrate both capacity and qualification for this office.

The Responsibility of Deacons

Just as the term *pastor* seems to endure in modern Bible translations, so too does the term *deacon*. Although we might be served by referring to the office of the *servant* (because that is how the early church referred to the office and because this translation indicates the general responsibility of deacons to act as servants of the church), it is unlikely that the term *deacon* will fall out of popular use.

The office of deacon uniquely seeks to lead in serving the church. For that reason, the responsibilities of the deacons regularly shift and morph to match the needs of the church at a particular stage in that church's life. The deacons receive oversight from the elders, who give counsel and guidance to aid the deacons in determining the needs of the church.

The Organization of Deacons

Just as with elders, deacons generally seem to appear as a plurality in the New Testament (e.g., Phil 1:1). However, just as with elders, it is better to have fewer deacons who are qualified than more deacons who are not qualified.

The deacons should be free to organize themselves, giving out responsibility based on gifting and capacity while also working together to ensure that the church is served well.

There are seasons where the deacons will need to meet more regularly and collaborate more closely. However, there are also seasons where the deacons will not need to meet as frequently because of the distinct roles that each deacon takes on (e.g., hospitality, technology, etc.).

The Benefits of Deacons

Deacons benefit the church in various ways, including facility engagement of members in the work of the church, securing provision and care for the unhealthy and disenfranchised, and ensuring the smooth operation of the many items in church life (ranging from ongoing maintenance to hospitality to the administering of the Lord's Supper).

Deacons themselves benefit from this service as they "acquire a good standing for themselves and great boldness in the faith that is in Christ Jesus."

Elder-Led Congregationalism

