



Church Governance/Polity Recommendation

A meeting for Deacons, Pastors and ALT members convened on Monday evening, September 9, 2024 to consider the recommendation that Mt. Vernon make a transition from its current form of governance/polity. The result was an overwhelming majority vote in favor of a leadership structure that reflects the two-office approach affirmed in the Mt. Vernon Constitution's Statement of Faith and in the *Baptist Faith and Message 2000* embraced as Mt. Vernon's official doctrinal statement.

Following this cover sheet and opening summary you will find a series of recommendations for your approval.

Here is a brief bulleted list of the reasons behind this proposal as reviewed with the congregation in the September 22, 2024 business meeting:

- **Reconciling discrepancies in Mount Vernon's current Constitution and Bylaws (December 2020 version) related to church leadership and governance/polity**
- **Returning to the two-office structure indicated in the Statement of Faith and BF&M and eliminating the need for the ALT; restoring the leadership model of elders/overseers and deacons**
- **Defining the biblical titles, qualifications, composition and functions of elders/overseers, and distinguishing between elders/overseers and pastors**
- **Identifying the relationships of pastors to the elders/overseers and the servant role of the deacons in keeping with the New Testament responsibilities**
- **Reaffirming congregational rule as the preferred governing structure of most Baptist churches and in keeping with Mount Vernon's official affirmation of that form of church governance**
- **Other recommendations needed for the implementation of this transition**

A Proposed Recommendation from the
Leadership Teams of Mount Vernon Baptist Church -- *Pastors, Deacons and ALT Members*

Initiative and Reasons for the Proposed Recommendation

Written by David Horner, Interim Senior Pastor

During the early spring of 2024, I was contacted by the Search Committee and Personnel Committee about coming to serve as Interim Senior Pastor at Mount Vernon Baptist. After video calls with the pastors, deacons, search committee members and others, the Lord directed our paths together for this season. Part of the confirmation of that calling was the understanding that I would serve not just as pulpit supply for Sunday preaching duties, but that I would also assume the leadership role as Interim Senior Pastor to oversee the current staff and ministry team.

Soon after arriving, questions and concerns about the current state of the church's governance came to the surface. A bylaw revision team was already in place to try to address the issues. Conversations had been under way for many months about the best way forward. The pastors had reached agreement months ago that Mount Vernon would be best served by transitioning to an elder and deacon ministry structure. However, it was not clear what form that should take. After much discussion and a few meetings with the deacons, the ALT, the pastors and others, the way forward was still not clear.

As a result, as Interim Senior Pastor, I began to take part in some of those conversations and realized that there were widely divergent ideas about what such a move would mean, how it would be implemented, how it would be perceived, what the impact would be on congregational polity, where the pastors would fit, what role the deacons would play, what would happen to the ALT, and many other similar questions.

Therefore, the following proposal was presented for the consideration of those currently in leadership in the positions of pastors, deacons and ALT members. The intent of that proposal was to ask for that group to approve the recommendation I was making, amend it as appropriate or to not approve it and move in a different direction.

At that meeting on Monday night, September 9, all three groups met together and by secret ballot vote overwhelming approved the recommendation presented to you in the attached motion.

The Recommendations

Big Picture: That Mount Vernon Baptist Church transition from its current church polity as documented in The Bylaws (approved December 16, 2020) in order to realign her governance to conform to the language and forms stated in Article IV, Section 1 of its Constitution.

Current polity recognizes three church leadership offices/officers: pastors (Article VI, Section 1), deacons (Article VI, Section 3) and an Administrative Leadership Team (Article VII). However, the Constitution identifies the church as having two offices/officers: pastor/elder and deacons (Article IV, Section 1).

“...We believe that God has established offices of leadership and organization in the local church, consisting of pastor/elder and deacons to lead and serve the body.” (based on, but not exactly reflecting the language of, the *Baptist Faith and Message 2000*).

In the 2020 version of the Bylaws, the Administrative Leadership Team was introduced and given the duties and responsibilities normally designated in scripture to elders/overseers or pastors. This designated group of leaders has served well as the congregation has undergone pastoral changes over the past decade. In the interim periods between senior pastors, the need created by the absence of a senior pastor left much confusion about the lines of authority, the decision-making processes, the reporting structures and the roles of those in various church offices. From our best understanding, the ALT was not intended to be a permanent form of governance but one put in place until new pastoral leadership arrived to help establish the best form of polity/governance for Mount Vernon Baptist Church.

But as the prospects of a pastor search approached, a clear statement describing Mt. Vernon’s governance/polity needed to be in the hands of the Pastor Search Committee. No such clarity has been in place for the past few years so the urgency of addressing the need pressed in upon the congregation and her leaders.

With that as background, here are the recommendations on behalf of the pastors, elders and ALT, we present the following motion for your approval. A special called business meeting will be called for Sunday, October 20, 2024, for the congregation to voice its approval, amendment or denial of the motion.

Motion from the Pastors, Deacons and ALT

On Monday evening, September 9, the Pastors, Deacons and ALT met to consider and then vote on a proposal to introduce a new leadership structure to oversee and serve the congregation of Mt. Vernon Baptist Church. By an overwhelming majority, the following recommendation was approved. The recommendation before you comes to you from those three leadership teams coming together to move the adoption of the following motion.

The Motion: Eight Aspects of the Recommendation

1. That Mount Vernon Baptist Church, a *congregationally governed* church, return to the leadership polity, or governance, stated in its Constitution in the Statement of Faith, and in the most recent version of the Baptist Faith and Message 2000¹; that is, that the church offices would once again be two – elders/pastors and deacons. [NOTE: This would mean the elimination of the ALT introduced in the 2020 version of the Bylaws.]
2. That the offices be defined according to the best understanding of the biblical language used to identify those offices, and the distinctions between elders/pastors and deacons, as well as the distinctions between elders/overseers and pastors. [For details, see the document, *The Case for Elders, provided for your study.*]
3. That the primary duties and responsibilities outlined in Scripture be followed regarding the functions of the biblical offices (six prescribed for elders/overseers and none specifically noted for deacons beyond the basic role of servant leader).
4. That the elders/overseers should consist of no less than five and no more than twelve members, including a) the Senior Pastor, and b) the balance of the group consisting of lay leaders chosen to be ordained and installed as elders from members of the congregation; that means there will be pastors who are not elders and elders who are not pastors. In the absence of a Senior Pastor, the elders may choose to have one of the other pastors fill his position as an elder until a new Senior Pastor begins his tenure. The elder chairman will be chosen only from among the lay elders.
5. That the Senior Pastor reports to the elders/overseers and the pastoral staff reports to the Senior Pastor; that the elders are accountable to the congregation.
6. That the Bylaws be amended to formalize the new polity/governance and that a new section in the Operations Manual address the details of the selection process for elders/pastors and deacons and other procedural details not explained in the broader description in the Bylaws.
7. That the official name of this office become “elders” instead of “elders/overseers.”

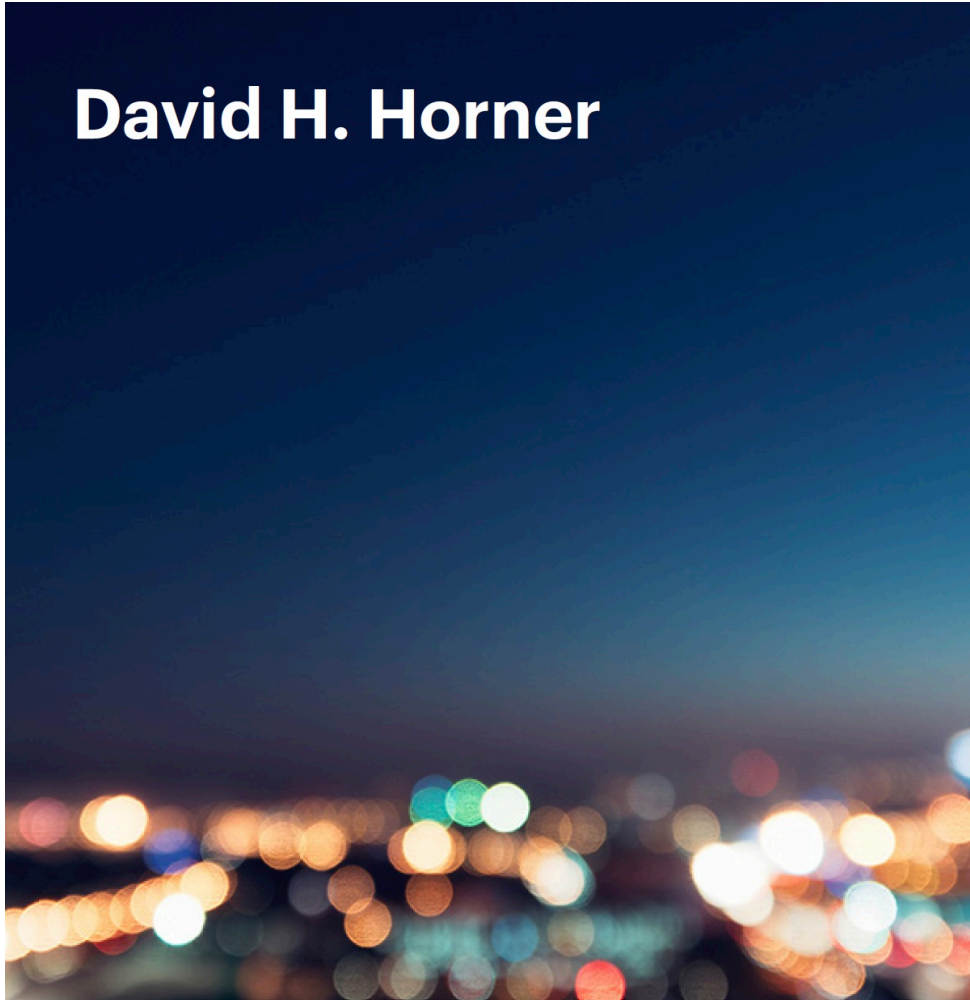
Amendment to the original recommendation (not voted on at the September 9 meeting but offered as a friendly point of operational clarification)

8. That the elders establish standing committees, such as personnel and finance, to assist them and the congregation in fulfilling ministry needs; establish *ad hoc* committees when necessary (such as pastoral search committees for both full-time and interim senior pastors, building committees, bylaws committees, etc.); and encourage the formation of such committees as would be helpful in advancing the work of the pastors and other ministry leaders.

¹ The original version of the BF&M 2000 used the language, “Its scriptural offices are *pastors* and deacons.” That wording was amended in June 2023 at the Southern Baptist Convention in New Orleans to read, “Its two scriptural offices are that of *pastor/elder/overseer* and deacon. While both men and women are gifted for service in the church, the office of pastor/elder/overseer is limited to men as qualified by Scripture.”

More information about the actual implementation of this approach can be found in a twelve-page booklet entitled *The Case for Elders*. That document is attached to this packet for your convenience. Using a question/answer format, the booklet provides information about the implementation of this approach to polity/governance at Providence Baptist Church in Raleigh, NC beginning in 1984. Many adjustments have been made over the years to settle on the best possible format within this ministry leadership approach. It is my desire to share these best practices in order to make the transitions work smoothly here at Mount Vernon.

David H. Horner



**THE CASE
FOR
ELDERS**

*The Case for Elders: Most Frequently Asked Questions
About Elder/Deacon Ministry Structure*

David H. Horner
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Throughout church history, there have been many forms of government practiced by the church. Most of them fall into three main categories based primarily on how they define the various biblical leadership roles and offices. They are *episcopal*, *presbyterian* and *congregational* forms of church polity. In an episcopal form of government, there is a bishop, or an *episkopos*, outside the local congregation who exercises authority over the churches under his charge. In a presbyterian form of government, there is a presbytery composed of leaders from various congregations who exercise authority over the churches under their charge, and within each church there is a group identified as elders, or *presbuteroi*, who make up the governing body (or session) of the local church under the supervision of the presbytery. Then there is a congregational form of government which recognizes no human authority outside the local congregation and operates as a democratic organization and determines its own leadership structure usually identifying its leaders as either pastors, elders or deacons.

Providence functions within the framework of a congregational polity and identifies the two primary offices of the church as elders and deacons. We also recognize and support the ministry of those who are called pastors. With as much variety as there is in the designation of the various forms of church governments, the following question and answer format is intended to explain why we have followed the course we have at Providence. Although this is not intended to answer all the possible questions you might have, it should serve to give you a basic understanding of the biblical reasons behind our decisions to do what we do. Should you find that other explanations of the biblical texts make more sense than these, we are not offended!

We do believe that what we have chosen to do makes the most sense based on the pertinent biblical texts, but we also know that anyone who insists that there is only one legitimate form of church government cuts with a finer knife than we find justified by the biblical evidence. In some cases, it may be true that the right form does not guarantee effective spiritual leadership because the character of those in office does not match God's design. In other words, their form may be right but their hearts are not! Conversely, there may be others who have missed the best

forms but have succeeded in finding the right kind of people and they are enjoying wonderful effectiveness in their church leadership. What a joy it can be when we follow both God's basic design and our leaders have God's basic leadership qualities! Here are some of the most frequently asked questions we have run into over the years related to the matter of the biblical structure of the body of Christ.

1. What does the Bible say about the respective roles of elders and deacons?

People are often confused by the different words used in the New Testament to talk about the biblical offices. Most of the time, the biblical offices are recognized to be *elders* and *deacons*. However, we are not always clear about what those words really mean, who they refer to and what those called to these leadership offices are supposed to do. That perhaps helps explain why there are at least three distinctive forms of church government in practice.

Elders/Overseers and Pastors. Much of the confusion arises over the words used for the first of these offices. Some of that can be attributed to the fact that Paul and Luke use two distinct words to refer to the same position or office. These words are often translated into English as “elder” and “overseer/bishop.” In Acts 20:17, we read that Paul called together the *elders* [*presbuteroi*] of the church in Ephesus and delivered a farewell charge to them. As a part of that charge in Acts 20:28 Paul challenges these elders to “Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you *overseers*...” [*episkopoi*—translated as either overseers or bishops]. So we find these leaders called “elders” in 20:17 and then “bishops, or overseers” in 20:28. Both words are used to identify the same group. That has confused many who prefer to separate those two offices and give them distinct functions. Others become frustrated because they do not like having to deal with two names for the same group of leaders!

If that were not confusing enough, Paul then goes on in Acts 20:28 to exhort these elders/bishops (overseers) to fulfill their calling by “shepherding [*poimaino*, shepherd or pastor] the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.” The verb translated here as “shepherd” is translated elsewhere as “pastor, tend, feed” as was the case when Jesus told Peter in John 21:16 to “feed My sheep.” The noun form of the word is found in Ephesians 4:11 where Paul identifies four groups of leaders God gives to the body of Christ: “And he gave some as *apostles*, and some as *prophets*, and some as *evangelists*, and some as *pastors* [*poimēn*] and *teachers*.”

The question that brings to the table is whether elders/bishops (overseers) and pastors all refer to the same office according to the New Testament. For many years I had concluded that the three words were interchangeable when used to identify this biblical office. However, although I still think that may be a possibility, the text does not support that conclusion as decisively as I originally thought. I will say more about that to answer the question that follows.²

For the time being, what we can see is that the words “elders” and “bishops” (overseers) refer to one specific office recognized by the church and described in the Scriptures. Regarding the biblical understanding of this one office referred to by two names, the Scriptures offer instruction and information in the following areas:

- The ordaining of elders (Titus 1:5 and Acts 14:23)
- The qualifications of elders (1 Timothy 3:1–7 and Titus 1:5–9)
- The duties of elders (1 Peter 5:2–3; Acts 20:20; 1 Timothy 3:2,5, 5:17; Titus 1:9,11; Ephesians 4:12; and James 5:14–15)

The Biblical responsibilities and duties outlined for the Elders are:

- To shepherd the flock of God (1 Peter 5:2; Acts 20:20; 1 Timothy 3:5)
- To be an example to the flock, not lording it over those allotted to their charge (1 Peter 5:3)

² Adding to the confusion in the current climate among Southern Baptists, framers of the Baptist Faith and Message recently made an editorial shift in the vocabulary used to describe the two biblical offices recognized in the churches. The 1925 BF&M said, “Its Scriptural officers are bishops, or elders, and deacons” (Article XII. The Gospel Church). That wording expressed similar language used in the 1883 New Hampshire Confession of Faith which said, “Its only scriptural officers are bishops or pastors and deacons” (Articles XIII, Of a Gospel Church). That version was based on the 1689 London Confession of Faith which used the language, “Its Scriptural offices are bishops, or elders, and deacons.”

But then in an abrupt divergence, the 1963 version of the BF&M chose to omit any reference to bishops and elders as officers and decided to refer to the two leadership offices by saying that the church’s “Scriptural officers are pastors and deacons.” So prior to 1963, the officers were called by various combinations of the words “bishops, elders and pastors.” The reason for the shift to the single word “pastors” does not appear justified given the biblical preponderance of all three words but most frequently the former two, bishops and elders.

Constant throughout all these documents is the use of the word “deacon” as the name for one of the offices but without any explanation as to why that office eventually came to assume the biblical responsibilities expected of the other office (elder/bishop/or pastor). The BF&M 2000 once again chose to retain the wording of BF&M 1963 to describe the scriptural officers as “pastors and deacons.” But this article was amended at the Southern Baptist Convention in New Orleans in 2023 to use the broader language “pastor/elder/overseer and deacon” as it returned to some of the earlier terminology from the London Confession of Faith (1689), the New Hampshire Confession of Faith (1883) and the original BF&M (1925).

- To teach and exhort, thereby equipping the flock for ministry (1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:9; Ephesians 4:12)
- To refute those who contradict truth (Titus 1:9,11)
- To manage the Church in their role as overseers (1 Timothy 3:5, 5:17)
- To pray for the sick (James 5:14-15)
- Various other references to elders (Acts 11:30, 15:4,6,23, 16:4 and 1 Timothy 4:14)

Plurality of Leaders. In addition to these specific points regarding elders/bishops (overseers), it is helpful also to note that throughout the biblical usage of the words relating to this office, the words are always in the plural. The Bible does not speak of any church with only one individual, whether a pastor, bishop or elder, charged with exclusive responsibility for the flock. Instead, they were appointed to serve collectively as a team to function in leadership over the body of believers committed to their care.

Deacons. Well, what about deacons? Deacons are also called upon to serve the body of Christ, but their responsibilities are not specifically defined in the Scriptures other than the functional role of servant. Historically and traditionally, they have been identified with the group of seven men in Acts 6 who were chosen from among the body to function as its servants because they were full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom. Therefore they were deemed to be worthy servants to assist the apostles and the church in making sure that the Hellenistic Jewish widows were not overlooked in the daily distribution of food. However in Acts 6 these men are not called deacons, and the church leaders were the apostles (not elders, bishops, or pastors), but the servant role they assumed has traditionally become a model for the office of the deacons. Essentially, they are set apart by the church to serve in whatever capacity is needed to enable the elders to fulfill their responsibilities to minister to the overall spiritual needs of the congregation. Like the elders, they are to be men of sound spiritual character as noted in the qualifications set forth in 1 Timothy 3:8–13. For all the points of discussion about the specific functions and names for the office of elder/bishop, the office of deacon stands apart as a fairly straight-forward role within the church, the role of servant. As you will see later on, many churches have expanded the role of deacon to take over the role of

elder and diminished or eliminated the role of elder, replacing it either with a ruling pastor or supplanting it with ruling deacons.

2. *What is the relationship between pastors and elders? Are they the same?*

As we have already noted, there seems to be some confusion about this question. Although many have attempted to identify pastors as the elders/overseers of the church, there seems to be no biblical support to justify such an effort. A careful study of the relevant texts (those referring to pastors as well as those referring to elders) calls into question whether or not all elders are called to the specific function of pastor/teacher as mentioned in Ephesians 4:11.³ Although they are expected to shepherd the flock in their role as overseer (Acts 20:28), it is not certain that the requirement that they are “apt to teach” qualifies them with the necessary spiritual gifts of teaching, exhortation, preaching or other gifts usually associated with the calling to be a pastor/teacher of the flock. Similarly, the identification of pastors/teachers as those who are called to equip the saints for the work of ministry in Ephesians 4:11 does not necessarily mean that those who have been uniquely gifted for that ministry must be identified as the exact equivalent of those who serve as elders/overseers, and certainly not to be understood as referring to exactly the same calling.

In our application of the biblical principles and instruction on this subject, we have chosen to bring together what we believe to be the best of both worlds. *We have pastors who are not elders and elders who are not pastors.* Because we have many pastors on our staff, we designate one of them to be the senior pastor who provides organizational accountability, ministry vision and gives consistent directional leadership to the overall ministry. The other pastors are responsible to the senior pastor who gives oversight to their ministries. Therefore, the senior pastor represents the entire pastoral staff team by serving in the office of elder. In the organizational structure here at Providence, he is the only member of the pastoral staff team who functions in that capacity.⁴

³ The only time the Greek word, *poimēn*, is translated as “pastor” is in Ephesians 4:11. The other eighteen appearances of the word it is simply translated as “shepherd.” The verbal form, *poimainō*, is never translated as “to pastor” but as “to feed, tend, rule.”

⁴ A case can be made for a provisional position at which point one of the other pastors may be designated by the elders to serve as an interim elder in the absence of the senior pastor. In other words, should there be a vacancy in the senior pastor position, rather than have no pastoral presence among the elders, the elders may designate one of the other staff pastors to join the serving elders until a new senior pastor comes on board. Another option could be for an interim senior pastor, should there be one, to be designated by the elders to serve as an interim elder.

The senior pastor serves well by providing the church with *directional* leadership. The other elders serve well by providing the church with *decision-making* leadership. While the senior pastor helps give shape to the ministry direction of the church through faithful teaching and application of biblical truths and principles, the elders offer accountability as they make decisions to either affirm, amend or decline the various components of the ministry direction recommended by the senior pastor.

When the elders meet, the senior pastor is frequently joined by other pastors who play an integral part by participating in the meetings but not in an official voting capacity. By informing and advising the elders on ministry-related issues, the pastors offer their unique insights and perspectives to the discussions and deliberations and contribute to the process by which wise, informed decisions are made.

By having elders who are not pastors, a special depth and breadth strengthen this crucial ministry team. Although we make every effort to downplay the distinction between those called *lay leaders* and *pastors by vocation*, we have found that having elders composed primarily of lay leaders has brought a wealth of wisdom and experience to the spiritual leadership of the church. Similarly by having the senior pastor serve as an elder, they benefit from his wealth of biblical/theological study and ministry experience and training giving much needed depth to the spiritual leadership of the church.

When the pastors and elders share the common vision and values of the overall ministry, there can be a strong, unified leadership team as each group fulfills its calling and complements and supports the ministry of the other.

3. *Are there really different functions for elders and deacons, or is the whole issue simply a question of semantics?*

Elders are called to lead the flock and serve as overseers of the ministry of the church. Deacons by the very nature of their position are called to support the leadership of the elders by assuming various aspects of the workload. As a result, elders are then enabled to direct their attention more intently on the priorities set for them in the Scriptures.

The elders are given responsibility in six specific areas (see pages 9-10 and 17 of this booklet) for watching over and guarding the flock as those who will be called upon by God to answer for those entrusted to their care (Hebrews 13:17). The deacons, according to the Scriptures, are never

assigned any specific oversight or decision-making duties other than serving generally to meet whatever needs the church requests of them. Therefore, a clear distinction is made in the Scriptures in the ministry of these two offices.

4. What are the obvious advantages to a church in making the change from deacon-led government to elder-led government? In other words, why make any change?

The first and most obvious answer to this question is that we return to the apparent structure of the New Testament church as we see it described in the Scriptures. Both in terminology and function, this change will line up more closely with what God's Word says plainly. Secondly, it alleviates a tremendous burden often placed on deacons and pastors. The deacons are forced by necessity into the unenviable position of serving a dual role performing the duties of both offices, or the pastor(s) faces the hardships that come from trying to fulfill both directional and decision-making leadership roles.

Thirdly, the plurality of elders provides a check and balance, serving as a safeguard against the tendency of any one individual, or leader, to assume an autocratic role lording his position over the people (1 Peter 5:3). When the elders function as they should, they will operate as one unit, having sought together the heart and mind of God on every issue they consider. Since they normally operate on a consensus basis for their decision-making, no one elder can dominate the life and ministry of a church by an assertive, intimidating personality or persuasively manipulative leadership style. The church is, therefore, protected from unsound leadership by selecting as its elders only those men of God who meet the biblical qualifications and who will act responsibly in their respective roles of leadership.

5. Will this structure change the church from congregational government and establish a government in which the elders "rule" the church?

This is perhaps one of the most frequently asked questions concerning the elder/deacon structure. The answer is very simply this: *No! The church will still function within the structure of congregational government!*

How is that possible? An elder-*led* form of church government and elder *rule* are not the same thing. Elder rule has many advocates among those who have structured their ministries that way but having elders does not force a church to abandon congregational polity. To assume that an elder-led church ceases to be congregational in polity would make it necessary to assume that deacon-led churches, or pastor-led churches are no longer congregational in polity either. The elders are charged with the responsibility for leading the congregation, but the congregation still has the responsibility to hold the elders accountable for their leadership.

A church does not need to be either purely representative in government or purely democratic. A middle ground can provide a way where there is responsible leadership from the elders and the opportunity for the voice of the congregation to be heard. Issues of significant impact on the life of the church should always be brought to the congregation for endorsement or veto by means of congregational vote.

However, a fine line must be observed between the submission of the members to their leaders (Hebrews 13:17) and the active role all members should take in advocating for and supporting a course of ministry consistent with their understanding of God's Word. Our desire is to surrender neither of these in governing the affairs of the church.⁵

6. *Isn't it unusual for a Baptist church to make this kind of change?*

First of all, that is not the right question to be asking. The identity of a church as Baptist must be a distant second to the church's identity as biblical. Denominational distinctives must never take precedence over what the Bible teaches. Where the two line up, great; where they do not, the biblical course must always be taken. Opponents to an elder-led approach to the government of a local congregation frequently identify the word elders with a presbyterian form of government. Therefore, they conclude that embracing elder leadership abandons Baptist polity.

However, on the matter of elder leadership in the church, there is no divergence from historical Baptist polity at all. As a matter of fact, until recent church history, Baptists have had the kind of

⁵ Although congregationally-led churches theoretically exist, the proper biblical model is to select biblically qualified leaders who are selected by the congregation to give leadership to the ministry, as we have already noted. But the congregation still retains its responsibility to rule or govern. John Hammett explained it succinctly when he wrote: "Congregationalism allows for *leadership* by pastors, elders and/or deacons, even strong leadership and a measure of delegated authority. It does not allow *government* by leaders. Congregationalism is government by the congregation. Baptists have supported congregationalism, because they have thought it the most scriptural position." John S. Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches: A Contemporary Ecclesiology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2005), 146.

structure described here. Edwin Dargan,⁶ professor of homiletics and ecclesiology at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville at the turn of the 20th century, wrote the following:

“Deacons’ ministries in modern churches tend to encroach upon and absorb that of the eldership...It is greatly to be regretted that there is any decline in the use of so venerable and scriptural a designation of the New Testament office, and a revival of its usage is greatly to be desired (p. 106).”

“It may be said that the plurality of elders in our earlier churches was a more scriptural order than that of today, and our churches would perhaps do well to reset this ancient landmark (p. 107).”

“Our churches today have discarded the plurality of elders. It is our custom now, even in very large churches, to have only one active pastor, or elder, while it seems clear that in the New Testament churches, certainly the larger ones, there were several or even many elders (p. 115).”

In 1859 at New Park Street Chapel, a Baptist church in London, through the course of his preaching ministry, Charles Spurgeon expounded many of the passages relating to elders. As a result, the church soon implemented a plan to have elders and deacons:

“In apostolic times, they had both deacons and elders; but somehow, the church has departed from this early custom. We have one preaching elder – that is, the pastor – and he is expected to perform all the duties of the eldership.”⁷

His congregation did what many churches may still be trying to do. Spurgeon said, “I did not force the question upon them; I only showed them that it was Scriptural; and then, of course, they wanted to carry it into effect.”

⁶ Edwin Dargan, *Ecclesiology: A Study of the Churches* (Louisville: Chas. T. Dearing, 1897).

⁷ Charles Spurgeon, *C. H. Spurgeon Autobiography, Volume 2: The Full Harvest, 1860–1892* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1973, repr. 1983), pp. 74–75.

Having heard from Dargan, a Southern Baptist and Spurgeon, a British Baptist, we will conclude this question by quoting Earl Radmacher,⁸ a Conservative Baptist and past president of Western Conservative Baptist Seminary in Portland, Oregon:

“The context of elders, in my past experience, has been Presbyterianism. Consequently, when I would hear someone refer to his church leaders as elders, I would automatically think of church government that is alien to that which is Baptist. I confess that I assumed this without every doing a careful historical study of the early nomenclature of Baptist leadership (which used the term elders), or worse yet, without every reckoning with the fact of the predominance in the Scripture of the use of ‘elder’ as a title of church leaders (p. 1).”

To summarize, there is absolutely nothing “unbaptist” about having elders. As a matter of historical fact, it is a return not only to a more biblical designation but to one that is more in line with the historical roots of many different kinds of Baptists.

7. What safeguards have been established to prevent the domination of church affairs by a small group who may in later years deviate from the intentions of her biblical principles and functional bylaws?

The essential success of the move to an elder/deacon structure depends upon the selection of spiritually qualified men of God who meet the qualifications outlined in His Word. That is the most important safeguard there can be. Secondly, the qualifications must be reviewed by not only the congregation in their nomination and vote, but by the elders currently serving to ensure that each potential elder is examined as the Bible says he must be.

Thirdly, only the pastor serving as elder should remain in his position as elder more than the constitutionally prescribed term of office. He should remain as an elder as long as he is called by the body to serve in his capacity as pastor. Other elders are asked to serve four-year terms, after which they become ineligible for service for a period of at least one year before they can be re-nominated to serve again. Fourthly, they must still function within the context of congregational government in order to provide continued accountability.

⁸ Earl Radmacher, *The Question of Elders* (Portland, Oregon: Western Baptist Press, 1977).

8. *What effect will this change have on the ministry of the deacons?*

In a word, the effect will be radical!

The deacons will be freed from all of their workload that pertains to the elders' duties, which currently consumes the majority of their time. The biblical responsibilities outlined for the elders, repeating here what was already noted earlier (pages 9-10), include the following:

- To shepherd the flock of God (1 Peter 5:2; Acts 20:20; 1 Timothy 3:5)
- To be an example to the flock, not lording it over those allotted to their charge (1 Peter 5:3)
- To teach and exhort, thereby equipping the flock for ministry (1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:9; Ephesians 4:12)
- To refute those who contradict truth (Titus 1:9–11)
- To manage the Church in their role as overseers (1 Timothy 3:5; 5:17)
- To pray for the sick (James 5:14–15)

Deacons are not given specific responsibilities and duties in the Scriptures but are described as a valuable and necessary resource to be called upon as needed for help and counsel by the Church. They are to be servant leaders responsible for serving the Church through various kinds of shepherding ministries (counseling inquirers after worship services, interviewing new members, serving the Lord's Supper, providing leadership for benevolence ministries, etc.). Unlike the elders, the deacon role does not involve any governing, managing or decision-making duties.

Concluding Thoughts on Church Governance

In summary, let me turn again to Earl Radmacher for a final assessment of this subject:

“Regularly the Scriptures give the church a responsibility together with commensurate authority for conducting their business, i.e. choosing officers (Acts 6:3,5; 14:23), exercising discipline of its members (Matthew 18:15–17; 1 Corinthians 5:4–5,13; 2 Thessalonians 3:6,14–15), sending missionaries (Acts 13:2–3), etc. This does not mean that these churches may not delegate the managing of much or most of their daily activities to those elders whom they have chosen to rule over them, but it does mean that the congregation never relinquishes ultimate authority. And if it should happen that the elders as a group act irresponsibly, the congregation, in assembly, would need to bring them to account.

“At this point, therefore, it may be well to carefully distinguish between congregational government and congregational authority. The congregation has the authority to conduct all of its business in session, as it chooses; but this would make meaningless the choosing of elders and deacons. Obviously, the special qualifications required by Scripture for these offices presume special spheres of leadership. Therefore, the congregation must be careful not to destroy their own efficiency and effectiveness by becoming immersed in the managing or governing for which they have elected spiritually-qualified leaders, and the leaders must be careful not to usurp authority for themselves which rightfully belongs to the congregation as a whole. Their governing is by guiding, not by directives. I believe that this balance can be preserved when the leaders lead by love, teach by example, and when the congregation exercises proper submission to those whom they have chosen in submission to the Word of God and the Spirit of God. Surely the balance is portrayed in Hebrews 13:7 and 17. May God help us to find it in practice.”⁹

It is likely that some may question your church’s decision to adopt an elder/deacon structure. However, it is quite clear that biblically, historically, logically, and practically such a structure will be profitable for enabling the body of Christ to fulfill its ministry effectively and efficiently for the privilege of functioning under His authority and serving together in His Name.

⁹ Earl Radmacher, “What is the nature of leadership? A Series on the Question of Elders: Part 3,” www.helpmewithbiblestudy.org/11Church/OrgQuestionOfElders_Radmacher.3.aspx#sthash.bymry8g3.dpbs