

An Historical Study Of Baptist Elders

I Peter 5:1-4

(Note: The following is a transcript from a sermon entitled, *The Case For Elders*, preached by Paul Burleson at Trinity Baptist Church in Norman, Oklahoma. Trinity is a church affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention utilizing eldership. This message is used with Pastor Burleson's permission.)

Now, I want to give you the Baptist background for elders. One of the biggest accusation against some of us who understand this and function in this way as churches, is that we're not Baptist because we do. Let me make several statements on this thing of Baptist background for elders. First, I want to make this statement: Baptist have always had elders. Here is a piece of paper xeroxed out of a book written by Dr. Leon MacBeth called a source book for Baptist heritage. These are the Baptist of 1608. Listen to it now, "We hold that the government of the churches uniform and that the presbytery or the ministry consist of elders, pastor/teachers and deacons. We hold that all the elders of the church are pastors." Now, that's 1608. Dr. Charles Deweiss, who is the Director of the Historical Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention. And, Dr. Deweiss was one of the men that we met with last Monday. In this article, Baptist Elders in America in the 1700's, a hundred years after that statement, listen to what Dr. Deweiss writes, "the office of elders is to assist the ministers in maintaining such rules of order in government as Christ has established in His church, so much is implied by their titles of elders, rulers and so on. Their qualifications are the same as pastors, except aptness to teach and so on. Their work is none other than the part of the ministerial office." In other words, in 1700's pastors were called elders and were recognized to be plural in number in every church.

Here's an interesting article, let me tell you who the fellow is, his name is William Bulletin Johnson. What a name. He was the first President of the Southern Baptist Convention in 1846. The Convention was formed in 1845. He was the first elected president in 1846. Now listen to what Dr. Johnson says, "Remember them that have the authority over you, who have spoken unto you the Word of God, whose faith follow, considering the end of their way of life, Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and so on and so forth", and he gives Hebrews 13. Now, listen to this: "These rulers are designated by various titles in connection with duties which they are to perform in the church. The messengers from Antioch were received of the church and of the apostles and the elders at Jerusalem. From Miletus, Paul sent to Ephesus, and called the elders of the church." and he goes through several other passages. Now he concludes his study with this, "In review of these scriptures we have these points clearly made. One, that over each church in the New Testament era a plurality of elders was ordained who were designated by the terms elders, bishop, overseer, pastor with the authority of the government of the flock of God." Second, this authority involved no legislative power but was ministerial and executive and in it's exercise the rulers were not to lord it over, but to be an example to lead the flock in the performance of ministry. Third, that the duties of these rulers consisted in taking heed generally to themselves and to the flock, and to watch for their souls. Fourth, while all were elders, some labored in word and doctrine and in the preaching to the people. Fifth, that great responsibility rested upon these elders, for they watched for the souls of their flock. Sixth, these elders were all equal in rank and authority, no one having a preeminence over the rest. This satisfactorily appears, in fact, from the same qualifications that were required of all. Seven, these elders, pastors, bishops, overseers were made so by the Holy Spirit, recognized by the congregation and charged by them. Eight, that the members of the flock were required to follow, imitate the faith of the elders.

Now, listen to this, it is of particular attention that each church had a plurality of elders and although there was a difference in their respective departments of service there was perfect equality among them. Now, that's the first president of the Southern Baptist Convention. Who, by the way, had elders in his church as did every church that formed...in the newly formed Southern Baptist Convention. I want to share a word from Dr. Dragen. It's not dragon, it's Dragen. Probably the greatest theologian Southern Baptist had at

Southern Seminary writing in 1897. Now, listen to what he says, "As to the officers of the churches there are some items of interest among the earlier Baptist churches of our country, we find these officers: pastors, teachers, elders and deacons. As to the office of deacon, little need be said as it has substantially the same in all of Baptist history. Except, now notice this, that in it's modern tendency has been to encroach upon and even to absorb that of the elders. As to the eldership, we may note that the title was always inclusive of every pastor until a recent date. It is in our day....in our day it has almost disappeared as a title in ministry, though in some quarters the preacher is still call by the sanction, scriptural title of elder. It is greatly to be regretted that there is a decline in the use of so venerable and so scriptural a designation and a revival of it's usage is greatly to be desired. Now this is our greatest theologian at the turn of the century, Dr. Dragen. His library is in the Southern Seminary.

Now, having said that, I want to read you a portion of a paper that was given me Monday by one of our present day writers in Southern Baptist life. This fellow is the leadership consultant for Preaching and Worship, Pastoral Leadership in Administration Department of the Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention. Listen to this, "One of the most frequently discussed and potentially divisive topics currently sweeping our denomination has to do with the organization, leadership of the local church, within that debate perhaps the most dominate issue is the elder leadership. This Presbyterian form of church government is being promoted by several prominent non-Southern Baptist evangelical pastors such as John MacArthur. Many new churches...new church starts...in Southern Baptist life, particularly in California have adopted this form of government. This is taking place despite the fact that elder rule is alien to traditional Southern Baptist polity; from our earliest documents and so on and so forth, it has not be found. The purpose of this article right here, is to explore the fundamental question of what is an elder, what is elder leadership, and so on and so forth. We took this in hand, shared our material, and they gave us their commitment that this would not be published because it is erroneous. It is erroneous. You see this thing of elders is both biblical in it's basis and Baptist in it's background.

Now, somebody might ask the question, well what happened to us for crying out loud? It's a good question. What happened to us? Let me feed a little more ammunition to the understanding of the historical perspective. Did you know that in every Baptist Confession of Faith all the way back to England, all the way up to Southern Baptist Confession of Faith of 1923, it always refer to elder. Until 1963, the Baptist Faith and Message - 1963. The '63 Statement of Faith is the first one where the word elder is dropped. And, it's the first one where the phrase democratic...in fact, let me quote for you, "Operating through democratic procedures." was written into the Statement of Faith. What happened? Where have we come to the place... we don't understand that it's biblical and we don't even understand that it's Baptist.

What happened to us? Can I give you my opinion? I think several things happened; for instance I think the expansion west in the early 1800's caused a decline of understanding of church government. When American started moving from the east coast to west coast groups of elders didn't move. Usually, it was one elder leaving and going west with his family. He'd get to a little town and he would grow a little church. And, of course he was an elder, a pastor, a bishop. So he would teach the word. He was the parson. The number one person of the community. That's where the word parson comes from. But, he wasn't just in this community, he would move to this community, he would move to this....in other words, he was a circuit riding minister. And, unfortunately while circuit riding ministry was an assist to little towns and little churches as they moved west it did cause us to lose the understanding of a plurality of leaders in a local congregation. Then second, was the rise of landmarkism. Now, if you're not familiar with what landmarkism is...do some research on it. But, landmarkism gave five points that make a New Testament church. And, one of them was democratic rule with no elder rule. Landmarkism has greatly influenced Southern Baptist life. Third, was the rise of the Campbelites. That's what Baptist called them early on, we now call them the Church of Christ. You see the Church of Christ used the word elder almost exclusive. And so early on, when...as Baptist said, the Campbelites became a group and begin to grow; they used the word elder exclusively. Baptist threw it out and chose the word pastor when it's only used one time in the New Testament as a noun.

We Baptist are funny critters. Somebody makes too much of something and we throw out the baby with the bath water. Somebody misinterprets something and we'll have nothing to do with the truth, because

somebody else has misinterpreted. And, so the Assemblies of God interpret the fullness of the Spirit in a particularly Pentecostal way and we Baptist say, that's not what it means to be filled with the Spirit and since they've misinterpreted we just won't talk about it. Oh, that's terrible. Because the Bible says, "Be not drunk with wine, but be filled with the Spirit." We'd be a lot better off if we'd be more concerned with being filled with the Spirit than we are those who get drunk with wine. The fact is you don't have to make a choice, be concerned with both. If it's sin against God to be drunk with wine, it is a sin against God to not be filled the Spirit. And, when someone misinterprets we throw out the baby with the bath water. So, when the Campbelites came into existence, we now call them the Church of Christ. And, I call them the Church of Christ. They don't enjoy being called Campbelites, and I respect their opinions. But, when it begin to grow, we lost the use of elders. It's interesting that no one doubts that elders (plural) in a church as leaders is a biblical fact. No one doubts that. Let me give you two churches, I'll not say where, but one of them... the pastor shared this on Monday. When he moved there, some seven years ago the church had just split because of a pastor who was immoral. They were running about ninety on Sunday, discouraged, defeated, down. And, God begin moving in John's heart; now I had the privilege of being John's pastor at South Cliff while he was in the Seminary. And, God begin moving in John's heart, that he wanted a church to be biblical in everything they could be biblical in as far as their understanding. And, so one day he asked about twenty men to study this thing about elders. He said, I'm not going to meet with you. I don't even what to know what you're discussing. He shared this story last Monday. He said, I don't want to know what's going on, but I want you to study for X number of weeks, this thing of elders; and I want you to come out from this study and I want you to share with me what you believe the church needs to do. And, he was scared. He didn't know what they'd come out with. But, he said one day they called him, they were meeting on Thursday nights; they said Brother John get over here. He went over there and he said there was a spirit of revival, these men had seen things in scripture they'd never see....they had begun to understand leadership like they had never understood it before. And, they were so thrilled beyond words, and they went back to their church, they presented it and John had nothing to do with it. And, that little congregation embraced leadership in a plurality of pastors and elders and bishops. I was in that church in a meeting one month ago and I'm so grateful for what God's doing.

Let me give you another one scenario. A church in Texas, a First Baptist Church, the pastor began to have a burden toward this biblical understanding of elders and so he asked the men to study it. They went with their Bible opened, their hearts opened, they began to study the Word of God and they came out ...now watch it...unanimous, that this was the biblical method of leadership in the church and they said, but pastor, we can't do this. Why, we're a First Baptist Church; what would Southern Baptist think of us? And, they chose not to embrace what the Spirit of God had shown them in the scripture. The pastor left there not long after, and now pastors a church with a commitment of being biblical... when you see it in the scripture and standing on it. What I'm saying to you is...there is no question that it's biblical. There isn't even a question that it's Baptist.

Now let me close by sharing just a few of the blessings and benefits of elder leadership. You know what happens when we understand elders, pastors, (plural) leading a congregation? It gives the church multiple hearts in leadership, not one man. Kinda like a family. You can make it with one parent, but, oh it's tough. And, that one parent would be honest to tell you it's hard to be everything that the children need. God has ordained that leadership be multiple even in the family. And, as a single parent with children will testify, it can be done but oh, it's difficult. There are pressures upon that one parent that are not in a family where there is the dual parent, the multiple parent as God originally intended. Now, can I tell you from a pastor's perspective, that when a pastor is the only pastor of a church there is incredible pressure upon that man. I know personally. And, a church needs more than my heart. We need true spiritual parenting in church life. And the Bible calls them elders, pastors, bishops and that's what you as a church embraced some two years ago.

Let me give you another benefit in blessing. It gives the teaching/pastor benefit of counsel. In other words, kinda a check and a balance. The simple language, it keeps one man from playing God. Listen carefully to what I'm going to tell you. I have a deep conviction that as there are abusive family situations where a strong husband authority figure literally intimidates a wife, intimidates children with verbal or emotional abuse and demands his way, which is absolutely ungodly and unscriptural in like manner, there are abusive church situations where a demanding pastor (singular) has set the course. And, that is never

God's way. You see it creates a check and a balance. With our interim elders, it's amazing how in our retreat just a few days ago, we would hear each other's heart...we would hear each other's heart. Check and a balance can be built in. Third, it permits people to be close to a pastor. Do you know, now listen to me very, very carefully on this, we're going to be finished in just a moment, listen carefully; did you know no one can know more, it's a proven fact, that no one can know more than twenty people in any given situation intimately. In other words, you will never know more than twenty people intimately in this congregation. But, now the only thing is, when you run forty on Sunday morning in Sunday School, you know half the church. Then, when you're running eighty, you still just know twenty, intimately, but you know you have an acquaintance with the others. But, when you're running eight hundred as we are or when you're running a thousand, you can't be close to a pastor. You can't be intimate with him. But, did you know with a multiplicity of elders, the congregation can be broken down where when there's illness, when there's crisis, when there is disturbance in family life, a pastor, an elder, a bishop can be there and relate to you on an intimate basis as long as you don't demand that it be the pastor for there is no such thing in the New Testament. There are the pastors in the New Testament and they are to shepherd the flock of God. Benefit and blessing, it removes impossible burdens from the pastor's family.