

Faith Pulpit

Congregational Rule Versus Elder Rule

Most Bible-believing Baptist churches today follow an organizational system in which a pastor guides the people by means of his moral example and his preaching of God's Word, but in which the congregation itself is the decision-making body.

This approach is well expressed by Edward T. Hiscox in his important book written in 1894 entitled, *The New Directory for Baptist Churches* [reprinted under the title, *Principles and Practices for Baptist Churches*]. Hiscox says: "The government is administered by the body acting together, where no one possesses a preeminence, but all enjoy an equality of rights; and in deciding matters of opinion, the majority bears rule.

The pastor exercises only such control over the body as his official and personal influence may allow, as their teacher and leader and the expounder of the great Lawgiver's enactments. His influence is paramount but not his authority. In the decisions of questions he has but his single vote. His rule is in the normal force of his counsels, his instruction and guidance in matters of truth and duty, and also in wisely directing the assemblies whether for worship or business. Much less have the deacons any authoritative or dictatorial control over Church affairs. Matters of administration are submitted to the body and by them decided." [Pages 144 and 145]. The question is: If this organizational system is correct, why does the New Testament speak of elders who rule?

Congregational Rule

Let there be no misunderstanding here! In the New Testament, the congregation was the decision-making body. When men were needed to make certain that no needy widow was being neglected, the whole multitude chose these men [Acts 6:5]. The apostles did not choose them. The apostles merely ratified the choice of the congregation [Acts 6:3–6]. This is noteworthy because the word used by the apostles to describe this ratification ["appoint" in verse three] is the same word used in Titus 1:5 to

describe the ministry of Titus in ordaining elders. It becomes clear that just as in the case of the apostles in Acts 6, so Titus was not making the selection but ratifying through ordination the choice of the congregations involved.

Concerning brothers weak in the faith, Paul urged the saints at Rome, not the leaders, to receive them [Romans 14:1]. When Paul discovered open immorality in the life of one of the members of the Corinthian congregation, he appealed to the believers themselves, not to the leaders of the church, to remove the immoral person from their midst [1 Corinthians 5:1–13]. Paul describes church discipline at Corinth [whether this case or not] as “this punishment. . . of many” [literally, “by the majority”]. How, then, is the rule of elders to be understood?

Elder Rule

Two Greek words are used to describe the rule that leaders in each church exercised. The first word is found in Hebrews 13:7, 17, and 24 and means “lead, guide” [A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament, Bauer, Gingrich and Danker, second edition, page 343]. When not referring to leadership, the word also means, “think, consider.” The precise nature of the leading/guiding can be found in Hebrews 13:7. The leaders guided by speaking God’s Word and living godly lives [“conversation” = “conduct”]. Given this understanding of what it means to lead or guide, believers should have no trouble remembering [Hebrews 13:7], obeying, [Hebrews 13:7] and saluting [=greeting, Hebrews 13:24] their leaders.

The second word is found in 1 Thessalonians 5:12, 1 Timothy 3:4, 5, 12, and 1 Timothy 5:17. It means “be at the head [of], rule, direct, manage, conduct” as well as “be concerned about, care for, give aid” [A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament, page 707].

The passage of Scripture which gives a clear picture of just what it means for an elder to rule is 1 Timothy 5:17. Here the Apostle Paul sets up a contrast, implied to be sure, but a real contrast nevertheless. This contrast is expressed by means of three words or expressions in the verse:

1. Well: some elders ruled well. This implies that some elders merely ruled but did not excel in it;
2. Double: the elders who ruled well were to be counted worthy of double honor. In 1 Timothy 5, honor seems to include financial remuneration [cf. verse 3 in light of verses 9, 10, and 16]; Thus elders who ruled well were to be considered worthy of generous financial support ;
3. Labor: some elders toiled in the preaching and teaching of God’s Word. The implication is that some did not excel in their preaching and teaching. Those that did toil in God’s Word were to be counted worthy of double honor. Lenski [The Interpretation of St. Paul’s Epistles to the Colossians, to the Thessalonians, to Timothy, to Titus and to Philemon, pages 681-682] says: “Especially those toiling in connection with the Word and teaching” does not mean that some elders did not teach, for all were required to have (and thus to use) this ability (3:2). Naturally, however, some would manifest zeal in this part of the work, actually toil in it to the point of fatigue and weariness. These richly deserve the twofold honor.” Vincent [Word Studies in the New Testament] comments on 1 Timothy 5:17, “The comparison is with those Elders who do not exhibit equal capacity or efficiency in ruling.” The passage lends no support to the Reformed

theory of two classes of Elders ruling and teaching.

If this interpretation is correct, and I believe that it is, then to rule well is defined as laboring in the Word and doctrine, not as final decision-making; that function has been committed to the congregation. In practice, strong pastoral leadership and congregational government must go together: Primarily a pastor leads the people by preaching and teaching God's Word. The members do not vote on whether or not they approve of everything their pastor preaches and teaches. He is their bishop, their overseer. Clearly, he is the one called of God to lead the congregation.

When a congregation votes to invite a man to be their pastor, they do not hire him to be their pastor; they are officially recognizing that God has called him to be their pastor. A pastor's leadership also involves reinforcing his preaching and teaching by godly example. The teaching and moral aspects of pastoral leadership are combined when a pastor shares his vision for the church by outlining to his congregation the goals and programs that he believes will help fulfill the church's mission. Whether or not a congregation officially votes to adopt those goals and programs, it is clear that whole-hearted acceptance of these goals and enthusiastic participation in these programs are necessary if they are to succeed.

[September 1999 revision of an article that originally appeared in the February 1986 faith pulpit]

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Dr. Houghton was promoted to Heaven on July 13, 2020, leaving a legacy of service and faithfulness to the thousands of men and women who he impacted during his ministry.