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“NEW GROUND, ANCIENT FOUNDATION”

by Josh King

Sometimes going somewhere new can be exciting, like going on vacation; sometimes it can be terrifying, like moving to a new town. My aim in writing this article is that there will be more excitement and less fear regarding our move to being an elder led church. Church, we have moved, and I want you to be assured that it is a good move. We are not vacationing in “Rome”, we have moved there, and although the ground underneath our feet is new to us, it is an ancient foundation.

NEW BUT ANCIENT

Today many evangelical churches are returning to an elder led polity (form of government), but note that this isn’t something new, but a return to something old. You could look at the transition as being only another fad in the Western church, and for some this may be the case, but I believe the biggest influence is God graciously calling many back to Biblical faithfulness. Sometimes old is trendy and sometimes old is just good. This is not a move to be trendy; this is a move because it is best for our church family.

This “new” ground isn’t even new for Baptists. In his excellent little book on church polity, *A Display of God’s Glory*, Mark Dever writes,

Elders could be found in Baptist churches in America throughout the 18th century and into the 19th century, (e.g., Robertson’s *Life of Broadus*, p. 34; O. L. Hailey, *J. R. Graves*, p. 40). W. B. Johnson, the first president of the Southern Baptist Convention, wrote a book on church life in which he strongly advocated the idea of a plurality of elders in one local church. Whether through inattention to Scripture, or the pressure of life on the frontier (where churches were springing up at an amazing rate!), the practice of cultivating such textured leadership declined. But Baptist papers’ discussion of reviving this biblical office continued. As late as the early twentieth century, Baptist publications were referring to leaders by the title of “elder.” Though this practice is unusual among Baptist churches today, there is now a growing trend back to it—and for good reason. It was needed in New Testament churches, and it is needed now.

But we are not just returning to an elder led church government because it is ok for Baptists to do this. Elder led polity is broader than us Baptists. Our aim is not to be Baptist, but to be Scriptural. The foundation we are building on is not that our Baptist forefathers themselves, but rather, the same foundation they built on, that of the apostles (Ephesians 2:19-22). Our heritage is good, but our aim is not to be faithful to our



FBC MERIDIAN

heritage, but faithful to our Lord; and our Lord through His apostles has communicated that the church is to be led by a plurality of elders (all emphasis mine):

And they did so, sending it to the *elders* by the hand of Barnabas and Saul. (Acts:11:30)

Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the *elders of the church*, and let *them* pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. (James 5:14)

And when they had appointed *elders* for them *in every church*, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed. (Acts 14:23)

And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the *elders* about this question. (Acts 15:2, cf. 15:4, 6, 22, 23)

Now from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called the *elders of the church* to come to him. (Acts 20:17)

Let the *elders* who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching. (1 Timothy 5:17)

This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint *elders* in every town as I directed you (Titus 1:5)

THE STRENGTH OF THIS ANCIENT FOUNDATION

This foundation may be old, but it is strong. It is the strongest ground to build upon. Eldership can be abused, but so can any form of church government, and an elder led polity seeking to be faithful to the Scriptures is the least susceptible to corruption. We cannot think of a better form of church government than Jesus. If we follow His plan for church government, the church will flourish spiritually – she will be healthy and God glorifying. The benefits of an elder led polity for the church are plethora, they include:

1. *Being led by the gifted and spiritually mature.* In a pure democratic model if the church grows rapidly that could mean a majority of immature Christians could determine the direction of the church, rewrite the constitution, and change its doctrinal emphasis. God gifts his church with leaders (Ephesians 4:11-16, 1 Corinthians 12). Submitting to an elder led polity is a way to express thanks to God for His gifts. Biblical eldership is a gift to be enjoyed, not a burden to be tolerated (Hebrews 13:17).

2. *The vision and momentum of the church not being contingent on one man.* Churches that are not elder led often flounder if the lead pastor leaves, dies, or is removed. Being elder led puts a ballast in the church to see it through stormy times. Conversely this also



FBC MERIDIAN

protects the church from a wolf who may take the church in a bad direction. A plurality of elders also means collective wisdom and counsel guide the church.

3. *Placing the greatest weight of leadership within the church.* We hope to raise more leaders up than we bring in, and we want non-staff elders to always significantly outnumber staff-elders. This will help avoid tyranny by the lead elder and staff. There won't be a group of paid elders who feel as if I am their boss and they have to be yes men in order to keep their jobs. All the elders are accountable to each other and the church body to be faithful to the Scriptures. Matthew 18:15-20 should apply to elders just as easily as anyone else (1 Timothy 5:19-20) and a plurality of elders makes this easier as they should initiate it.

4. *Diffusing congregational criticism.* Because the church is led by a plurality of elder this means that one man isn't the target of all critical remarks. An elder polity means that one man does not have to bear all the criticism and responsibility alone.

Churches, like families, flourish under Biblical authority. Biblical authority bleeds for others following the example of our Lord. Biblical husbands and elders are built like a good house – their outer strength matched by inner warmth. This is the foundation for the church to become a holy and happy family.

HOW YOU CAN HELP US MOVE

Currently we are testing and training elders. We are not rushing through this process (1 Timothy 3:10, 5:17). We envision assessment to take approximately one year and we ask your help. Biblically we believe that elders are to train and test elders and that the congregation then should affirm them (Acts 14:23, Titus 1:5). But in this task we need your help. If you know of any reason why any of the elder candidates are disqualified per 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9 please lovingly and prayerfully confront them according to Matthew 18:15-20 and inform the elders (at this point that would be me, Josh) of the reason you think them disqualified. Do not be shy, all of the qualifications save two concern character, we cannot compromise in this area.

Further, we plead that you pray for your elders. If the apostle Paul asked prayer from the saints how much more do we need them (2 Thessalonians 3:1)? Pray for transparency, honesty, humility, and accountability among the elders and candidates as we seek both to personally pursue holiness and lead the flock in holiness. Pray for our sanctification. Pray for our protection from the evil one and that we would not fall to temptation. Pray that God would gift and enable us for this ministry. Pray that we would remain God-reliant, gospel-centered, and Christ-intoxicated.



FBC MERIDIAN

Also, being elder led does not mean that the rest of the congregation is rendered unnecessary. God gifts His church as a whole, not just the elders. The elders need your unique gifting, perspective, and wisdom. As elders we need to hear your voice. Let us know your concerns and desires. It will be our aim to prayerfully consider them and answer accordingly in a spirit of love. As elders we don't want to take your place in the body, but help you find your place in the body.

Finally as we transition to elder leadership you can help us by joyfully embracing God's plan for the leadership of His church. We ask this not for our sake, but for your joy and His glory.

Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you. —Hebrews 13:17

This is a big move church, but we believe it is for the family's best. The new ground is ancient, and it is strong. Let us rejoice in where the Lord has brought us.