

Elders in Baptist churches? Conference examines the idea

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By Gary D. Myers

NEW ORLEANS (BP)--Elders and congregationalism. For many Baptists, these terms sound like polar opposites. However, according to some speakers at the "Issues in Baptist Polity" conference, the two may not be mutually exclusive.

The issue of the growing presence of elders in Baptist churches was one of the key discussions during the Feb. 5-7 sessions at the Baptist Center for Theology and Ministry of New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary.

Mark Dever, pastor of Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington, D.C., argued that a body of elders is the New Testament model of church structure. He made a clear distinction between "elder-led" and "elder-rule," flatly rejecting the Presbyterian model that makes a distinction between teaching elders and ruling elders. Instead, Dever offered a biblical argument for an elder-led form of congregationalism in which the congregation serves as a "final court of appeal" in the decision-making process.



Mark Dever, who addressed the topic of elders during New Orleans Seminary's church polity conference, notes several resources available from his church, Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington, D.C. *Photo courtesy of NOBTS*

Pointing to passages in Acts, 1 Timothy, Philippians, James and 1 Peter, Dever made his case that the New Testament church had a plurality of elders within each congregation. In a number of cases, the New Testament writers refer to elders (plural) when addressing a church (singular). He read verse after verse.

"The best I can tell, the New Testament evidence seems to indicate that common, even expected practice was a plurality of elders in each local congregation," Dever said.

In addition to the biblical argument, Dever attempted to prove that elder-led congregations are not absent in Baptist history. He cited a number of early Baptist documents that mention a plurality of elders. Among these was a letter written by W.B. Johnson, the first president of the Southern Baptist Convention, which refers to a plurality of elders in most Baptist churches of the South. Dever also cited correspondence from Baptist churches in England, Philadelphia and Virginia as evidence.

"The biblical model is elder-directed or elder-led congregationalism," Dever said. "It is biblical and it is Baptist."

While there was support for elder-led congregationalism, the majority of speakers at the NOBTS polity conference denounced elder rule in Southern Baptist churches. Under the elder-rule model, the congregation has little or no say in the matters of the church. A select group rules and controls all or

most of the decisions of the church.

In contrast, various presenters were at least open to the idea of elder-led model as a form of congregationalism. This is due in part to their general consensus on the biblical teaching about the number of church offices.

"It is commonly agreed by all that there are not three distinct church offices, but two in the New Testament -- that of deacon and that of elder/overseer/pastor," said David Dockery, president of Union University in Jackson, Tenn. "God intended for there to be at least one leader and perhaps a team of leaders in each congregation."

Dockery explained that beginning in Acts 14, elders are usually mentioned as plural in the New Testament, with the context implying multiple elders for each church.

The function of the church, Dockery said, is more important than the form as long as the form is consistent with the scriptural teaching. To Dockery, Christ's lordship over the church is best experienced in churches with congregational polity. However, he noted that "being elder-led is quite consistent with congregational polity."

Paige Patterson, president of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Texas, addressed the issue of elders within Baptist congregations during a panel discussion that featured Dever, Richard Land and James Leo Garrett. He expressed concern about the growing trend toward "elder rule" in Southern Baptist churches.

A proponent of congregationalism, Patterson said he believes some churches adopt elder rule to fix unbiblical forms of congregationalism. One "abhorrent" form of congregationalism, he said, views the pastor as the slave of the church. Instead of shifting to a biblical model of congregationalism, some churches move toward elder rule. Patterson suggested that this "fix" may be worse than the problem.

"I do not like the 'elder-rule' proposition. I think we are going to lose one of our great distinctives as Baptists if we throw away our congregational church polity," Patterson said. "I do not have a problem with multiplicity of elders within congregationalism."

Patterson said "primary elder" congregationalism rather than "single elder" congregationalism is the model found in New Testament.

Garrett, distinguished professor emeritus of theology at Southwestern Seminary, said the practice of elder rule in Baptist churches constitutes a serious erosion in congregational polity. He believes that congregational polity is being rejected in some Southern Baptist churches because it is time-consuming and sometimes difficult.

"The appeal to allow a small group in the congregation to make the decisions for the church parallels the appeal to the citizens to give up voting and participatory democracy and put governing into the hands of the experts," Garrett said. "Decision-making as to the life, ministry and mission of a church should not be rigidly separated from the living out of the life, ministry and mission. Members who are involved in one should be involved in the other."

Garrett said that it is acceptable for the congregation to delegate certain matters to a smaller group

within the church. He insisted that these things should be of lesser importance, with the essential issues coming before a congregational vote.

This is the case at Capitol Hill Baptist Church, which often delegates issues to the elder body, yet the congregation still plays a key role in decision-making by voting on essential issues. The calling of a pastor or the election of elders, for example, must be approved by the church, Dever said.

"I do think the conference for many expanded what Southern Baptists mean by the term 'congregational polity,'" said Stan Norman, assistant professor of theology at NOBTS, BCTM director and organizer of the conference. "I am open to further discussion and study on the matter of 'elder-led' as a viable form of congregationalism, but I am not completely convinced at this time"