

Elders—common title, different definitions

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What do some contemporary, Calvinist and cowboy churches have in common? They all have elders.

But while they all agree elders find their basis in the Bible, they differ widely about who these elders are, what they should do and who has authority to make decisions for a congregation.

In contemporary-style mega-churches, congregations often delegate the routine decision-making authority to paid staff, with the pastor in the senior decision-making role.

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Daniel Akin, president of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, essentially advances that position as one of the contributors to *Perspectives on Church Government*, a 2004 Broadman & Holman book that examines five views on church polity. Akin defends what he calls “the single elder-led congregational” model.

“There is no biblical defense for a dictatorial, autocratic, CEO model for ministry leadership,” Akin insists. Even so, he calls for strong pastoral leadership and suggests “congregationalism often is best practiced in the form of a representative model” rather than having churches vote on routine matters.

“The church should seek out, call and follow godly leaders,” he writes. “We should willingly and joyfully submit to their direction and leadership. ... We should wisely leave the everyday affairs of church life in their hands and banish forever the monthly business meeting ... that provides repeated opportunities for persons to exercise their carnality.”

But James Leo Garrett, retired theology professor at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, writes in the same book a defense of traditional congregational polity.

Akin’s representative model “is not true congregationalism but a new form of the elder system centering in preaching-teaching-administering elders (at least in larger churches), of whom one is senior,” Garrett insists.

“Those who aspire to build mega-churches seem to see congregational polity as an impediment,” Garrett laments. But he insists congregational governance by all believers finds its roots in the New Testament doctrine of the priesthood of all believers, as well as in the principle of fairness.

“Those who through the voluntary stewardship of material gifts, their life of prayer and their deeds of ministering service sustain the work of the congregation should indeed have some role in the decision-making process

of the congregation,” he writes. “Not all believers are equally gifted, but each should have a voice or expression of will amid the gathered and covenanted community of faith.”

In contrast, Baptists in the Reformed tradition adopt—to varying degrees—a modified Presbyterian form of church governance. Presbyterians believe in two orders of elders—teaching elders who preach and provide spiritual guidance for congregations and ruling elders who provide administration for a church.

For instance, First Baptist Church in Richland Hills—an independent church that cites the Calvinistic 1689 Second London Baptist Confession of Faith as its doctrinal statement—identifies itself as elder-ruled.

“The elders, being called to oversee and administer the local church … are the chief officers of the church,” the congregation’s website states. “Specifically, the elders are responsible for the instruction and oversight (government and superintendence) of the church. … The members of the church have the duties of submitting to and obeying the instructions and government of the elders.”

In a similar vein, John Piper, pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, Minn., wrote in a widely distributed 1999 paper, *Biblical Eldership*, “The responsibilities of elders are summed up under two heads: governing and teaching.”

Cowboy churches understand elders differently, said Ron Nolen, western heritage congregational strategist with the Baptist General Convention of Texas.

“We believe in the elder role, not in elder rule,” Nolen said. Western heritage churches use multiple elders—typically two or three men who stand alongside the pastor, who functions in the role of senior elder. But rather than acting as a ruling and decision-making body, these elders serve

as “a safety-net for decision-making,” he explained.

“We’re big on empowerment and accountability. The elders lead by example. They work to bring the giftedness out of other believers by empowering them for service, and then they are held mutually accountable,” Nolen said. “If a lay pastor or someone on the staff team falters or drops the ball, the elders step in.” Unpaid lay pastors serve as resources to lay-led ministry teams, and programming decisions are made through the teams—with input from the church as a whole, he added. An audit team makes administrative decisions—particularly regarding day-to-day finances.

“When it comes to major decisions like buying land or calling staff, that’s done by the whole church,” Nolen explained. “On a day-in and day-out basis, it’s done by the teams.”

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