

Herschel Hobbs on church governance

May 12, 2006

Posted: 5/12/06

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What would Herschel Hobbs say about elders? Who should have decision-making authority in a church?

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Hobbs—the pastor-theologian who chaired the 1963 revision of the Southern Baptist Convention’s statement of faith—wrote 35 years ago in a church training book on the Baptist Faith & Message: “The officers in a local New Testament church are pastors and deacons. ... The same office is variously called bishop, elder or pastor. ... ‘Elder’ translates the Greek word which connotes age. Among the Jews, it was used of one who because of age possessed dignity and wisdom. But in the Christian sense, it was used of those who presided over assemblies of the church.”

Citing Acts 20:28, Hobbs concluded elder, pastor and bishop are interchangeable terms, saying, “‘Elder’ in the Christian sense always refers to the same office of bishop or pastor.”

On the matter of decision-making authority, Hobbs wrote: “ ... (A) New Testament church is a local church acting through democratic processes under the lordship of Jesus Christ. In such a church, each member has equal rights and privileges but also should share equally the responsibilities. The will of the body should be the will of all, a will reached under the authority and guidance of the Spirit of Christ.”

(The Baptist Faith & Message by Herschel H. Hobbs, pp. 80-81)

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