

# Church Polity

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# 1 Introduction

In this paper, I will argue that the current church government structure at Bedford Baptist Church is inefficient and not biblical. I believe that the biblical standard for church governance has been eroded over time and should be restored. I believe that God desires our obedience to his Word. My hope is that anyone reading this document will devote the time and effort necessary to study these matters so that we can enter the congregational discussions with insight and wisdom.

Before we dive into the main material, I would like to briefly discuss my motivation for writing this paper.

## 1.1 Scripture

First and foremost, I want us to have a very high view of Scripture. In 2 Timothy 3:16-17, we read that

All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.<sup>1</sup>

The Bible says about itself that every word in it was spoken by God himself. The Creator of the universe isn't a silent dictator but a loving Father who speaks with and listens to his children. We believe that the Bible is a record of what God has spoken to his people throughout history. We believe that no errors were made when those words were written down and passed down the generations.

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<sup>1</sup> ESV, and for all future Bible references unless otherwise stated.

In Matthew 4:4, Jesus says

It is written, ‘Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’

which indicates to us that we need the words of God to live fully. This means that we need to be careful when reading the Bible so that we don’t misunderstand what God is trying to communicate to us. I believe that we have strayed from the biblical picture of church organization and this is my attempt to be faithful to the word of God.

I don’t want us to deceive ourselves. As Augustine said:

If you believe what you like in the gospel, and reject what you don’t like, it is not the gospel you believe, but yourself.<sup>2</sup>

## 1.2 Effectiveness

It has become apparent during the last few months that our church has become ineffective in carrying out kingdom work. Issues in many different areas of church life take a significant amount of time to resolve. We are currently unable to quickly respond to urgent or unexpected problems. If there is a more efficient way of structuring the leadership of the church, I think it is our responsibility to explore it<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup>Augustine, Sermons

<sup>3</sup>I have been involved with the work of the Finance, Missions and Christian Education committees. My assumptions are based on what I have seen in the work of those three committees. Purposely, no particulars are mentioned as I wish to avoid any gossip.

### **1.3 Church life**

Many people in our church are discouraged by the politics and drama that seems to be going on in the leadership. There are different agendas being pushed and people quickly tire of power struggles. Instead of focusing on gossip, lobbying and other worldly activities, let us look to God and his glory.

We want our people to be serving others, making disciples and bringing glory to God.

## **2 Present state**

For completeness, this section will describe the current state of things at Bedford Baptist Church when it comes to leadership organization. I will try to refrain from making any comments and focus on the description.

### **2.1 Boards and Committees**

According to the constitution of Bedford Baptist Church, there are currently twenty-three boards and committees: The Board of Deacons (15), the Board of Trustees (9), the Christian Education Committee (12), the Finance Committee (9), the Stewardship Committee (6), the Investment Committee (5), the Missions Committee (9), the Women's Missionary Society, the Friendship Circle, the Floral Committee (8), the Decorating Committee (4), the Greeters, the Ushers, the Social Committee, the Music Committee (4), the Nominating Committee (9), the Technical Management Committee, the Radio Management Committee, the Visitation Committee,

the Tellers (21), the Seniors Fellowship, the Church Library Committee and the Office Help Committee<sup>4</sup>.

The sum of all the committees make up the church leadership. There are over a hundred people in the leadership of the church<sup>5</sup>. The church currently has around 250 members.

## **2.2 Deacons**

The constitution says that the board of deacons

shall advise, assist and support the Pastoral Staff and cooperate with them in the administration of the spiritual affairs of the Church

In essence, it says that the deacons, along with the pastors, are administrative and spiritual leaders of the church.

## **2.3 Pastors**

The constitution says that

The Pastor(s) report to the Board of Deacons.

and then it lists the qualifications for pastors:

Shall be a person(s) having or seeking accreditation from a recognized theological institution and whose Christian character and qualifications are consistent

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<sup>4</sup>As adopted on February 28, 2011; and for all future constitution references unless otherwise stated.

<sup>5</sup>Note that the total number of people is 111 but some people are on more than one committee. For example, many committees have as one of their members a representative from the board of deacons. Also, for example, the Executive committee is made up of the Chairmen of the various boards and committees.

with the doctrine and policy of the Church. The person(s) shall be spiritually and emotionally mature with proven leadership skills and demonstrated ability as team players.

Within the context of the constitution, the pastors are always spoken of as staff of the church organization. The constitution sets out rules on how pastors are to be selected, employed and what the procedure is for dismissal.

## **2.4 Executive committee**

The Executive committee

shall be responsible for the efficient management of the affairs of the Church business between business meetings

and it consists of Chairmen of all of the above committees. It is understood in this context that the business meeting is a meeting of the assembly of all members of the church. The Executive is the highest body of power, right under the assembly of the people.

## **2.5 Congregational votes**

Important decisions within the church, such as budget approvals or the calling of a pastor, are to be done through a congregational vote. According to the constitution

every member shall have one vote. All members are entitled to take part in the deliberations and vote at any and all meetings. A simple majority vote of members



present shall legally commit the Church to act in accordance with the motion. However, a seventy five per cent (75%) majority is required for Budget Approval or a Constitution change and a ninety per cent (90%) majority is required for the calling of a Pastor(s). In the event of a tie vote the Moderator or Vice Moderator shall have the deciding vote.

## 2.6 Roberts Rules of Order

According to the constitution of Bedford Baptist Church, “the guide for the conduct of meetings shall be as outlined in *Roberts Rules of Order*”. Roberts Rules of Order is a “codification of the present-day general parliamentary law”.<sup>6</sup> It describes in great detail how parliamentary societies should conduct themselves with respect to the decision-making process. It speaks of numbers of votes necessary for decisions to be passed, who can call a meeting, what constitutes a quorum in the different kinds of meetings, what meeting minutes should look like and much more. Roberts Rules of Order was first published in 1876.

## 3 Description of biblical polity

Now that we have an idea of how church government works at Bedford Baptist Church, we should survey the Bible to see what it teaches on proper church polity.

The New Testament describes two offices to be held within the local church: an *elder* and a *deacon*.

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<sup>6</sup>Robert’s Rules of Order Newly Revised, 10th edition, Perseus Books Group, Cambridge MA, 2000, p. xxv.

### 3.1 Elders

The terms *elder*<sup>7</sup>, *overseer* (bishop)<sup>8</sup> and *pastor*<sup>9</sup> are used interchangeably in the New Testament. Elders were the ruling overseers of the local church. They were in charge of spiritual, practical and financial matters. Elders were versed in the Christian doctrine and had the respect of their flock. They weren't, however, rulers in the worldly sense. Instead of domineering, they sought to lead sacrificially and by example.

In our day, I picture an elder to be a mature Christian on whom you can depend in all areas of life. He will be with you in your sorrows and your joys. He will be a man of integrity and experience. He will know the Word of God and will be able to use it to correct and encourage.

Let me mention a few verses from the New Testament that use the word *elder*.

Acts 14:23

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 15:1-6

But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the

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<sup>7</sup>Greek: presbyteros, Strong's G4245

<sup>8</sup>Greek: episkopos, Strong's G1985

<sup>9</sup>Greek: poimen, Strong's G4166

others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question. So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the brothers. When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they declared all that God had done with them. But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up and said, "It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses." The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter.

#### Acts 15:22-23

Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They sent Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brothers, with the following letter: "The brothers, both the apostles and the elders, to the brothers who are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia, greetings.

#### Acts 16:4

As they went on their way through the cities, they delivered to them for observance the decisions that had been reached by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem.

Acts 20:17

Now from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church to come to him.

Acts 21:17-18

When we had come to Jerusalem, the brothers received us gladly. On the following day Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present.

1 Timothy 4:14

Do not neglect the gift you have, which was given you by prophecy when the council of elders laid their hands on you.

1 Timothy 5:17

Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.

1 Timothy 5:19

Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses.

Titus 1:5

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—

James 5:14

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.

1 Peter 5:1

So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed:

1 Peter 5:5

Likewise, you who are younger, be subject to the elders. Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.”

2 John 1:1

The elder to the elect lady and her children, whom I love in truth, and not only I, but also all who know the truth,

3 John 1:1

The elder to the beloved Gaius, whom I love in truth.

In 1 Timothy 3:2-7, we find the qualifications for elders:

Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not a drunkard, not violent

but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church? He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil. Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil.

If elders are to rule over God's household, they should have a proven ability to lead. This ability is demonstrated by their ability to manage their own affairs.

The elder must be "able to teach", meaning they should have a solid grasp on biblical doctrine and be able to explain the gospel truth plainly. I take this to mean that formal education isn't necessary to hold this office. Even though the term *elder* suggests an older man, Timothy was a young elder:

Let no one despise you for your youth, but set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity. (1 Timothy 4:12)

The apostle Paul says to Timothy that elders ought to rule the local church.

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

The Bible teaches that the office of elder is reserved to men.

I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. (1 Timothy 2:12-14)

We can see that Paul grounds his command in the order of creation meaning that this is a prescription applicable in all cultures. In addition, later in the epistle, Paul tells us that this is how we ought to conduct our services:

I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these things to you so that, if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth. (1 Timothy 3:14-15)

I realize that this might be the most controversial point of this exercise. In our culture today, media fills our minds with strong statements of gender equality and human rights. It is important to understand that by preventing women from entering into the top level of local church government we aren't saying that women aren't able or worthy of such position. Unquestionably, there are some very intelligent women in the world (my wife included!) and the last thing I want to do is say that women aren't capable of doing this job. What I do want to stress, though, is the issue of obedience to the word of God. The Bible clearly teaches that the office of elder is reserved to men and if we choose to ignore this part of the Holy Scriptures, where will we stop? What is next? Shall we also support gay marriages? Shall we endorse abortions? No, of course

not.<sup>10</sup>

Additionally, I think having several elders be the ruling force in the church makes practical sense. When an urgent, unexpected need arises, the dozen or so elders can all call each other on the phone and figure out what to do. We don't have to wait until the next meeting of the Finance committee to see if we can afford to spend money. Then, we don't have to wait for the Executive committee to meet and pass a motion allowing this sum of money to be releases, etc. The ruling elders have the authority to do this among themselves. This can be very efficient and fast.

## 3.2 Deacons

The Greek term for deacon literally means “helper”. I think Acts 6 provides a great picture of what a deacon is supposed to do within the context of the local church. The issue was that the elders couldn't focus on preaching and prayer *and* take care of the widows. So they decided to set aside other people to do just that—to feed the poor. It speaks of “serving the tables”.

Deacons help with the practical needs of daily life. Their work is often unseen but necessary.

In 1 Timothy 3:8-13, we find the qualifications for deacons:

Deacons likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain. They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. And let them also be tested first; then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless.

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<sup>10</sup>The issue of women elders is far beyond the scope of this paper. I would be happy to discuss this much further if there is need.



The deacons' job is to help with the more practical needs within and outside the church. This may include shoveling the snow in the driveway, preparing meals for church events, cleaning the church building, etc. Currently, all work that falls under Trustees would be appropriately handled by the deacons.

## **4 History**

In this section, I would like to show that the ideas presented in this paper aren't new. Indeed, they have a strong rooting in reformed tradition.

John Piper writes that

from their earliest beginnings Baptists have held to the view that the two ongoing church offices presented in the New Testament are elders and deacons, and that only in more modern developments has the eldership largely disappeared.<sup>11</sup>

The rest of the section is taken verbatim from "Rethinking the Governance Structure at Bethlehem Baptist Church". The following shows that faithful Christians throughout history have interpreted the Bible the same way.

### **4.1 A Short Confession of Faith in Twenty Articles, by John Smyth, 1609**

Article 16:

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<sup>11</sup>John Piper, Rethinking the Governance Structure at Bethlehem Baptist Church

The ministers of the church are, not only bishops (episcopos), to whom the power is given of dispensing both the word and the sacraments, but also deacons, men and widows, who attend to the affairs of the poor and sick brethren.

#### **4.2 A Declaration of Faith of English People Remaining at Amsterdam, 1611**

Article 20:

That the Officers of every Church or congregation are either Elders, who by their office do especially feed the flock concerning their souls, Acts 20:28, 1 Peter 5:2,3. or Deacons Men, and Women who by their office relieve the necessities of the poor and impotent brethren concerning their bodies, Acts 6:1-4.

#### **4.3 Propositions and Conclusions Concerning the Christian Religion, 1612-1614**

Proposition 76:

That Christ hath set in His outward church two sorts of ministers: viz., some who are called pastors, teachers or elders, who administer in the word and sacraments, and others who are called Deacons, men and women: whose ministry is to serve tables and wash the saints' feet (Acts 6:2-4; Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:2,3,8,11; and chap.5).

## **4.4 The London Confession, 1644**

Article 36:

That being thus joined, every Church has power given them from Christ for their better well-being, to choose to themselves meet persons into the office of Pastors, Teachers [“Pastors” and “Teachers” are omitted in later editions.], Elders, Deacons, being qualified according to the Word, as those which Christ has appointed in his Testament, for the feeding, governing serving, and building up of his Church, and that none other have power to impose them, either these or any other.

## **4.5 Second London Confession, 1677, 1688**

Article 26, paragraph 8:

A particular Church gathered, and completely Organized, according to the mind of Christ, consists of Officers, and Members; And the Officers appointed by Christ to be chosen and set apart by the Church (so called and gathered) for the peculiar Administration of Ordinances, and Execution of power, or Duty which he entrusts them with, or calls them to, to be continued to the end of the World, are Bishops or Elders and Deacons.

## **4.6 Articles of the Baptist Bible Union of America, 1923**

Article 13:

We believe that a church of Christ is a congregation of baptized believers... that its officers of ordination are pastors, elders and deacons, whose qualifications, claims and duties are clearly defined in the Scriptures.

#### **4.7 Statement of Faith of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1925, 1963**

Article 6:

This church is an autonomous body, operating through democratic processes under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. In such a congregation members are equally responsible. Its Scriptural officers are pastors and deacons.

#### **4.8 Swedish Baptist Confession of Faith, 1861**

Article 9:

We believe that a true Christian church is a union of believing and baptized Christians, who have covenanted to strive to keep all that Christ has commanded, to sustain public worship, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit to choose among themselves shepherds or overseers and deacons, to administer baptism and the Lord's supper...

#### **4.9 Confession of Faith and Ecclesiastical Principles of the Evangelical Association of French-Speaking Baptist Churches**

Part 2, Article 2:

In addition to pastors or elder, the local church may have other responsible servants, for example deacons and deaconesses whose role it is to assist the pastors or elders in their ministry, by assuming especial responsibility for everything that relates to the material interests of the congregation.

## **5 Issues with current system**

### **5.1 Decision making**

There is a bureaucratic web of proper procedure. Before a decision can be done, a great many different boards and committees need to have a chance to discuss it. Most committees meet once a month and it can take several months before everyone can supply their input.

There is no complete account of how the government system works at Bedford Baptist Church. A newcomer to the leadership is at the mercy of others' willingness to explain proper conduct. This often results in miscommunication, people having their feelings hurt and not enough things getting done. On a number of occasions, I have been at the center of these problems caused by my ignorance. These issues seem to stress people out and slow down our process.

### **5.2 Fights over authority**

No one is able to say with certainty who has authority in any given matter. Usually, the problem then goes from one committee to another and the whole process is slowed down significantly.

If we were to institute ruling elders as prescribed in the New Testament, there would be no question as to who has the authority to make a certain decision. The answer would always be *the elders do*.

### 5.3 Number of leaders

I think we can all agree that having too many leaders is counter-productive.

### 5.4 Congregational votes

John MacArthur writes:

In many churches today the congregation rules the leaders. This sort of government is foreign to the New Testament.<sup>12</sup>

I don't think that congregational democracy has much practical sense for the local church. Suppose that a great revival broke out in the Bedford area and a few hundred new believers were added to our flock.<sup>13</sup> New believers tend to be spiritually immature and easily swayed. Suppose we were to have a congregational vote on a delicate issue such as whether or not we should allow gay marriages to be officiated in our church. The new believers, outnumbering the original believers, could easily affect the church's decision in one way or the other. Instead, we should select mature Christians whose experience and knowledge of the Scriptures is deep to make these kinds of decisions. I believe that Paul prescribes the elders to be such people.

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<sup>12</sup>John MacArthur, *Hebrews*, Moody, 1983, p. 445.

<sup>13</sup>What a glorious thought!

## **5.5 Business-likeness of church meetings**

Currently, we consider our meeting procedures to be very important. The proper conduct during meetings is followed and closely monitored. For example, when a committee wishes to make a decision, it's done by passing a motion. All committee members then express their opinion by saying *yay* or *nay*. When a meeting is concluded, the secretary produces meeting minutes that are then approved at the following meeting. There are guidelines on how to create meeting minutes and certain things aren't permitted to be included in them.

Instead, all rigorous structures should be removed to make room for the leading of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is shown in the New Testament to produce unexpected behavior in believers. By reducing the amount of rules and regulations, we can be ready to act when the Holy Spirit comes.

## **5.6 Christian Education**

Christian education should be handled by the elders of the church and not by individuals selected from the congregation. The elders are called to teach and preach the gospel.

## **5.7 Pastors**

As indicated above, pastors are in fact elders and they should be given the same privileges as other elders. Mainly, they should be able to rule. Currently, pastors at Bedford Baptist Church don't rule; they only advise and educate.

## **6 Steps towards biblical polity**

While I would like us to see the biblical truth and at once decide to be obedient to it, I don't think this can realistically happen in a short period of time. There needs to be a church-wide initiative to teach what the Bible commands in terms of church government.

We should pray for the Holy Spirit to fill the hearts of our people and be receptive to new ideas. We should seek to explain and correct in love. We should be tender-hearted towards critics. We cannot make great progress without a spirit of gentleness.

### **6.1 Dissolve all boards and committees**

As the Bible doesn't prescribe any administrative bodies under the deacon level, we should do away with them altogether. This will free up a great many people to do more work for the kingdom. More practically, this means that the leadership of the church will be reduced from over a hundred people to about twenty or thirty.

### **6.2 Establish elders and deacons**

We should select from our midst a number of elders to lead the church. The elders should be all men with the necessary qualifications given in 1 Timothy. We should include current pastors in the group of elders in obedience to the New Testament. We should ascribe to them ruling power.

Once we have establish elders, the elders should select and appoint as many deacons as necessary.



## 6.3 Prevent congregation from making decisions

Altering the constitution to remove decision-making power from the congregation might be more difficult than it seems. What we will be asking our people is to vote to have their voting privileges stripped, and to be fully submissive the newly appointed elders of the church.

## 7 Conclusion

If we truly believe that the Bible is the inerrant Word of God and if we trust that our God has the best intentions for us, we should have a desire to be obedient to his commandments. Knowing the will of God and not acting on it is a serious offense.

I would like to start a dialog around this issue. I welcome any feedback, criticism, request for clarification and so on.

## 8 Further Reading

- Steven Cowan, *Who Runs the Church?: 4 Views on Church Government*
- John Piper, *Manhood, Womanhood, and the Freedom to Minister*
- John Piper, *Rethinking the Governance Structure at Bethlehem Baptist Church*
- Wayne Grudem, *Evangelical Feminism & Biblical Truth*
- Mark Driscoll, *Doctrine*
- James Beck, *Two Views on Women in Ministry*