

Who has authority to make decisions for a church?

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Associated Baptist Press

MEMPHIS, Tenn. (ABP)—Sam Shaw, pastor at Germantown Baptist Church near Memphis, Tenn., had a problem on his hands. As in a growing number of Baptist churches, Germantown leaders—including Shaw—wanted to elect elders. And while many church members welcomed the change, a determined majority opposed it as a violation of Baptist traditions and biblical teachings.

In a May 7 church conference, members voted 2,183-1,542 to reject a proposed constitutional change that would have created a governing body of elders.

Baptists across the country viewed the showdown at the 9,000-member church as an example of how the bitter debate over elders can derail a church.

"A New Testament church of the Lord Jesus Christ 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."

—From Article 7, "The Church," the 1963 *Baptist Faith & Message*.

At First Baptist Church in Colleyville, a similar rivalry left a senior-adult Sunday school class locked outside its classroom one February morning after class members voiced opposition to a plan to relocate the church. The relocation was a pet project of the church's newly elected elder board.

On the other side of the debate, Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington, D.C., has experienced continued improvement and growth as a congregation, the pastor says, thanks in large part to the strong elder tradition it has developed.

Traditionally, Baptists adhere to strict democratic governance, with every member eligible to vote on important church decisions.

More recently, however, some churches are appointing or electing "a small

group of men” to become “the rulers of the church,” explained Robert Wring, an opponent of the trend who has studied its history. “They may allow the congregation to vote on certain important issues, but mainly the church just affirms what these ‘elders’ have already decided for the church to do.”

While scholars agree elders of some sort took part in first-century church leadership, division remains as to what that role was—and how that should translate to present-day churches. No matter which side of the issue those scholars espouse, they agree the issue is here to stay.

Wring, pastor of Mountain Highway Baptist Church in Spanaway, Wash., believes the “board of elders” practice in Baptist churches is a hybrid church-governance structure that combines Presbyterian and Baptist traditions.

“This board of elders is a Presbyterian-style church governance, but only on the local-church level,” he said. “Those favoring ruling elders (in a Baptist church) try to do this along with a congregational church-polity style. At best, it is a hybrid Presby-terian style of church governance.”

Wring wrote his doctoral dissertation at Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary in Memphis on elders in Southern Baptist churches. He feels strongly about the issue, even holding an informational seminar for Germantown Baptist members recently at Mid-America.

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Since New Testament times, Wring said, the role of “pastor-elders”—as some call the traditional office of pastor—has proved an asset to the church, along with deacons. But the more recent movement toward laymen as ruling elders creates a “third office” beyond the traditional offices of pastor and deacon, he said.

Wring foresees a lack of accountability developing with the addition of an elder group. Elders often begin acting as a board of directors, he said, unchecked by biblical qualifications or a specific job description.

According to critics, elders are being used in some cases to circumvent the more cumbersome majority-led governance that historically has characterized Baptist churches.

Germantown’s pastor disagrees. Shaw used open letters to the church to assure members that elders would not control everything. Instead, he saw the change as a way for the 170-year-old church to be “better shepherded.”

“Godly laymen will be more intimately involved in discussing and determining the spiritual direction of our church,” Shaw wrote, explaining the benefits of elder leadership. “The senior pastor will have a godly group of church-elected peers (elders) to serve with him and provide leadership in spiritual and administrative matters.”

In his statement, Shaw said congregants still would have nominated and approved changes relating to the pastor and elders, the church budget and church discipline. Members also would have regularly scheduled meetings with the pastor and elders.

Many congregants viewed the proposal with alarm, warning it was ambiguous enough to leave room for complete elder rule. More than 1,200 people met the same week church leaders released the proposal to discuss how to lobby against it—even setting up a website to fight it.

Clark Finch, one of the founders of the website, said the trend toward elder rule still is small within the Southern Baptist Convention. “Out of 42,000 churches in the SBC, there are less than 1 percent that have some form of elder,” Finch said. “All the churches I’ve been able to find that have elders are smaller churches or dying churches. (Germantown) does not fit this description.”

In Germantown’s elder process, church members would have nominated candidates, put them through a screening process by an elder interview team and then approved the interviewers’ decision. Part of that interview team would have consisted of the church’s present deacons and pastors.

Finch and other opponents used their anti-elder website—www.savegbc.org—to rally opposition by enlisting historians, professors, lay people and others. They insisted they wanted to save their church—not from elders, but from their improper use. The proposed elders were not “leading elders” but “ruling elders,” said Finch, something he sees as a dangerous departure from biblical descriptions of elders.

Finch believes elders should be helpers, not rulers. In his opinion, a church should consist of pastors, deacons, committees and the congregation. He has no problem with calling pastoral staffers “elders,” but he categorically opposes elders as a ruling body. A close reading of the bylaws Germantown Baptist Church rejected reveals elders would have controlled everything, Finch said.

“First, let me state that elders are not the issue at GBC,” Finch said. “If we are to believe that pastor, bishop and elder are the same person, then we already have 22 elders. The real issue is lay elders and their function.”

The website says no Baptist associations or conventions support elder rule. If Germantown had joined the trend, it likely would have been the largest Baptist church to do so.

Mike Dever, pastor at Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington, D.C., has done just that. His small but historic 139-year-old church has long had 10 elders who provide the church with “sound guidance from biblically qualified men.”

Capitol Hill emphasizes all the elders are pastors of the congregation along with Dever, who serves as “first among equals.” Most of the elders work in secular jobs, while all meet scriptural qualifications for office as laid out in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1, Dever said.

“The elders should be marked by a use of their authority, which shows that they understand that the church belongs not to them but to Christ,” Dever wrote in his book, *A Display of God’s Glory*, which defends the use of elders. “The elders will give an account to Christ for their stewardship.”

Plus, Dever wrote, the elders are a “gift from God” for the good of the church. He warned Capitol Hill members to avoid “Satan’s lie that authority is never to be trusted because it is always tyrannical and oppressive.”

“As in a home, or in our own relationship with God, a humble recognition of rightful authority brings benefits,” he wrote. “In a church, when authority is used with the consent of the congregation for the good of the congregation, the congregation will benefit as God builds his church. ...”

In many cases, the consent comes from Baptist congregations voting on elders. But some churches leave the choice of elders to the senior pastor. For some churches, deacons make decisions in place of elders, although many Baptist churches view deacons primarily as helpers, not rulers.

Bill Leonard, dean and professor of church history at Wake Forest Divinity School in Winston-Salem, N.C., has studied extensively the place of elders in Baptist history.

Some early Baptists may have used the titles of elder and pastor interchangeably before the 17th century, he said. But confessions of faith written by Baptists of that era point to only two specific church offices—pastor and deacon.

The confusion over the role of elders has surfaced even overseas, Leonard said. “I was recently in Romania and there met some persons who took the title as elder and used it interchangeably with the term deacon, a lay office in the church,” Leonard said. “So you see, there is some variety of usage in Baptist life.”

Leonard, like others, said he thinks the new controversy indicates Baptists are becoming more Presbyterian—or they are at least developing a hybrid model, as Wring detects.

Some scholars complain the trend indicates Baptists are becoming more ecumenical and less distinctly Baptist. Wring blames “younger Baptist leaders who do not know what being a Baptist is truly all about.”

That sentiment—the fear that time-honored Baptist principles are disappearing—fuels the emotional side of the debate. Baptists are notoriously stubborn, said author James White, and each group will determinedly defend the viewpoint they first learned.

Personal emotion plays a large role in most Baptist politics, not just the issue of elders, and emotional ties stem directly from tradition, said White, adjunct professor of theology at Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary in Mill Valley, Calif.

A contributor to the book *Perspectives on Church Government: Five Views of Church Polity*, White said when Baptists are raised with one viewpoint, it becomes their tradition.

“Baptists tend to think we have no traditions when, of course, we do,”

White said. “Since we do not talk a lot about testing our traditions by Scripture, when someone comes along and says, ‘The way we do this does not line up with Scripture,’ we tend to take that personally, and it is truly upsetting.”

No matter on which side of the issue they fall, however, most observers agree the division is not going away, nor will the emotion and even anger it engenders.

“This issue may be with Southern Baptists for a long time,” Wring said. “It very well may be the next issue to be dealt with in SBC life for at least the next 10 to 15 years.”

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