

Authority Structures in Local Churches

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Introduction

My two-fold responsibility in the assignment to write this material is to discuss the following: (1) situations in congregations which have no eldership and which must depend upon committees and/or trustees for leadership and (2) a relatively recent phenomenon relating to the selection and appointment of elders, commonly called the “reaffirmation of elders.” Let us now study these topics in this order.

Committee/Trustee “Rule”

Introduction

I once moderated an open forum at a lecture program during which a querist asked, “Can a congregation Scripturally exist without elders?” The obvious answer is, “Yes.” The first congregation to exist (i.e., the Jerusalem church) began and existed for some time with no elders. We do not read of any elders in Judea before Acts 11:30, perhaps ten or more years after Pentecost. Of course, these elders had been appointed and served for some interval of time before Luke mentioned them, but still, it is clear that the Jerusalem church functioned Scripturally with no elders initially. Paul and Barnabas established congregations in the cities of Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe on their first preaching trip, then went back later and appointed elders in them (14:23).

Paul’s instructions both to Timothy in Ephesus and to Titus in Crete imply that the congregations in those places had no elders, but that a plurality of such men as were qualified should be appointed (1 Tim. 3:1–7; Tit. 1:5–9). Perhaps the Ephesian elders with whom Paul visited at Miletus resulted from Timothy’s work in this regard (Acts 20:17). So it was with all of the churches in the apostolic era, and so it has continued down to our time. In the very nature of the case, congregations must first begin and function for more or less time before they have elders. I have worked with some congregations that had no elders, wishing that they did. On the other hand, I have worked with some congregations that had elders, but which would have been far better off without the unqualified men in that position.

How are churches to make decisions, carry on their business, plan and execute their work, make necessary purchases, and so forth in the interim—before they have men who can qualify and be appointed as elders? This is a very practical question because it applies to every congregation for at least some period of time. It would be very convenient if we could turn to various passages in the epistles and read of the way our first-century brethren handled these

matters. However, if such passages exist, this Bible student has never been able to find them. It appears that the Holy Spirit left such matters in the realm of option, expediency, and our best “sanctified” judgment that violates no principle of Scripture.

Committee “Rule”

Congregations without an eldership must have a means for making decisions regarding such things as their work, worship, discipline, and other matters. In keeping with the general unending principle of God’s Will regarding male leadership from the beginning, this responsibility falls upon the shoulders of the men (Gen. 3:16; 1 Cor. 11:3; Eph. 5:22–24; 1 Tim. 2:8–14; et al.). The common practice to expedite the necessary decision-making is for the men to meet periodically and discuss the affairs of the church, with decisions reached by majority vote of the men. Depending on the size of the congregation (whether with or without elders), it may be expedient to appoint one or more committees to which various responsibilities are delegated. The principal danger that must be avoided in such committee arrangements (especially in congregations **without** elders) is in allowing a committee of men to become a quasi-eldership. I know of at least one congregation where such a situation has developed, and it has caused considerable trouble within the church. The important caution for churches without an eldership is for the men to be sure that the committees serve the church rather than vice versa. There is no Scriptural authority for the male members of a church without elders to appoint a committee into whose hands all decision-making powers are given as if it were an eldership—thus dispensing with meetings involving all the male members.

Trustee “Rule”

Church trustees are men to whom the congregation’s real and/or physical properties are legally committed in trust. Churches existed long before the concept of trustees of church property. There is no hint that any congregation in the first century owned any property, thus rendering even the concept of trustees superfluous. In more modern times, with congregations owning property often involving vast amounts of financial expenditure and investment, the creation of church trusteeships has become rather common. While churches are permitted by law to have trustees, they are not required to, at least not in my home state of Texas. I would suppose that in those cases where a church has elders, but no trustees, that the elders would be considered de facto trustees in any questions that might arise involving church property. I have no way of knowing what legal variables there may be from state to state or in various nations concerning trustees. It is quite possible that some states and/or nations require them.

My understanding of the role of trustees, as stated above, is that these men hold in trust the real and physical property of the congregation on behalf of the congregation. Many congregations have certain restrictions written into their property deeds. Likely the most common one has to do with the prohibition of using instrumental music in worship by the church that owns the property. This restriction has its roots in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century when liberals stole the vast majority of buildings and other property from faithful brethren. In a congregation with such a deed restriction, trustees would be responsible for seeing that the restriction is not violated.

It is possible, but not common to my knowledge, for the elders and the trustees to be the same men. It is likely wise for them **not** to be the same, however. If the elders should become liberal and should try to introduce instruments of music into the worship or other unauthorized innovations, it would be the legal (and Scriptural) responsibility of the trustees to oppose the elders in order to protect the church property according to the deed restriction. However, trustees have no ruling authority in a congregation (with or without elders) apart from their duty to preserve and protect the church's property for its Scriptural functions of its work and worship. In churches with elders, the elders are charged with the complete oversight of all of the activities of the church (Acts 20:28; Heb. 13:17). This oversight includes the property. However, the preceding statements assume that these men will fulfill their dual charge to remain faithful themselves and to keep the congregation faithful (Acts 20:28–31).

In churches with trustees, but with no elders, it is especially necessary to clearly set forth the limits of their responsibilities and powers lest they, as sometimes occurs with committees, become a quasi-eldership. I know of one congregation with trustees that lost its eldership because one of its two elders moved away. At least some of the trustees (one of which was also the treasurer) began to make decisions and pronouncements without consulting the other men. They obviously took upon themselves eldership authority in violation of Scripture.

When a church decides to appoint trustees, it has no Scriptural qualifications for these men to which it can turn. However, given the nature of their responsibility, wisdom and logic dictate that these should be men who both know and love the Truth and who therefore have the ability to recognize error. Not only so, but they should also be men with enough backbone to protect the church's property should it ever be jeopardized, whether from without or from corruption from within. Trustees are human beings, and they can also apostatize (witness what has happened to the trustees of some of the universities operated by our brethren!). The congregation should remain vigilant for any sign of the weakening of convictions in any of the

trustees and should replace such with faithful men without delay. Perhaps, if new trustees were appointed on an annual basis, with great care taken to appoint only faithful men, this problem would be preempted.

Reaffirmation of Elders

Introduction

My first exposure to the practice of appointing elders by a “reevaluation/reaffirmation” process in a church of Christ was in 1987 when the Richland Hills Church of Christ (near Fort Worth, Texas) announced in its bulletin that it follows such a process for both its elders and deacons. Due to its history of leadership in all things liberal for many years, this practice was not at all surprising. However, the next time I heard of such a practice was both surprising and disappointing. The Brown Trail congregation, Bedford, Texas (its building being only about 3 miles from that of Richland Hills), generally known through the years for its Scriptural soundness, used the reevaluation/reaffirmation process in 1990 to restructure its eldership. This included the dismissal of at least one elders and the selection of a new elder. Although many other examples doubtless exist, in my research for writing this material I only have documentation of this practice by the following congregations, including the two mentioned immediately above:

1. The Richland Hills Congregation, North Richland Hills, Texas
2. The Houston Park Congregation, Selma, Alabama
3. The Pleasant Ridge Congregation, Arlington, Texas
4. The Airport Freeway Congregation, Euless, Texas
5. The 11 th and Willis Streets Congregation, Abilene, Texas
6. The Crestview Congregation, Waco, Texas
7. The Brown Trail Congregation, Bedford, Texas

Definitions

In order to understand the practice under discussion the reader needs to understand the definition and application of the three principal terms employed by its advocates:

1. *Reevaluation* is based upon the word *evaluate*. To evaluate is to determine or fix worth or value of an object or person (in this case, the latter) based upon examination. To reevaluate is to evaluate again or anew. To reevaluate elders means to reexamine them in order to determine their worthiness or unworthiness to continue to be elders.
2. *Reaffirmation* is based upon the word *affirm*, which means to validate by positive assertion. Thus to reaffirm means to validate again that which was once validated. In respect to elders, *reaffirmation* means that men already serving as elders have their continued service

validated and positively asserted. Please note that reaffirmation implies prior reevaluation; without it there is no basis for reaffirmation in this procedure.

3. *Reconfirmation* is based upon the word *confirm*. This word means to make firm, strengthen, ratify, or give approval to. *Reconfirmation* obviously means to repeat the approval or ratification originally given upon one's appointment as an elder. Since this word is actually a synonym for *reaffirmation*, when applied to elder selection the two words may be and are often used interchangeably.

To these three words I have added *deaffirmation* and *deconfirmation* (admittedly my "coined" words), effective antonyms for *reaffirmation* and *reconfirmation*, respectively. It logically follows that a man who is not reaffirmed/reconfirmed after reevaluation is thereby "deaffirmed" or "deconfirmed"!

The Basic Procedure

Some variations exist in the details followed by the earlier-listed congregations for their respective reevaluation/reaffirmation processes. However, they all have the general steps below in common:

1. Appointment of a committee (in some cases more than one), which stands between existing elders and the congregation and composes rules for the process.
2. The committee is vested with authority and oversight of the entire reevaluation/selection process—including authority over existing elders.
3. The committee establishes an arbitrary (and sometimes complex) formula by which it determines who is to be reaffirmed, deaffirmed, and/or affirmed (in the case of new candidates).
4. The congregation reevaluates existing elders and suggests prospective elders, per the rules drafted by the committee.
5. A period of time is allowed for lodging objections against any of the existing elders and/or candidates.
6. Those who satisfy the pre-established formula and who are not disqualified because of sustainable Scriptural objections lodged against them are then reaffirmed or affirmed, respectively.

Justifications Offered by Advocates

Having seen the nature of the process, we now consider the attempts to Scripturally justify and defend the practice/process. The aforementioned congregations that have adopted a reevaluation/reaffirmation approach to elder and/or deacon appointment have indicated varied attitudes toward justification of it. These range from no attempt at justification to setting forth a somewhat earnest attempt.

The Brown Trail (Bedford, TX) “Elder Selection Screening Committee” went to much greater pains than others in its attempt to provide Scriptural justification for employing its elder reevaluation process. This would be expected for at least two reasons:

1. The Brown Trail Church has had a long history of seeking to do only what the Scriptures authorize (admirably so), and the other congregations involved in this work have hardly distinguished themselves in this pursuit.
2. Both the Brown Trail elders and the reevaluation committee rightly anticipated that their adoption of this process would identify them with generally-recognized liberal congregations in the minds of many sound brethren. Due to the committee’s concerns about such matters, it issued a lengthy (by comparison) “Rationale” for the program it set forth.

From all of the foregoing sources, the following list is a summary of the assertions offered in justification of the concept of reevaluation and reaffirmation of elders:

1. The New Testament authorizes the selection and appointment of elders, but it does not instruct in the procedure for doing so; therefore, we must use our judgment concerning the best way to do so.
2. The selection of Matthias as an apostle (Acts 1:24) is a model for selection of elders. God had already made His choice and the other apostles simply employed a means by which He could reveal who it was.
3. Elders are to be selected by the members (Acts 6:3).
4. Elders must have respect of the church members to be able to serve effectively.
5. Elders should be evaluated to see if they continue to be qualified (1 Tim. 5:19).
6. Elders have the authority to determine whether or not the congregation still has sufficient confidence in them to respect and follow their leadership.

Responses to the Justifications

My initial response to the proffered justifications is to observe the following: All of the justifications have linked (whether wittingly or unwittingly) selection and appointment of elders with reevaluation and reappointment of elders as if they were inseparable and without distinction. The basic argument of the reevaluation advocates may thus be stated as follows:

1. The Scriptures authorize local congregations to select and appoint their own elders, but the details of doing so are in the realm of expediency.
2. *Reevaluation* and *reaffirmation* are merely alternate names for and means of the selection and appointment of elders.
3. Therefore, the Scriptures authorize reevaluation and reaffirmation of elders as expedients for selection and appointment of elders.

The first premise above is true. Assuredly, the Scriptures authorize the selection and appointment of elders/bishops/pastors in every congregation in which two or more men can be found who are Scripturally qualified (Acts 14:23; 15:4ff; 16:4; 20:17; 1 Tim. 3:1–7; 5:17–20; Tit.

1:5–9). Moreover, the New Testament does not provide specifics, either by example or precept, of the way these selections and appointments are to be done. Such arrangements are therefore left to the exercise of human wisdom that works in harmony with the overall context of Scriptural authority.

The problem arises with the second premise above: It assumes that which requires proof and evidence, which are not offered. It should be obvious to all that programs of “reevaluation” and “reaffirmation” (or “deaffirmation”) (such as those described above) of previously-selected and appointed elders are not the same as mere selection and appointment procedures. The Brown Trail plans referenced above use separate and different forms for evaluating **present** elders and nominating **new** elders—a tacit admission that reevaluation and initial selection are separate processes even in the minds of the committee members. Moreover, the Brown Trail plan stipulated: “Present elders must receive 75% support of those submitting forms.” No such stipulation was applied to those who had not previously served.

Since the second premise is false, the conclusion is necessarily false. The reevaluation, reaffirmation, and deaffirmation process concerning elders is a separate issue from the mere selection and appointment of elders and thus must be separately tested in light of the Scriptures. Both implicit and explicit authority exist for the latter. None exists for the former.

What about the use of Acts 1:24 as justification? I have never before seen this passage used in any connection with the selection or appointment of elders, and, with good reason. The context of this passage is the meeting of the 120 disciples, along with the 11 apostles, in Jerusalem between the ascension of the Lord and the Day of Pentecost. In the process of selecting a replacement for Judas, the group prayed (apparently led by Peter, v. 15): “Thou, Lord, who knowest the hearts of all men, show of these two the one whom thou hast chosen, to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas fell away” (vv. 24–25). From this they argue that the apostles did not “impose their will on the church” (obviously impossible since the church had not yet been established).

But even granting that this process was employed after the church was established, it hardly helps the argument—unless those making it are willing to cast lots and rely upon the outcome as the means nowadays by which God signals His choice of elders. The fact that this was a selection involving the miraculous element invalidates it as a precedent for any generation of the church since the cessation of miracles. While this incident shows that the apostles did not independently or arbitrarily choose Matthias, it has nothing to do with the question before us. The “church” (i.e., the 120) did not make the selection, either; God did! The

argument seems to be that because the apostles did not choose Matthias, we therefore have Scriptural authority for reevaluating and reaffirming or “deaffirming” elders. This is a very large stretch—even for a Texas church!

In its “Biblical Rationale” statement, the Brown Trail church referred to Acts 6:3 and 1 Timothy 5:19 for justification. What, if anything, does Acts 6:3 have to say about the issue before us? The only point the “Rationale” drew from it was, “The members select elders to begin with (Acts 6:3).” The context of this passage is the response of the apostles to the complaint from the Grecian Jews that “their widows were being neglected in the daily ministration” (v. 1). The apostles called the church together and told them, “Look ye out therefore, brethren, from among you seven men of good report, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business” (v. 3). The “Rationale” used this passage to note that the apostles here gave an inspired selection process. I agree and have so applied it for many years. However, I must ask how this justifies the reevaluation/reaffirmation/deaffirmation program? All this passage does is furnish the precedent for congregational involvement in the selection of elders (and deacons), rather than in some intricate reevaluation process of men who were already selected, appointed, and serving.

According to the “Rationale,” 1 Timothy 5:19 is alleged to demonstrate that “the Bible makes provision for the evaluation of an elder’s spiritual standing.” In this passage Paul cautioned: “Against an elder receive not an accusation, except at the mouth of two or three witnesses.” He then added, “Them that sin reprove in the sight of all, that the rest also may be in fear” (v. 20). The “Rationale” goes on to state the following absurd redundancy: “Should a current elder be found to be disqualified, he no longer meets the qualifications to be an elder.” It then alleges that “an evaluation process is simply one expedient means of ascertaining the elder’s conformity to God’s will.” The paragraph closes by stating: “‘Once an elder, always an elder’ is as false as ‘once saved, always saved.’”

Search as I might, I find no Scriptural precedent for the “reevaluation/reaffirmation” practice in 1 Timothy 5:19–20. To find this practice in this text requires some imaginative eisegesis, rather than sound exegesis. Of course, “once an elder, always an elder” is a faulty concept. However, the task and necessity of removing an elder because two or three witnesses sustain a charge of sin against him is one thing, and “reevaluating” and either “reconfirming” or “deconfirming” one elder or an entire eldership as a matter of policy or of periodic routine is something altogether different. Further, I know of no basis for removing a man as an elder **unless he is proved to be unqualified** according to 1 Timothy 3:1–7 and Titus 1:5–9. To say

that a man should be removed because 26% of the congregation does not want to follow him or does not like him is not found in this passage or any other.

The “Rationale” continues: “Since the complexion of congregational membership changes over the years, an eldership may conceivably no longer consist of the same individuals whom the present membership would select.”

However, just because the “complexion” of a congregation changes over the years (as all do to some extent) says nothing to justify the practice of reevaluation/reaffirmation. When saints come to place membership with a congregation they are obligated to submit themselves to the elders of that congregation, just as every other member is obligated (Acts 20:28; Heb. 13:17). If said members cannot follow the leadership and work under the oversight of those elders, why should they want to place membership?

Consider certain harmful consequences may accrue from this practice:

1. The congregation is “up for grabs” with the change of congregational “complexion.” Any group of errorists of any sort (antis, premillennialists, preterists, liberals, or others) could move into a congregation over a period of months and so change the “complexion” of a congregation as to demand their own chosen elders. This actually has occurred as a power move in more than one place even with the “reevaluation” process, but the “reevaluation” program may even invite and encourage such occurrences.
2. The “reevaluation/reconfirmation/deconfirmation” concept removes the oversight of the congregation from the elders (Acts 20:28) and gives it to 26% of the congregation. Majority rule in the absence of elders has its drawbacks at times, but to allow a mere 26% to determine who will or will not serve as elders, and that, perhaps on the basis of personal likes and/or dislikes rather than on Scriptural qualifications, is as foolish as it is without Scriptural sanction. Moreover, the 26% figure apparently relates to the **number of forms received** by the screening committee, rather than 26% **of the actual membership**. Depending on how many forms were submitted the 26% of objectors could represent a much smaller percentage of the entire membership—“minority rule,” indeed!

No reasonable, much less Scriptural, connection obtains between the “change of complexion” of a congregation and the justification for some sort of reevaluation/reaffirmation process for the reconfirmation or appointment of elders.

The next item in the “Rationale” asserts: “Shepherds cannot lead where sheep will not follow.” It then proceeds to argue that while a man may be “technically qualified” to be an elder, if the congregation does not respect and trust him as a leader, he cannot “shepherd effectively.” I submit that this assertion invites abuse of and rebellion against the eldership or at least of certain men who are elders. Does not this place all of the responsibility upon the elders to be men (even though Scripturally qualified) who the members want to follow (based on perhaps

subjective or mere fleshly standards), rather than placing it on submission to the eldership because its members are qualified and because God commands them to do so (Heb. 13:17, et al.)? The reevaluation/reaffirmation process places more stress on who the members will follow than on who is or is not Scripturally qualified to continue serving as an elder. Further, the *change of complexion* excuse requires the elders to submit to the church rather than upon the church's submission to the elders. Further still, to make a rule that members must also be "willing to follow" a man who is otherwise "technically [i.e., Scripturally] qualified," is to add a qualification to those set forth by the Holy Spirit. Given the Scriptural qualifications, one who meets them is worthy of being followed, and those who will not do so are the ones in error—not the "technically qualified" elder.

The "Rationale" also asserts that the "reevaluation" process is merely an expedient means of determining whether or not an elder is conforming to God's will. Such an attempt overlooks an elementary principle of Biblical hermeneutics: **Authorization must precede expediency**. In other words, no matter can be expedient unless it is first authorized—and the authorization for this practice cannot be produced.

The final paragraph of the "Rationale" avers that elders have the authority to determine what level of confidence the members have in their "leadership capabilities." Granting—for argument's sake—that they have this authority, where is there any emphasis in the New Testament relating to a craving for such information? This sort of uneasiness smacks more of the cold, sterile, secular concerns of executives in the business world than it does of God's elders. It is evident throughout the "Rationale" that there is a severe preoccupation with whether or not an elder is perceived as having "leadership" qualities that will inspire members to follow him. There seems to be a corresponding **under**-emphasis on the actual Scriptural qualifications themselves in the whole reevaluation/reaffirming process. Elders have authority in the local congregation in matters of expediency and judgment, but they do not have authority to empower a committee, whatever its purpose, that supersedes the authority God gave to them alone!

A List of Concerns

I now list a number of issues (some of which have already been mentioned) that need to be seriously considered by any congregation that is contemplating adoption of a reevaluation/reaffirmation plan. I am concerned about the following matters:

1. It professes to "reappoint" (the practical meaning of reaffirming or reconfirming) men who are already appointed and who have not resigned (both contradictory and nonsensical).
2. It renders duly-selected and appointed elders only "de facto" or "quasi" elders during the reevaluation process.

3. It places an administrative or screening committee in authority, to which the eldership must give account and submit.
4. It prevents elders (who are to oversee all of the members and all of the work of all of the congregation) from having any voice in or oversight of who will serve as elders.
5. It sets a precedent that will be very difficult to abandon. It will thenceforth appear unfair to those to whom it was originally applied if all succeeding elders are not subjected to the same process.
6. It adds (as mentioned earlier) the qualification of “leadership characteristics” to the qualifications found in the New Testament.
7. It may result in removing certain unqualified men from the eldership, but it also provides an opportunity for forces of error to quickly and easily gain control of the eldership of a congregation with a minimum number of people by removal of qualified men. What if the elders in a congregation are qualified men who are determined to keep the church pure, but in the reevaluation process a 26% element of liberals in the church turn in negative ballots? Just this easily (and unscripturally) can a dedicated, qualified eldership be restructured!
8. It creates a great potential for dissension and division in a congregation should the elders dare contradict the committee, the existence of which they have authorized and whose policies and procedures have been sanctioned by the congregation.
9. It gives an opportunity for fraud, deceit, and favoritism in the process of tabulation of the ballots by the committee members.
10. It could encourage an elder who is being reevaluated to engage in “lobbying,” politicking, and/or “promise-making” in order to be able to attain the necessary percentage of votes for reaffirmation.
11. It establishes arbitrary percentages for “reaffirmation” or “deaffirmation.”
12. It necessarily tabulates (as earlier emphasized) the percentages only of those who actually participate in the balloting, which may represent much smaller percentages of the actual membership.
13. It allows a small percentage of the members of a congregation to determine who its elders will be and how long they will serve.
14. It smacks more of the standards of failure and success employed by the world of business rather than the standards set forth in the New Testament.
15. It replaces the Scriptural mandate, “them that sin rebuke before all” (1 Tim. 5:20) with “in the event an elder is not reaffirmed by the congregation, he should be given opportunity to retire with dignity.”
16. It supplants the Scriptural instruction for dealing with sin and/or failure in the qualifications of an elder (1 Tim. 5:19) with a humanly-contrived scheme of detailed and intricate “reevaluation” protocol relating more to “leadership characteristics” than to Scriptural qualifications.

Conclusion

The one major concern that overrides all others for lovers of Truth is that the formal, arbitrary, highly-structured reevaluation, reaffirmation, or deaffirmation procedure that is almost a fad running through liberal congregations (and that has ensnared even some unwary conservative ones) is without Scriptural authority. Most of those who defend it hardly make an appeal to the Scriptures, and with good reason. Those who attempt such an appeal fail. The best argument against it is the same as that against instrumental music in worship and a thousand other innovations that men have dreamed up: “There ain’t no Bible fer it,” as the backwoods, but faithful, saint declared!

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