

Almighty Maker, God*Isaac Watts (1674–1748)*

Almighty Maker, God,
How wondrous is thy name!
Thy glories how diffused abroad,
Through the creation's frame.

Nature in every dress
Her humble homage pays,
And finds a thousand ways t' express
Thine undissembled praise.

My soul would rise and sing
To her Creator too;
Fain would my tongue adore my King,
And pay the worship due.

Create my soul anew,
Else all my worship's vain;
This wretched heart will ne'er be true,
Until 't is formed again.

Descend, celestial fire,
And seize me from above;
Melt me in flames of pure desire,
A sacrifice to love.

Let joy and worship spend
The remnant of my days,
And to my God, my soul, ascend
In sweet perfumes of praise.

ΤΩ ΚΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ*In the Nick of Time***Elders Rule! But Congregations Decide***Kevin T. Bauder*

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Those who think that churches should be governed by a self-perpetuating boards of elders have two main arguments. The first is that the sheep (i.e., ordinary believers under the care of shepherds or elders) are not competent to make church-wide decisions. This argument is easily refuted by even a cursory reading of the New Testament. Not only does the New Testament repeatedly emphasize the spiritual competence of every believer, but it gives multiplied instances of congregations (churches) choosing servants and even leaders, expelling and readmitting members, and defining doctrine. At least some passages make it clear that these decisions were reached by majority rule.

Advocates of elder government sometimes try to refute this uniform pattern of New Testament teaching and example by appealing to the fact that Paul, Barnabas, and Titus ordained elders. Those passages, however, do not depict individuals imposing elders upon unwilling congregations. They are rather ambiguous, but a close reading of the text indicates nothing inconsistent with apostolic installation after congregational selection. In other words, those texts do not really constitute an argument either for or against elder government.

Faced with these facts (and they are facts), advocates of elder government quickly flee to their second argument, namely, that elders are supposed to rule and congregations are supposed to obey. They understand "ruling" to mean that elders make decisions for the congregation, and they understand "obeying" to mean that the congregation is bound to submit to those elder-made decisions. The question is whether this construal really does justice to the evidence. Baptists believe that it does not.

In fact, the ship of elder government sails into a reef when it reaches 1 Peter 5:3, where the apostle explicitly forbids elders from acting as "lords over God's heritage" (KJV). The verb is a form of *katakaieuo*, which has exactly the idea of making fiat decisions. It involves the power to impose one's decision upon unwilling recipients.



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To be clear, the verb is not about the attitude with which the elder leads. Peter is not saying that elders can make all the decisions they wish for congregations, as long as they do it nicely. He is not saying that elders have the power to force people to act against their will as long as it is in their own best interest. Peter is absolutely forbidding elders from exercising fiat authority over congregations. Upon no occasion whatever can elders rightly impose a decision without a church's consent.

In the absence of fiat authority, how are elders supposed to lead? Peter gives part of the answer: they set an example for the flock. Ordinary church members should be able to look at their pastor to see what biblical principles look like when they are fleshed out in real life.

Peter also provides another part of the answer when he instructs elders to "feed the flock" (1 Pet. 5:2). Feeding and overseeing are closely connected, and it is no surprise to discover that an elder's teaching and preaching ministry compose a significant part of his leadership. According to Paul, those who are "over you in the Lord" exercise their authority when they "warn you" (1 Thess. 5:12). The writer to the Hebrews connects ruling or leading with speaking the Word of God and setting an example of faith (Heb. 13:7).

Paul underlines the importance of preaching and teaching in 1 Timothy 5:17. Some have thought that this passage teaches a difference between teaching elders and ruling elders, but if it does, it is the only passage in the New Testament to make that distinction. It is better to understand the verse as contrasting elders who rule well with elders who simply rule (adequately). The factor that distinguishes the two is labor in preaching and teaching. All elders rule or lead by their teaching, but some elders give themselves to the task in an unusual way. They labor in the word and in doctrine. Such elders are to be granted double honor.

To rule is simply to lead. Elders rule in two ways. They lead by example, and they lead by preaching and teaching. As part of their teaching they may rebuke, reprove, and exhort, but they are still teaching. They are not enforcing their decisions upon congregations.

What about obedience? Does not the New Testament command believers to obey elders? How can Christians obey leaders who are forbidden to give orders?

Hebrews 13 also answers this question. According to verse 7, ruling is connected with speaking the Word of God and setting an example. Believers are supposed to listen to the teaching and consider the example. To the extent that the teaching is sound and the example results in God's approval, believers are obligated to obey (verse 17). What they obey is not the elder's command, given on his own initiative. What they obey is the Word of God, taught rightly by the elder and reinforced by his example. If a church is be-

ing taught rightly, and if it is being shown how to apply Scripture rightly, and it refuses to obey, then it is going to have to answer to God.

Perhaps the greatest problem with the advocates of elder government is simply that they lack imagination. They cannot visualize any kind of authority other than giving orders. They cannot conceive a mode of leadership that does not require them to make up people's minds for them. The result is that their congregations are deprived of the opportunity to grow by deciding (and sometimes making mistakes) for themselves. At the end of the day, elder government tends toward congregational immaturity.

In fact, that is one reason that proponents of elder rule clutch their system so tightly. They do not have confidence that congregations can be brought to sufficient maturity to make spiritual decisions. And that means ultimately that they lack confidence in the power of Scripture and the agency of the Holy Spirit to guide God's people through difficult places.

Elders are supposed to lead. Scripture is clear on that point. Scripture is also clear, however, that elders are not supposed to lead by making decisions for churches. They are supposed to lead by preparing congregations to make those decisions for themselves.



This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, Research Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.
