

The Baptist Faith and Message: **VI. The Church, part II**

A New Testament church of the Lord Jesus Christ is an autonomous local congregation of baptized believers, associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the gospel; observing the two ordinances of Christ, governed by His laws, exercising the gifts, rights, and privileges invested in them by His Word, and seeking to extend the gospel to the ends of the earth. Each congregation operates under the Lordship of Christ through democratic processes. In such a congregation each member is responsible and accountable to Christ as Lord. Its scriptural officers are pastors and deacons. While both men and women are gifted for service in the church, the office of pastor is limited to men as qualified by Scripture.

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When the *BF&M* refers to democratic process, it means that members of Southern Baptist churches vote and each member has an equal vote. Baptists have the freedom to constitute themselves in a manner agreeable to the majority of members. Most SBC churches have written forms of governance, such as constitutions and by-laws that explicitly define the form and method of church structure and function to assure that all things are done decently and in order. When a congregation truly operates under the Lordship of Christ, biblical principles prevail and good practices spring naturally from regenerate hearts, promoting unity. It is an out-growth of the freedom that we have in Christ. Baptists believe in freedom of conscience so long as it does not create dissension in the body or do injury to a fellow member. In stating that Baptists are responsible and accountable to Christ as Lord, the *BF&M* makes clear that members of SBC churches are expected to live their lives in a manner pleasing to the Lord to Whom they must give an account at the last day. They make their spiritual sacrifices to Him. They make their confessions to Him. There is no other intermediary. However, the *BF&M* is not suggesting that we are not also responsible and accountable to each other because the Bible teaches that we most certainly are. “No man lives to himself or dies to himself.” The basis for koinonia fellowship is interpersonal accountability in the body.

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The 1925 *BF&M* used the term “elders” instead of pastors. Careful examination of the NT reveals that the terms “pastor,” “bishop,” and “elder” all refer to the same spiritual office and can be used interchangeably. Examination of the constitutions of early SBC churches reveals that the prevailing church polity was to have multiple elders (often referred to as a “plurality” of elders) and deacons. This model is strongly supported in the Scriptures; however, other models can be interpreted from the Scriptures or not clearly prohibited by them. Some churches categorize elders as preaching, teaching, or ruling elders. Southern Baptists do not typically make such distinctions. The only distinction we make is between professional and lay elders, the latter receiving no remuneration. A plurality of elders brings stability, broad experience, and protects the congregation from autocrats.

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Some churches today, including some Baptist churches, claim that the office of Apostle still exists and people claim to hold the office. The *BF&M*, by not mentioning Apostle, implies that the office of Apostle no longer exists. The denominations that claim the office continues today usually also believe that there is continuing revelation and prophesy, some actually referring to themselves as prophet or prophetess, terms also conspicuously absent from the *BF&M*. In the NT, only two offices, pastor and deacon, had specific qualifications spelled out for those who would occupy those offices. This supports the view that there would be no continuation of the other offices. I stand with those who believe that revelation ended with the apostles, NT prophets, and their contemporary witnesses.

The *BF&M* also specifies that the pastoral office cannot be held by women; however, it does not make such a distinction for the office of deacon. Even so, most conservative SBC churches typically do not allow women to hold the office of deacon. Although there were women prophets in the NT, women pastors can nowhere be found. The Scriptures outlining the qualifications for pastor (elder, minister) always refer to males: “If a man desires the office of elder...” Generally speaking, the denominations or churches that have women pastors or ministers have adopted a liberal view of the Scriptures and tend to embrace liberal views on social issues (e.g., evolution, gay rights). Notably, the *BF&M* leaves the door open for women deacons for several reasons. First, a Scriptural case can be made that Phoebe was a female deacon because the Greek word “diakonos” is used to describe her service to the church at Cenchreae. However, the word can also mean servant and the context of its use is not sufficient to prove Phoebe was serving as a deacon. Secondly, female deacons existed in early SBC churches. Thirdly, a pragmatic reason is that there are some necessary services that men cannot perform for women as well as other women can (e.g., men visiting women in the hospital.) One impediment to women serving as deacons is that the pastor-deacon model has changed the role of the deacon to be closer to a pastoral role. Many are concerned that ordaining women deacons will lead to ordaining women pastors.

Although the elders and deacons have differing responsibilities, they have very similar qualifications that are nearly all related to their personal character. The office of deacon was formed to provide relief to the elders from the daily operations of the church so that the elders could devote themselves to the Word and prayer. This is one reason that being “apt to teach” is among the qualifications for elders, but not for deacons. Thus, the elder role focuses on ministry of the Word and the role of the deacon on the daily operations of the church. Obviously, the roles can overlap to some degree. This also provides some insight regarding the prohibition of women serving in the pastoral office because women were not permitted to teach men. Women serving men would not necessarily be an issue in the more operations-related role of deacon.

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More broadly, the *BF&M* also speaks to the universal nature of the church and the spiritual union that we have as believers that transcends denominationalism and life and death. We, as believers, are all one in Christ. By including the redeemed of all ages, the church is not only made up of the living but also those who by faith have been taken up (Enoch), died looking for the promise (Abraham), or died having received the promise who, all taken together, make up that “great cloud of witnesses” spoken of in Hebrews 12.

Speaking of the church as the redeemed of all ages can present a problem for those churches in the SBC that hold a dispensational view of the church. They may not be comfortable with including OT believers in the church as they define it.