

Church,

I am daily reminded of both the profound blessing as well as the weighty responsibility that comes with being your pastor. It is the second, the weighty responsibility of pastoral ministry, that prompts me to write this letter to you. Instead of wanting to pastor you all by myself so that I could receive all the praise and “atta boys” for myself, I am asking you all to consider a different model of pastoral leadership than our church has ever had before; this structure would take the singular spot light off me as a solo-pastor, diversify the weighty responsibility that comes with pastoring a church, and, I believe, result in you all being shepherded better than ever before. The church leadership model that I have in mind (which I believe to be the Biblical model) has a team of pastors (sometimes called a plurality of pastors) which serve our church in partnership with the team of deacons. This plurality of pastors would be made up of both staff pastors (paid) and lay-pastors (unpaid, like our deacons). If you would be gracious enough, I would ask you to take some time to read the following pages of this letter where I show that this is both rooted in Scripture as well as the earliest years of the Southern Baptist Convention and that it continues to be the leadership structure of many of our sister-churches in the Missouri Baptist Convention.

Introduction

If fatherlessness is prominent within a community, that given community is more likely to suffer. Alternatively, when the typical family within a community is as God designed it (i.e. having both a father and a mother), that community is more likely to flourish. In a similar way, if a local church does not have both complimenting offices as mentioned in Scripture (e.g. possessing a deacon body but not having a body of pastors), that local church will struggle to flourish as God intended it to.

This letter is not to argue that one church office is better than another. In fact, I wrote this letter as one who is immensely grateful for both offices that God has blessed His bride with and, as such, I want to champion both offices as they operate within their proper roles and functions. My goal in writing this is to briefly summarize the church leadership model laid out in Scripture and then to survey the history of the SBC to see how it has drifted over time from this standard presented in the New Testament. I want to then conclude with a hope-filled view of SBC churches moving forward (especially our own).

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For as long as most living Southern Baptists can remember, “the norm” within SBC churches has been a deacon-board and solo-pastor model. This trend within the denomination can even be traced in all the ministry handbooks the SBC has published for local churches. In their 1925 *The Pastor’s Manual*, churches are encouraged to have a plurality of lay-deacons, but there is no mention of a plurality of pastors. In 1966, Broadman published a new resource called *The Baptist Church Manual*, which briefly acknowledged in one sentence that a plurality of pastors was endorsed within the New Testament¹ but then went on to only describe the deacons of a church in the plural and exclusively talked about the pastor in the singular. Two years later, in 1968, they released *The Minister’s Manual* that spoke only of one Senior Pastor and referred to all additional hired workers as

¹ J. M. Pendleton, *Baptist Church Manual* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1966), 24.

“ministers” (never fellow pastors). Once more, in 1998, Broadman published *The Baptist Deacon* which described the local church as having a body of deacons but only a solo “preacher/pastor.”² Without a doubt, the deacon-board and solo-pastor model has been the standard for Southern Baptist Churches for the last century. To this day, if someone were to walk into a random SBC church, the chances are high they would find this leadership structure; but it has not always been this way.

In the following pages, we will see that this solo-pastor & deacon-board model is neither rooted in the Bible nor in the long-standing tradition of Baptists. Instead, it has surprisingly shallow roots in Baptist history since it only sprung up in the last one hundred years for primarily pragmatic reasons rather than Biblical ones.

A Theology of Plurality Established in Scripture

Though a plurality of leadership is an overwhelming reality within the New Testament, it is not original to the New Testament. Before God’s people were prescribed to be led by a plurality of elders in the New Testament, they were led by a plurality of elders in the Old Testament (“elder” is the New Testament’s most common title for what we know today as “pastor.”). When Moses was leading Israel, God told him to find 70 men to serve as elders alongside him in decision making (Numbers 11:16). This was so that these men would “bear the burden of the people with [Moses], so that [Moses] may not bear it alone” (v17). Before this, Moses was carrying the load by himself and his father-in-law had warned him, “the thing is too heavy for you. You are not able to do it alone” (Exodus 18:18).

It is not surprising, then, that we see this same principle of plurality amongst the leaders of God’s people in the New Covenant. The weighty burden of spiritual leadership still exists! We first see this on display in Acts 6. The Apostles were overwhelmed with the demand placed on them as the Church was rapidly growing. So, they sought to share the load with other able men (often called the “proto-deacons” since they were appointed to deacon-like ministry before the office of deacon was established). This allowed the Apostles (the “proto-elders”) to “devote themselves to prayer and the ministry of the world” (Acts 6:4).

Acts 6, in large part, serves as a model for what biblical church leadership looks like. It is the start of a pattern that continues through the rest of the New Testament where a plurality of elders within a church appoints and then partners with a plurality of deacons to serve the church by fulfilling different (yet equally vital) responsibilities for the continued growth of God’s kingdom. The term “elder,” along with the synonyms “overseer” and “shepherd” are consistently used to describe men who are appointed to a specific church (Acts 14:23, 15:22; James 5:14) and who serve alongside the deacons (Philippians 1:1). In common vernacular, they are “the pastors.” Notably, pastors are regularly spoken about in the plural, rather than in the singular, while the church they serve within is always in the singular rather than the plural (Acts 15:4, 15:22, 20:17, 20:28; James 5:14; 1 Peter 5:1-2). That is to say that for every local church, there was not only a body of deacons serving, but also a body of pastors leading. This is why Paul writes “Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching” (1 Tim. 5:17). In this, it is insinuated that there are also elders who are *not* the church’s consistent preachers.

² Robert E. L. Naylor, *The Baptist Deacon: From a Pastor With a Special Heart for Deacons* (Nashville, TN: B & H Books, 1998), 113.

According to Scripture, all pastors are tasked with relational duties such as caring for the flock (Acts 20:28) as well as visiting and praying with those who are sick (Acts 6:4; James 5:14). Such relational responsibilities are rightly shared with the deacons of the church (Acts 6:1-7). The pastors, however, are uniquely tasked with doctrinal duties, such as preaching (Acts 6:2; 1 Tim. 4:13; 2 Tim. 4:2; Titus 1:9), teaching (1 Thess. 5:12; 1 Tim. 3:2), judging doctrinal issues as they arise (Acts 15:6), and being watchmen for dangerous teachings which try to creep into the church (Acts 20:17, 28-31). Additionally, they are specifically charged with the general leadership of the church (Hebrews 13:7, 17; 1 Timothy 5:17).

Unquestionably, the function (and thus, significance) of a deacon is great and indispensable for the flourishing of the local church. This much cannot be overstated and should not be overlooked. Nevertheless, the function of the deacon as it is described in the New Testament does not include the responsibilities of doctrinal oversight or church leadership as it is for the pastors. While those in the congregation who are not elders, including the deacons, might provide the church with a teaching or assist in some form of leadership, it is exclusively those in the pastoral office who are chiefly charged with these tasks and will, therefore, be judged more harshly and critically according to how they executed such responsibilities (James 3:1; Hebrews 13:17).

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Starting Off Strong

Just like anything else, the Southern Baptist Convention did not spring up out of nowhere and was not formed within a vacuum. It is not the case that there were no Baptists in America in 1844 but then when the SBC was established in 1845 there were suddenly hundreds of new Baptist churches across the Southern landscape. Of course, the SBC was a product of previous Baptist denominations that came before it and were influenced by the beliefs held by those who transitioned into the movement. Thus, to know the beliefs held by those in the early years of the SBC, we must venture back in history to a time before the movement began.

Founded in 1707, the Philadelphia Baptist Association is “the oldest continuous association of Baptist churches in the United States”³ and was “the leading association of Baptists in the Colonial period.”⁴ Business meeting minutes from the PBA’s annual meeting in 1738 show that there was a collective decision amongst the messengers that any “ruling elder” of a congregation would still receive a second and separate ordination if he were to become a “teaching elder” for that congregation.⁵ Evidently, having multiple elders was common enough amongst these early American Baptist churches that it was worth gaining the attention of the entire association to establish a standard for ordination practices. As they understood it, there were elders who were the regular teachers/preachers of the church (“teaching elders”), and there were elders who did not teach regularly but who helped lead alongside the teaching elder(s) (“ruling elders”). This church structure can be seen firsthand by looking at preserved business meeting minutes within a local congregation.

³ “History,” Philadelphia Baptist Association, 2025, philadelphiabaptist.org/history.

⁴ Phil A. Newton, *Elders in Congregational Life: Rediscovering the Biblical Model for Church Leadership* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2005), 24.

⁵ Ibid.

One Baptist church, for example, decided to send some members to start a new church (one which eventually would join the SBC and, to this day, still remains in the Southern Baptist Convention), and the minutes read as such: “Our brothron and sisters whos names are as followeth: Abel Morgan *teaching Elder* (Abel Morgan is returned), James James *Ruling Elder*, Thomas Evan Deacon, Daniel James, Samuel Miles [Wilds], John Harry...”⁶ (emphasis added).⁷

Inspired by the Philadelphia Baptist Association’s example of churches working in cooperation with one another, “on October 21, 1751, the Charleston Baptist Association was established and became a prototype for all Southern Baptist Associations that followed.”⁸ In the CBA’s 1774 annual meeting, the Association adopted a document titled *Summary of Church Discipline*. This document simply gave guidelines on how a church ought to enact church discipline according to Matthew 18:15-17 if an unfortunate situation were to arise that merited such action. The document states that it is the job of elders to oversee and execute this process and then clarifies that “if there is not a sufficient presbytery in the church, neighboring elders are to be called and authorized to perform that service...”⁹ Thus, the ideal situation would be for a church to have enough elders/pastors to handle any given situation. In a less-than-ideal situation, however, a church would call on a sister church’s elders to come and assist in overseeing the church discipline. Either way, the Association maintained the conviction that these situations require a plurality of pastors.

In 1845, the Southern Baptist Convention was established in Augusta, Georgia. After 14 years of existence, the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary (The Convention’s flagship Seminary) ratified its first confessional document titled the *Abstract of Principles* (1859), which was largely based on the *Second London Baptist Confession* (1689) and stated, “the regular officers of the church are Bishops or Elders, and Deacons.”¹⁰ A few decades later, the SBC published its first edition of the *Baptist Faith and Message* (1925) which adopts this same language on the matter of church officers. It states that the church’s “scriptural officers are bishops or elders and deacons.”¹¹ Notably, both statements speak of the “church” in the singular but speak of the “bishops, elders, and deacons” in the plural. This ought to be compared to the *Baptist Faith and Message 2000* which states, “its two scriptural offices are that of pastor/elder/overseer and deacon”¹² (speaking of both offices in the singular). Thus, it can be said that a plurality of elders in a local church is seemingly assumed by these earlier SBC confessions. What is more, it is outright endorsed by *The Baptist Church Manual* published by the SBC’s Broadman Press in 1966. In this church manual, it states,

⁶ Winny Jones, *Records of the Welsh Tract Baptist Meeting, Pencader Hundred, New Castle County, Deleware (1701 to 1828)*, vol. 1 (Wilmington, The Historical Society of Deleware, 1904), 83–86, <https://archive.org/details/recordsofwelshtr00wels/page/n8/mode/1up>.

⁷ The order in which the names are listed is also worth noting. First, the teaching elder is listed and then the ruling elder after him. Next was the deacon and then the laymen were all listed after that.

⁸ “Our History,” Charleston Baptist Association, 2024, <https://www.charlestonbaptist.net/history>.

⁹ Charleston Baptist Association, *A Summary of Church Discipline* (Charleston, South Carolina, 1774), <https://founders.org/library/a-summary-of-church-discipline/>. Chapter 2, Paragraph 5.

¹⁰ The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, “Abstract of Principles,” 1858, <https://www.sbts.edu/abstract-of-principles/>. Chapter 14.

¹¹ The Southern Baptist Convention, “Baptist Faith and Message,” 1925. Chapter 12.

¹² The Southern Baptist Convention, “Baptist Faith and Message,” 2000, <https://bfm.sbc.net/bfm2000/>. Chapter 6.

“A bishop was a pastor of a church and the New Testament, far from encouraging a plurality of churches to be under one pastor, in at least two instances, refers to a plurality of pastors in one church (See Acts 20:28, Philippians 1:1).”¹³

One year after the Southern Baptist Convention was founded, the Convention’s first elected president, W.B. Johnson, published a book titled *The Gospel Developed Through Government and Order of the Church of Jesus Christ*. In it, Johnson writes in no uncertain terms in favor of an elder-led and deacon-served church structure. He anchors this concept

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in Scripture by writing, “over each church of Christ in the Apostolic Age a plurality of rulers was ordained, who were designated by the terms elder, bishop, overseer, pastor, with authority in the government of the flock.”¹⁴ William Williams, a member of the founding faculty at Southern Seminary, agreed to this point in his own book when he wrote, “In most, if not all of the apostolic churches, there was a plurality of elders. The circumstances of the early churches rendered such an arrangement very advantageous, if not absolutely necessary.”¹⁵

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Based on this standard set forth in Scripture, SBC president Johnson said that, “It is worthy of particular attention, that each church have a plurality of elders,”¹⁶ and that “A plurality in the bishopric is of great importance for mutual counsel and aid, that the government and edification of the flock may be promoted in the best manner.”¹⁷ Again, Johnson argues that, “whilst a plurality of bishops is required for each church, the number is not fixed, for the obvious reason, that circumstances must necessarily determine what that number shall be.”¹⁸

We can conclude, then, that having a plurality of elders to serve a local congregation is not only a Biblical concept; it is also a historically Baptist concept, as well. This church model goes to the very origins of the Southern Baptist Convention and even before its conception. So, what changed? How has this leadership model become foreign to so many SBC churches? Why is it largely unheard of by the multiple generations of Southern Baptists who are living today?

Pragmatism Takes Hold

Pragmatism is simply doing what makes the most sense practically (even if it’s not found in Scripture). Pragmatism is why churches look at metrics to measure success, why worship services can look a lot more like a production, and why some lead pastors can look more like CEOs than shepherds. If it fits the business model for “success,” it’s pragmatic. What if I were to tell you pragmatism is also what drove churches to be led by deacons? What if instead of being extracted from the pages of Scripture, the deacon-lead model was extracted from a business-minded strategy that made sense practically.

¹³ Pendleton, *Baptist Church Manual*, 24.

¹⁴ William B. Johnson, *The Gospel Developed Through the Government and Order of the Churches of Jesus Christ* (1846), in Dever, ed., *Polity*, 190.

¹⁵ William Williams, *Apostolic Church Polity* (1874), in Dever, ed., *Polity*, 531.

¹⁶ Johnson, “*The Gospel Developed...*” 192.

¹⁷ Ibid. 193.

¹⁸ Ibid. 194.

What follows must be prefaced with this truth: the Church will always be at greater risk of falling into pragmatism (doing what seems best from a worldly perspective) when the people in the church have not been properly disciplined in Biblical theology. Sadly, SBC churches over the last two centuries have been a perfect case study for this reality when it comes to a proper understanding of church leadership. While there were plenty of Baptist scholars and pastors writing in the 1900's about important topics like atonement, Christology, justification, and sanctification, there was a void of almost utter silence on the topic of ecclesiology (the study of the Church).¹⁹ In fact, only three of the seven systematic theology textbooks produced by Baptists in the nineteenth century addressed the Church in any way.²⁰ W.T. Conner, a prominent Baptist theologian and a faculty member of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary (an SBC institution) in the early 20th century, did not include a section on ecclesiology within the textbook he published to be used in the school until the textbook's third edition. Even then, the section only spanned a total of 13 pages.²¹ This is important for the matter at hand because church leadership is a subset topic within the broader study of the church ("ecclesiology," as it is properly named). This silence coming from the Baptists on the matter of ecclesiology, we will see, resulted in Baptist churches turning to pragmatism when making decisions about their church leadership. Churches have not been taught to do otherwise.

As you can imagine, this eventually had an effect on the life of the Church, and it has continued to have an effect to this present day. Even now, there are many men who are passionate about serving their local congregations as either a deacon or a pastor (commendably so!), but do not have an adequate understanding of what the Bible says regarding the character and function of these two offices. Because of this, these men are well-intended but may be faithfully carrying out the functions of a pastor though they possess the title of deacon. This is possibly seen most clearly in countless churches looking to their deacons to lead in the administration of the church, even though this is a responsibility given to pastors (Hebrews 13:7, 17; 1 Timothy 5:17). This trend in the Baptist world of making the deacons the business managers of the church started in the latter half of the nineteenth century (1800s) and has continued on this track ever since. Because of this, the deacons were often called the "business managers"²² or the "the deacon board" (which would be closely related to the secular concept of a "board of directors").²³

But what, if not Scripture, led to this rationale becoming so prominent amongst Baptist churches? At the end of the 1800s and through the first twenty years of the 1900s, the average membership of Southern Baptist Churches was at or less than 115 people.²⁴ Naturally, many of these churches could not afford to pay a livable income to a full-time pastor. In tracing the history of clergy in America, E. Brooks Holifield records that, "In the rural south, half the clergy in 1920 were part-time preachers, supporting themselves with outside jobs, and most of them served two or three

¹⁹ Jeffrey Mask, "At Liberty Under God: A Baptist Ecclesiology," (Ph.D, Emory University, 1990), 32–33.

²⁰ Ibid. 12.

²¹ Ibid. 27.

²² Charles Deweese, *The Emerging Role of Deacons* (Nashville, TN: B&H Books, 1979), 15.

²³ Edward Rose, "A Comprehensive Deacon Development Strategy for Central Baptist Church Wendell, NC" (D.Min, Wake Forest, North Carolina, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2021), 53.

²⁴ Roger Finke, "The Quiet Transformation: Changes in Size and Leadership of Southern Baptist Churches," *Sage Publications, Ltd.* 36, no. 1 (September 1994): 4.

churches.”²⁵ Still, though, there was work that had to be done throughout the week and decisions that had to be made. The pastor couldn’t be expected to do this, but the deacons were available to step up and fill this role. Some advocates for this deacon-led model pointed to Acts 6 as the Biblical justification for this; the proto-deacons were entrusted with administering supplies throughout the congregation and overseeing that church operation.²⁶ “Being natural businessmen,” so the thought went, “these men were the ideal choice to lead the church.” The problem with taking this application from the Scriptures, however, is that these men were appointed by, and under the authority of, the Apostles (the “proto-pastors”). Further, when it came time for that same church in Jerusalem to make a major decision, it was “the Apostles and the elders” who gathered together to consider the matter (Acts 15:6). Ultimately, the move towards making the deacons the administrators over the church was less grounded in solid Biblical reasoning and more in what made the most sense practically at a time when pastors were few and deacons were available.

The church’s inability to pay for a pastor to serve the church full-time not only led to the deacons leading the church instead of pastors, it also led to the deacons doing pastoral ministry for the flock. For pragmatic reasons, the lines were blurred between the two offices in more than just administration. There was a consistent belief amongst protestants in the 19th and 20th centuries that “sermons were the most important part of [the preacher’s] public work.”²⁷ This was also the case specifically within the SBC. Because pastors were often part-time, the task that was “most important” became all that was expected of them. *The Pastor’s Manual* (published by the SBC in 1925) simply states that “[The pastor] is a man called of God to preach the Gospel.”²⁸ It continues to only describe the pastor as one who governs the weekly worship gatherings. Other responsibilities such as counseling are not included in SBC pastor manuals until 1968 (over forty years later). It would be another thirty years until the SBC published a pastor’s manual which addressed the pastoral duties of church discipline, church administration, and training others in the work of ministry (Ephesians 4:11). So, while there was a clear progression in the SBC over the last century of expanding what a pastor does in his ministry role, it was still quite narrow for most of the 1900s to primarily considering tasks related to the worship gathering. This is why many Christians who grew up in the church in the 1900s may be more prone to speak about “the preacher” rather than “the pastor;” in the eyes of the people, the office had shrunk to that single function.²⁹

²⁵ E. Brooks Holifield, *God’s Ambassadors: A History of the Christian Clergy in America*, Pulpit & Pew (Grand Rapids, Mich: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co, 2007), 153.

²⁶ Naylor, *The Baptist Deacon: From a Pastor With a Special Heart for Deacons*, 20.

²⁷ Holifield, *God’s Ambassadors*, 105.

²⁸ James Randolph Hobbs, *The Pastor’s Manual* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1925), 111.

²⁹ This is even exemplified in the literature published by the SBC in this time. In *The Baptist Deacon* (1998), Naylor consistently used the terms “pastor” and “preacher” interchangeably. A few examples would include, “The pastor and the deacon will provide the first example of being faithful in the matter of the tithe. A covetous preacher or a covetous deacon can almost wreck a program of stewardship in the church... Deacons and preachers will be the key men in this basic New Testament program” (102), and “There is no episcopacy by which the preacher is to have the authority in the church, nor is there any system of orders by which the authority becomes a part of the deacon office” (108). Under the section heading “The Preacher”, Naylor writes, “What does the deacon believe about the preacher?... the relationship of the deacon is so intimately connected with that of the preacher... The relationship between a pastor and a church... when the deacon thinks of the preacher... God has created the office of deacon in order that it might make the pastor’s ministry more effective... I am indebted to deacons more than any preacher I know” (113-114).

It didn't take long, though, for people to see the ministry of the church suffering because they merely had a preacher when they clearly needed a shepherd. To fix this realized problem, they did not establish more lay-pastors to serve this need (as Scripture proposes) but treated the deacons as "deacon-shepherd."³⁰ In *The Ministry of the Deacon*, published in 1968, Howard Foshee argues "the deacons are to perform the task of serving with the pastor in performing the church's pastoral ministries."³¹ Deacons, according to Foshee, are to be seen as fellow "under-shepherds of the flock."³² This carried on to be the default practice even into the present age of the church.

In Jonny Hunt's 2009 popular book, *The Deacon I Want to Be*, Hunt teaches that it is the deacons' responsibility, rather than that of additional lay-pastors, to come alongside and help the senior pastor bear the weight of shepherding the congregation.³³ Though this is undoubtedly driven by a good and right desire to serve the Church (and pastors) well and to fill a practical need in the ministry of the church (a point worth celebrating!), it is also a solution which does not have roots in the Bible. Instead, it is a church structure formed by pragmatism in a time when pastors were few and deacons were available to step up to fill the role of a pastor. Undoubtedly, deacons are needed, and the church would suffer without their service! But for practical reasons within the church, they migrated to serve in ways outside of Scripture's original design for that particular office. To meet a need, the deacons sought to fill two offices as just one group of men; they tried to accomplish with one body what Scripture says takes two distinct offices.

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“This vision must be cast from Scripture so that both deacons and elders can once again function in unity for the betterment of the church body.”

Even now, after “spreading prosperity allowed more congregations to hire full-time clergy,”³⁴ the change in church culture was already established in many SBC churches and the norm of deacon-leadership has already been fixed in place. Within the denomination, more and more “Preachers” have been afforded the opportunity to serve full-time in vocational ministry but often times, this is only under the authority of the deacon board. The generations that made these changes have since passed away and the generations within the church today don't know any different. Many churches are not familiar with the concept of a plurality of elders because they have grown comfortable with only having one plurality of deacons and a solo “preacher” or “pastor.” Though churches *can* have elders, they must come to understand that they *should* have elders. The vision must be cast from Scripture so that both deacons and elders can once again function in unity for the betterment of the church body.

A Remnant

While some studies indicate that the affluency of American church goers has increased over the last century, the church seems to be in a condition very similar to a century ago. On average, churches are still as small as they were in the 1920s. A survey conducted by Lifeway amongst

³⁰ Howard Foshee, *The Ministry of the Deacon* (Nashville, TN: Convention Press, 1969), 40.

³¹ Foshee, 16.

³² Foshee, 28.

³³ Johnny M. Hunt, *The Deacon I Want to Be: Growing in Faith, Faithful in Service* (Dallas, TX: Sampson Resources, 2009), 12.

³⁴ G. Jeffrey MacDonald, *Part-Time Is Plenty: Thriving without Full-Time Clergy*, First edition (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2020), 33.

Southern Baptists between 2017 and 2022 revealed that almost half of SBC churches (46%) have fewer than 50 people in average attendance and only 27% of the churches have over 100 people on an average Sunday.³⁵ The SBC's 2023 ACP reports confirm Lifeway's findings as it shows that 70% of SBC churches see less than 100 people in Sunday services.³⁶ Thus, while people may be more affluent personally, the financial burden to pay for a pastor, and not just a preacher, is still difficult for many churches to make possible given how few the number of financial contributors there are. According to a 2015 study on American churches, 38% of them only had part-time clergy.³⁷ Another survey in 2018-2019 found that 40% of mainline congregations have no full-time paid clergy.³⁸ These percentages have not dropped since these studies were conducted. If anything, it is even more difficult for churches to pay pastors in recent years because of COVID's lasting effect on the attendance and financial contribution of churchgoers. It has been said that "many congregations and denominations emerged from the pandemic weaker, with diminished financial resources."³⁹

While this one problem has remained consistent (i.e. many churches have not been able to pay for full-time pastors to fulfill all the shepherding needs of the church), the Baptist church in America has an opportunity to solve this problem in a different way than it has in the past. In fact, there is a growing awareness amongst churches, SBC churches in particular, of this better solution. This solution consists of unpaid lay pastors joining to bear the burden of pastoral ministry alongside the staff pastor(s) which the church can afford to pay. But it does not consist of stretching the deacons too thin in calling on them to wear both the hat of deacon and the hat of pastor. More and more churches are returning to the roots of the Southern Baptist Convention and, more importantly, the roots of Scripture as they begin to establish elders (lay-pastors) to serve alongside the paid pastor(s) in pastoral ministry while continuing to encourage the deacons of the church to persist in deacon ministry.

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“There is a growing awareness amongst churches, SBC churches in particular, of this better solution. This solution consists of unpaid lay pastors joining to bear the burden of pastoral ministry alongside the staff pastor(s).”

Some of this course-correction is due to institutions within (or in some way related to) the Southern Baptist Convention. There has been a steep increase of interest in recent years amongst SBC institutions to instill within local churches a proper ecclesiology. Southern Baptist seminaries like Southern (Louisville) and Midwestern (Kansas City) as well as the respective presidents of these institutions, Albert Mohler and Jason Allen, are big advocates of this church leadership model. Possibly more influential, however, has been the work of a Baptist ministry called 9Marks. Founded by an SBC pastor, Mark Dever, 9Marks champions this church leadership structure and supplies

³⁵ “Annual Church Profile Gauges Health of Denominations,” The Baptist Record. Lifeway Research of the Southern Baptist convention's Annual Church Profile. September 22, 2023, <https://thebaptistrecord.org/annual-church-profile-gauges-health-of-denomination/>.

³⁶ Aaron Earls, “Complicated Picture of Southern Baptist Churches Emerges From Statistical Analysis,” Baptist Press, Lifeway Research, March 11, 2025, <https://www.baptistpress.com/resource-library/news/complicated-picture-of-southern-baptist-churches-emerges-from-statistical-analysis/>.

³⁷ MacDonald, *Part-Time Is Plenty*, 19.

³⁸ Mark Chaves et al., “National Congregations Study: Waves I-IV Summary Tables” (Duke University Department of Sociology, Durham, NC, August 2021).

³⁹ Dwight Zscheile, “Shifting Ministry Paradigms: From Primarily Clergy-Led, Lay-Supported, to Lay-Led, Clergy Supported,” *Word & World* Vol. 44, Num 3, no. Summer 2024 (June 2024): 316.

churches with Biblically sound and practically helpful resources to help them move in that direction. Of course, the list of influencers go far beyond those within the denominations as there are also Baptist ministries outside of the SBC such as Desiring God, Grace to You, and G3 Ministries as well as non-Baptistic (yet well-respected) ministries such as Ligonier Ministries, and the Gospel Coalition that all endorse this elder-led and deacon-supporting model of church leadership.

Because these institutions have been committed to training and raising up church leaders to have a biblical ecclesiology, there is now recognizable fruit from their labors. Within the Missouri Baptist Convention alone, there are plenty of churches which are served by elders and deacons (and the number is growing every year).

Currently, I know of the following MBC churches who are operating under elder leadership:

- Central Baptist Church (*KC*)
- Church of the Redeemer (*St. Louis*)
- Connect Church (*Fenton*)
- Cornerstone (*Carthage*)
- Faith Community Church (*KC*)
- First Baptist Church (*Carthage*)
- First Baptist Church (*Clarksdale*)
- First Baptist Church (*Ellington*)
- First Baptist Church St. John (*St. Charles*)
- First Baptist Church (*Weston*)
- Frederick Boulevard Baptist Church (*St. Joe*)
- The Fount (*KC*)
- Grace Community Church (*Smithville*)
- Heritage Baptist Church (*KC*)
- The King's Church (*Columbia*)
- Liberty Baptist Church (*Liberty*)
- River Stone Fellowship (*Nixa*)
- Redeemer Fellowship (*KC*)
- Summit Woods Baptist Church (*Lee's Summit*)

In looking at this list, it is helpful to note that elder leadership is not just a trend in city churches (Weston has a population of 1,800) or of small towns (Kansas City and St. Louis are on the list). This is not just a trend in a certain region of Missouri (these churches are spread throughout Missouri).

That does not account for the many more SBC churches with elder leadership throughout the country (spanning from California to Maine and North Dakota to Texas). This is simply a Baptist model of leadership and, most importantly, it is a Biblical model of leadership for the flourishing of the church. It allows deacons to serve the church in powerful and necessary ways and it allows the church to be spiritually shepherded just like the churches in the book of Acts were. It allows the church to neither be

fatherless nor motherless but, instead, function as God originally designed His house of worship to be structured: with both offices of elders and deacons working together for the good of God's children.

“ ”

“It allows the church to neither be fatherless nor motherless but, instead, function as God originally designed His house of worship to be structured: with both offices of elders and deacons working together for the good of God's children.”

I hope this has been enlightening and encouraging for you to read. Let us continue to grow together as we seek to further reflect the church as God designed it in the New Testament.

Pastor Isaac

Frequently Asked Questions

1. What does “lay-pastor” mean?

This concept is most easily understood by looking at what already exists within our deacon body. Just as our deacons serve in a “volunteer” capacity (not getting paid for their labors), pastors can do this, as well. Lay pastors, then, are those who make a living elsewhere in the secular world but then give of their time to serve the church by assisting the staff pastor(s) in the work of pastoral ministry. Lay pastors do not have any less authority than staff pastors merely because they do not give as many hours in a given week to the work of ministry. Just as every deacon is an equal to his fellow deacons, so it is with the pastors. In elder meetings (pastor meetings), they would all have an equal voice and vote. Thus, “lay pastor” does NOT mean “junior pastor.” It simply speaks to the amount of time they are able to give to the ministry throughout a given week and to the volunteer nature of their service.

2. What is the difference between “pastor” and “elder”?

There is no difference. They are synonyms and can be used interchangeably at any point. The word “elder” comes from the Bible and refers to the person who shepherds the people of God (Acts 20:17; 1 Tim. 5:17; James 5:14). The word “pastor” comes from the Latin and simply means “shepherd.” These words are speaking to the same individual. This is why Peter writes, “I exhort the elders among you.... shepherd the flock of God that is among you...” (1 Pt. 5:1-2). Pastors (aka “elders”) are also referred to as “overseers” in the Bible. When Paul writes to Timothy about the qualifications for the two officers of the church, he writes, “an overseer must be...” (1 Tim. 3:2) and then six verses later writes, “deacons likewise must be...” (1 Tim. 3:8). So, any of these three terms are completely appropriate to use when referring to those that shepherd the flock of God: Pastors, overseers, elders.

3. Is having a body of lay-pastors a Baptist thing to do?

Yes. In fact, it was supported by the earliest of Southern Baptist churches (and the first Southern Baptist president). It was only in later years that many Baptist churches moved away from this structure. For further information on this, please read Pastor Isaac’s letter to the church about church leadership in the SBC. More important than whether or not this is a “Baptist thing,” though, this is a Biblical thing. The churches in the New Testament had multiple elders within each church (Acts 14:23, Acts 20:17; James 5:14) and it was the “elders and the Apostles” who discussed theological issues as they would arise (Acts 15:22).

Frequently Asked Questions



4. Is it right to have pastors who are not paid?

This is a reasonable question since Scripture clearly states that a pastor should be compensated for his labor (1 Cor. 9:13-14). Yet, it is hard to imagine that all the churches in the New Testament who had multiple pastors (See Acts 14:23, 15:4, 15:22, 20:17, 20:28; 1 Tim. 5:15-17; Titus 1:5; James 5:14; 1 Peter 5:1-2) also supported all of those pastors financially. More realistically, there were some who were paid and some who were not. It is also helpful to note what Paul writes in 1 Timothy 5:17. He says, “let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, *especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.*” The “double honor” which Paul is talking about is referring to financial compensation as the following verse confirms (1 Tim 5:18). Because those particular elders “labor in preaching and teaching,” they are worthy of a “double honor” (i.e. financial compensation). It is reasonable to presume, then, that the other pastors who are not the regular preachers should still receive honor “as those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord” (1 These 5:12), but might not receive payment for those labors (the “double honor”).

5. Does this mean the Senior Pastor would get more power?

No, just the opposite is true. Having multiple elders/pastors allows the Senior Pastor to share, not harbor, the unique authority (and burden) that comes with pastoral ministry. When the church needs to make an official statement on a theological issue, it is good to have multiple pastors rather than just one man. When there is an issue of church discipline, it is better to have multiple pastors rather than just one. When there are many people who need counseling, hospital visits, and house visits, it's better to have multiple pastors. Having a team of pastors allows the church's leadership to be spread out across multiple qualified men.

6. Why can't we just keep things the way they are? Aren't things already working well?

Currently, our church is served by one pastor and a team of deacons. By God's grace, our church family has some of the best deacons a church could ask for. Nevertheless, as long as the church does not have elders, these men are being stretched to do the work of both deacons and pastors. Since God's Word does not demand this from them, it is not fair for our church to expect these men to do the work of two offices. Yes, our church is currently being served well given the few number of men we have serving. But our church could be served in even greater of depths with more men joining in to share the load of work to be done.

Frequently Asked Questions



7. Why does our church need more than one pastor?

Our church needs more than one pastor because that is the Biblical model. Secondly, our church needs more than one pastor because it is practically beneficial for the whole church to be shepherded well. Pastoral ministry comes with multiple responsibilities - responsibilities that are best carried out by a team of qualified men (rather than just one man). Pastoral ministry includes preaching (1 Tim. 4:13), teaching (1 Tim. 3:2), prayer (James 5:14), judging doctrinal issues (Acts 15:6), protecting the church from evil teachings (Acts 20:17), and general oversight of the church (1 Tim. 3:5, 5:17; Heb. 13:7, 9, 17). Any one of these tasks would be best accomplished by a team rather than an individual. Especially when all the tasks are compiled together, it becomes impossible for one man to sufficiently serve the church by himself. It is practically necessary to have a team of shepherds who shepherd the flock of God.

8. What would the deacons start doing?

There are many things which the deacons already do that they would continue to do in service to the church. Our church will continue to look to the deacons to check in on and care for congregants of the church. The deacons would still be the primary individuals who meet the tangible needs of our church and the people in it. The deacons would be those who “put out fires,” defusing tension as it arises, and support the pastor(s) where they are able to. All of the above actions would make sense with what we see in Acts 6:1-7. Deacons would still serve communion and, in addition to all of these actions which they are already doing, they could also step into other areas of service which they have not yet. For example, they could assume more of an oversight role to the various committees of the church, as committees tend to be practical in service to the church.

9. What would the pastors (elders) do?

The staff pastor(s) (those who are paid to be pastors vocationally), would continue to do what they are already doing. They will primarily give their time to prayer, teaching, and preaching (Acts 6:4). The body of elders, as a whole, would be the ones that oversee and protect the doctrine of the church (Acts 20:17, 29-30), oversee the leadership and management of the church (1 Tim. 3:5, 5:17; Heb. 13:7, 9, 17), and oversee cases of church discipline as they arise (Titus 1:7-10; Gal. 6:1). Together, with the deacons, they would do congregant care by checking in on and caring for the people of the church (Acts 20:17, 28; James 5:14).

Frequently Asked Questions



10. **What would the path forward look like in finding lay-elders (lay-pastors)?**

This would need to be a matter of discussion at a monthly church business meeting. If it was something that the church would like to pursue, the church would need to elect a committee to revise the By-Laws so that it would reflect the inclusion of elders (currently, there is no language that refers to such an office; there is only mention of “the pastor” and a potential youth pastor). In the meantime, there would also need to be some form of search and election process in which elder-candidates were chosen and trained to serve in that office. After the committee had finished drafting their proposed By-Law revisions, these revisions would be voted on and would only become effective when there were elders available to serve and fill that role.