

# In Defense of Parity:

## A presentation of the parity or equality of elders in the New Testament

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### CHAPTER ONE

#### Parity and Diversity in the Eldership

*Part One-Parity*

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#### Introduction to Chapters 1 and 2:

The Lord loves his church supremely. She is His bride, the apple of His eye. He shed His blood for her. He endured divine wrath to spare and save her ([Eph.5:25](#)). All His sovereign purposes revolve around her welfare ([Eph.1:22,23](#)). He has sworn an irrevocable oath of loyalty and protection to her. No weapon formed against her shall prosper ([Isa.54:10,17](#)). She shall be preserved in holiness and truth forever ([Matt. 16:18](#)). Accordingly, the Lord has given His church a vital role in His saving work ([Eph.3:10,11](#)). She is designed to bring Him honor and glory ([Eph.3:21](#)) and to display His excellencies in the world ([1 Pet.2:9,10](#)). Her task is to proclaim His Word. (She is “the pillar and ground of the truth” ([1 Tim.3:15](#))). Therefore, church polity should not be regarded as a peripheral detail. Zeal should burn in our hearts that God would be glorified in His church, and that men would “know how to behave themselves in the house of God, which is the church of the living God” ([1 Tim.3:15](#))). The degree to which any church successfully fulfills this noble aim depends largely upon her leadership. Her leaders will either guide her to greater faithfulness, purity and devotion to her Lord, or mire her in compromise, mediocrity, confusion and error. All this mandates conscientious study of the Scriptures in order to discern and implement the Lord’s mind respecting church leadership. The Lord Jesus Christ, as the wise and loving head of the church, has graciously prescribed that pattern of church government most conducive to the attainment of God’s glory through His church. The hub of this pattern is Christ’s will for spiritual leadership, revealed and implemented through the government of the churches by the apostles. In the exercise of this authority from Christ the apostles uniformly and universally enjoined and supervised the establishment of elderships in the local churches under their care ([Acts 14:23](#); [15:2](#); [16:4](#); [20:17](#); [Phil. 1:1](#); [Titus 1:5](#); [1 Pet.5:1](#)). Each of these elderships constituted the ruling body of church officers in their respective churches ([Acts 14:23](#); [20:17](#), [28f](#)). Each of these elderships was composed of each man, and all the men, ordained to the office of elder in their respective churches ([Titus 1:5,6](#)). Nevertheless, these elderships were not marked by total uniformity, but displayed a rich diversity of vocation and honor ([1 Tim.5:17](#)) as well as of gift ([Rom.12:6-8](#)). Thus, the Lord wills that elderships be established, and that their form and structure display both PARITY and DIVERSITY Chapter 1 unfolds this parity; Chapter 2 this diversity. In this chapter we first establish the **Biblical Concept** of parity in the eldership. Second, we expound the **Manifold**

**Substance** of parity in the eldership. Third, we apply some **Practical Implications** of parity in the eldership.

## The Biblical Concept of Parity in the Eldership

In its general nature parity in the eldership is a parity of office. Paul uses the word **ΕΠΙΣΚΟΠΗ** (episcopē), translated “office of bishop”, or “office of overseer”, to designate the official exercise of spiritual leadership in the church, “If any man desires the office of a bishop he desires a good work” ([1 Tim.3:1](#)). Accordingly, one who holds this office is called a “bishop” or “overseer”, **ΕΠΙΣΚΟΠΟΣ** (episcopos), “The bishop must be blameless as God’s steward” ([Titus 1:7](#)). Our word “overseer” closely reflects this Greek word **ΕΠΙΣΚΟΠΟΣ** (episcopos), which means one who “looks over”, or “scrutinizes.” Incidentally, the word “Episcopal” is a transliteration (letter for letter equivalent) of that Greek word. Scripture closely binds this word for bishop or overseer to the word **ΠΟΙΜΗΝ** (poimen), translated shepherd or pastor. This intimacy is clearly seen in [1 Pet.2:25](#), where our Lord Jesus is portrayed as “the Shepherd [**ΠΟΙΜΗΝΑ**] and Bishop [**ΕΠΙΣΚΟΠΟΝ**] of your souls.” It is confirmed in Peter’s exhortation to spiritual leaders in [1 Pet.5:2](#), where he exhorts them to “tend [shepherd, **ΠΟΙΜΑΝΑΤΕ**] the flock of God which is among you, exercising the oversight [**ΕΠΙΣΚΟΠΟΥΝΤΕ**].” This connection is also confirmed in [Acts 20:28](#), where Paul exhorts the leaders of the church at Ephesus to “take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you bishops [**ΕΠΙΣΚΟΠΟΥΣ**], to feed [shepherd, **ΠΟΙΜΗΝ**] the church of the Lord.” The concepts of overseer and shepherd are thus bound by the fact that these terms together picture those whose task is caring for a flock of sheep. We, the Lord’s people, His church, are His sheep ([Acts 20:28](#)). He Himself is our chief Pastor and Bishop ([1 Pet.2:25](#)). The stewardship of spiritual leadership in His church is that of caring for his sheep ([Acts 20:28-31](#)). It is therefore a stewardship of oversight and shepherding. Accordingly, those vested with this stewardship are called in Scripture shepherds (pastors) and overseers (bishops).

Now the point and relevance of these considerations is this. *The elders of the church are, in these very passages, all depicted as pastors and bishops, and are all called upon to discharge this very stewardship of shepherding and oversight.* In [Acts 20:17](#), we learn that Paul called to him “the elders of the church.” In [verse 28](#) he addressed his charge to tend or “pastor” the flock to all of them. To these same elders, to all of them, Paul said, “the Holy Spirit has made you bishops.” Similarly while instructing Titus regarding the ordination of elders in Crete, Paul identified the elders as bishops. He says to Titus, “for this cause I left you in Crete, that you should set in order the things that were wanting and appoint elders in every city, as I gave you charge: if any man is blameless .... For the bishop must be blameless as God’s steward” ([Titus 1:5-7](#)). In like manner, Peter addressed his charge in [1 Pet.5:1-4](#) to the elders, “The elders therefore among you I exhort.” In [v.2](#) he exhorts the elders to shepherd (pastor) the flock. If these things are so, someone might ask, then if a church has a plurality of elders, it has a plurality of bishops too, for all the elders are bishops? Precisely. This was true of the church at Ephesus, for [Acts 20:28](#) reads, “in which the Holy Spirit made you bishops.” It was also true of the church at Philippi, for Paul addressed his letter to “all the saints that are at Philippi, with the bishops and deacons” ([Phil. 1:1](#)). Again, if a church has a plurality of elders it has a plurality of pastors, for all the elders are pastors ([Acts 20:28](#); [1 Pet.5:1,2](#)). To some this may sound strange, even radical, but it is nothing other than the inspired ecclesiology of the apostles. Others may think it impractical. But if an

ecclesiology designed by men seems workable, why wouldn't the Lord's own ecclesiology, implemented by His apostles, work as well, if not better? Others may think this novel. Yet it is nothing new. Indeed, Scripture is far too clear for these basic tenets to have escaped the notice of good and scholarly men. Thus, Charles Hodge observes, "By common consent bishop and presbyter are convertible terms. If a man is a presbyter, he is a bishop, and, if he is a bishop, he is a presbyter. Even prelatists admit this to be true as far as the language of the Bible is concerned."

One might think that this would settle the matter, but I am compelled to address one thing more, for some contend that all the elders are not presbyters. But such a one might as well say that all the elders are not elders. For "presbyter" is a transliteration of the Greek word, presbuteros (πρεσβυτερος), which, in all the passages we have just considered, is translated "elder." By what warrant can a word's transliteration be animated with a meaning different from its translation? If exegesis may be conducted after this fashion, surely men could make the Bible say literally anything they want it to say. It is beyond my present scope to comment upon every occurrence of presbyteros in the New Testament. Its usage may be summarized comprehensively as follows: (1) It is used sometimes to depict an elderly man, or in the feminine gender, an elderly woman ([1 Tim.5:1,2](#)). In that text it depicts those old enough to be Timothy's father or mother. In this usage, the word obliges respect on the basis of the experience and wisdom of age. Similarly, it can depict men who lived long ago, especially the founders or luminaries of some institution, society, or school of thought ([Matt. 15:2](#); [Heb.11:2](#)). Evidently, no notion of office in the local church exists in this usage of the word. (2) It is used frequently to depict the rulers of the entire Jewish nation ([Luke 22:52,66](#)), and, in one instance, it probably refers to the rulers of a local synagogue ([Luke 7:3](#)). (3) It is also used to describe the spiritual leadership of the Christian church. In the following passages it depicts elders in a local church: [Acts 14:23](#); [20:17](#); [1 Tim.5: 1:7,19](#); [Titus 1:5](#); [James 5:14](#); [1 Pet.5:1,5](#). They are often explicitly said to be its bishops or pastors somewhere in the immediate context ([Acts 20:17](#); [Titus 1:5](#); [1 Pet.5:1](#)). None of these passages provides a basis to assert that the term is ever used in the New Testament to depict elders of local churches who are not also vested with the stewardship of shepherding and overseeing those churches. The Bible does not acknowledge or reveal an inferior order of elders in local churches who are not the pastors and bishops of these churches. (4) Let us in all candor admit, however, that the New Testament does acknowledge another "order" of elders in the Christian church militant ([Acts 11:30](#); [15:2,4,6,22,23](#); [16:4](#); [21:18](#); [1 Pet.5:1](#); [2 John 1](#); [3 John 1](#)). This order is not "lower", however, than the former but "higher." It is the apostolic order, the eldership of the apostles. These are the elders not merely of a specific local church, but of all the local churches collectively, the universal church militant. To this order, the apostle Peter himself belonged ([1 Pet.5:1](#)), as did the apostle John, for thus he too depicts himself ([2 John 1](#)). By implication so did all the apostles and the Jerusalem elders who served with them ([Acts 15:2,4,6,22](#)), for they issued policy binding on all the local churches and their leaders ([Acts 16:4](#)). To this order also Paul belonged, for he cared for all the churches ([2 Cor.11:28](#)) and ordained policy binding on all the Gentile churches and their leaders ([1 Cor.7:17](#), [14:34,37](#); [16:1](#); [Titus 1:5](#)). Let none living today claim that he too is an Apostle, or that he belongs to their eldership, or that he has jurisdiction over all true churches collectively ([1 Cor.9:1](#); [15:7,8](#); [2 Cor.12:12](#)). For as the apostles once governed all the church militant by their life and words, so they alone are yet authorized and suited to govern it by their inspired writings preserved in Scripture. (5) It might be argued with some cogency that there is yet a third order of elders among the people of God. But this order is higher still, for it does not pertain to the church militant at all, but to the church triumphant

in heaven, for to this order belong only the twenty-four who surround the throne ([Rev.4:4,10](#), etc.).

In summary, the Lord has graciously granted his church militant two “orders” of elders. The first order being the one apostolic eldership, having jurisdiction over all local churches, authorized to shepherd and oversee all the collective flock throughout this age; the second order consisting of many distinct elderships, each having jurisdiction in their own local church, authorized to shepherd and oversee their own local flock. Besides these two orders of elders in the church militant, the Scripture acknowledges none. If there is to be yet another order, men must invent it. Dabney affirms this view of parity, when he asserts that “ruling elders” have power coordinate with, not subordinate to, preachers:

One party ... holds that wherever the Scriptures speak of official presbuteroi or episkopoi they mean preachers alone; that they alone are the essential bond of the church's government; that ruling elders are in no proper, official sense presbuteroi or episkopoi and in no part of their office coordinate with preachers; that they are not entitled to any ordination by laying on of hands; that they are simply laymen admitted into presbyterial courts as representatives of the people, yet in no sense essential constituent parts of those courts ... Our view, is that of Dr. Samuel Miller, that ruling elders are scriptural presbuteroi and episkopoi; that they should have a presbyterial ordination by laying on of hands-in the parochial presbytery, the church session-and that in all powers of inspection and rule they are co-ordinate with preaching elders, and have the same divine warrant for their authority.

Reformed Baptists stand confessionally committed to this perspective on parity. The 1689 London Confession, in 26:8,9, uses “bishop” and “elder” as interchangeable terms for the same office:

...the officers appointed by Christ to be chosen and set apart by the church (so called and gathered), for the peculiar administration of ordinances, and execution of power or duty, which he entrusts them with, or calls them to, to be continued to the end of the world, are *bishops or elders*, and deacons.

The way appointed by Christ for the calling of any person, fitted and gifted by the Holy Spirit, unto the *office of bishop or elder* in a church, is, that he be chosen thereunto by the common suffrage of the church itself; and solemnly set apart by fasting and prayer, with imposition of hands of the eldership of the church...

The Baptist fathers created these statements by modifying the Savoy Platform of Polity. They replaced their four offices (pastor, teacher, elder, deacon) with our two (bishop or elder, deacon). They then incorporated this polity into our Confession amid “the things most surely believed among us.”

## The Manifold Substance of Parity in the Eldership

Having established that parity in the eldership is a parity of office, we now unfold what this entails. We consider the equality in **authorization** and **representation** which make up parity of office.

### Equality in Authorization

The office of bishop or elder is a spiritual stewardship conveyed by the Lord, “The bishop must be blameless as God's steward” ([Titus 1:7](#)). Stewardship always embodies

authorization from a master ([Gal.4:2](#)), for which the steward is accountable to that master ([Luke 16:2](#); [1 Cor.4:1,2](#)). The elders are therefore equally authorized by and accountable to Christ. The generic substance of their authorization is revealed using a rich variety of analogies. Elders are portrayed not only as stewards or servants of God, but are also likened to parents caring for a household ([1 Tim.3:5](#); [1 Thess.2:7,11](#)), to governors administrating a province under their jurisdiction ([Heb.13:17](#)), and, as we have noted already, to shepherds and overseers caring for a flock of sheep ([Acts 20:28-35](#); [1 Pet.5:1-4](#)).

More concretely, the eldership is authorized, as a body, to govern the entire life of their particular church according to the Word of God. Since their oversight is comprehensive, they are responsible to promote the glory of God and to honor and implement His Word in everything germane to the church: its formative polity, membership, leadership, commission, order, assemblies, and associations. Evidently, elders cannot be newcomers to the faith, or largely ignorant of the people and ways of God, and expect to discharge such a stewardship acceptably in God's sight ([1 Tim.3:6](#)). Regarding the formative polity of the church, the elders are responsible to insure that the doctrinal standards (confession of faith) and polity statements (constitution) of their church are biblical, respected, enforced and, where needful to defend truth and godliness, amended. They must guard against wolves arising with heretical doctrines, beguiling experiences, and false claims to draw away disciples after them ([Acts 20:29-31](#)). They must preserve doctrinal purity and unity in the church, and oppose all the errors which threaten the church ([Titus 1:9-11](#)). Regarding membership in the church, they must "take heed to all the flock," so as to honor the biblical standard for membership, and to apply it graciously, conscientiously, impartially, objectively, and courageously ([Acts 9:26](#); [2 Cor.6:14-18](#)). Regarding church leadership, they must, "take heed to themselves." They must enforce the biblical standard for leadership ([1 Tim.3:1-13](#); [Titus 1:5-9](#)), and give careful oversight to the existing leadership, respecting both the life and teaching of the elders ([1 Tim.5:17-25](#)) and the life and labors of the deacons ([1 Tim.3:8-13](#)). Regarding the commission, tasks, and mandate of the church, the elders are responsible to know, "how men ought to behave themselves in the house of God" ([1 Tim.3:15](#)); and, knowing what is expected, must take pains that the Lord's will is done. They must know the identity of the church's tasks, be convinced of her basic competence to perform them, keep her from being diverted from them, and guide her to pursue them with God-honoring methods and means. Specifically, they are responsible to establish and maintain a biblical climate and content of **worship**, to formulate and promote a biblical policy of zealous **evangelism**, to institute a generous, equal and principled **benevolence** to poor and needy brethren, to **nurture** each of the disciples under their care in the Word and ways of the Lord, to implement a biblical **discipline** of the disorderly, regularly to administer and observe the **sacraments**, and to lead the congregation in corporate **prayer** focused upon the glory of God, the concerns of his kingdom, and the success of all the labors of the church. Regarding order in the church, the elders are responsible to know and follow the apostolic traditions, revealed in Scripture, designed to promote ecclesiastical order in all the churches on earth until Christ returns. Specifically, they must boldly and graciously implement the apostolic traditions respecting women ([1 Cor.14:33-36](#); [1 Tim.2:11-15](#); [3:15](#)), corporate giving ([1 Cor.16:1,2](#)), Christian liberty ([Acts 16:4](#)), spiritual gifts ([1 Cor.14:1-33](#), [37-40](#)), and marital ethics ([1 Cor.7:8-17](#)). Regarding church assemblies, they are responsible to insure that the church convenes and conducts all its assemblies in an orderly and edifying manner, and in the fear of God ([1 Cor.11:17-34](#)). Regarding church associations and relations, they are responsible to foster, establish, and maintain communion, cooperation and peace between their church and other true churches of Christ ([2 Cor.8:19,24](#)) as far as conscience and providence permit. And, they are responsible not to yoke their church

unequally with unbelieving and apostate congregations from which the Spirit of God has departed, and which Jesus has repudiated and cut off from his church militant ([2 Cor.6:14-18](#); [Rev.2:5,9, 3:9](#)). Surely we must ask with the apostle, “Who is sufficient for these things?” Yet thankfully we may in faith reply, “Our sufficiency is from God.”

## Equality in Representation

Since they officially exercise authority given by Christ, through the Holy Spirit ([Acts 20:28](#)), the eldership represents Christ, even as governors represent the king who sent them ([Heb.13:17](#); [1 Pet.2:13,14](#)). And, because they are recognized by the suffrage of the church, and are set forth as examples to the church ([Heb.13:17](#); [1 Pet.5:3](#)), the eldership also represents their church, both before the other churches and before the world. In this respect the elders are all equally representatives of Christ and of their church. In their exercise of Christ’s authority they speak for Him, in so far as they follow and implement His Word. To reject them and their biblical leadership is thus to reject Christ and His leadership. To receive them and their biblical leadership is thus to receive Christ and His leadership ([John 13:20](#); [Luke 10:16](#)). This must be qualified to prevent both abuse and misunderstanding. Elders, even good and godly ones, are not always in agreement ([Acts 15:38,39](#)), and elderships are neither infallible in their judgments nor impeccable in their actions. Their sins, faults and errors of judgment should be faced with impartiality ([1 Tim.5:19,20](#)), integrity ([Gal.2:11](#)), and courage ([3 John 9-12](#)). But as far as their judgments are in accordance with biblical principle and truth, they are just that far, and no further, the living embodiment of the loving rule of Jesus Christ over His church.

Consider then the heavier judgment which awaits ungodly elders who misrepresent Christ’s loving rule over His people. Even as a tyrannical governor misrepresents a good and gracious king, so do such misrepresent the King of kings. What an awful reckoning must await such unfaithful shepherds! Consider then how all this creates incentive, through fear, to avoid the abuse of church authority. Consider also how it creates incentive, through hope of reward, to rule faithfully and diligently as unto the Lord, in spite of opposition, knowing that from the Lord, and not from men, will come the commendation in the last day ([1 Cor.4:2,5](#)) and the crown of glory that fades not away ([1 Pet.5:3,4](#)). Consider then how this pressures all the elders to be men of prayer, who seek God’s guidance and grace to rule well, with heavenly wisdom, justice, and compassion ([James 1:5](#); [1 Kings 3:9,10](#)). Consider also, how this should drive all the elders to read, study and meditate on the Word of God, the treasure-house of faith and wisdom, in order to discern the mind of Christ for His church ([Col. 3:16](#)). No elder should be doctrinally or scripturally “illiterate”, but to the contrary, should be steeped in the Word of God, and well versed in the essential doctrines of the Christian faith which he is pledged to defend ([Titus 1:9](#)). Consider finally, how this compels all the elders to live godly lives, knowing that the eyes of saints and sinners alike are upon them as models, and that Christ and their church will be judged in large measure by how they live.

## Some Practical Implications of Parity in the Eldership

We have looked already at the concept and substance of parity in the eldership. We now consider the question, “so what?” What practical difference does it make? The seven

propositions which follow are not exhaustive, but rather, suggest the primary outworking of parity in church life.

### **1. Parity implies that all the elders should participate in visiting and counseling the flock.**

The eldership, as a body, should take heed to all the flock in which the Holy Spirit made them bishops, “to shepherd the church of the Lord” ([Acts 20:28f](#)). All the elders should watch for the souls of those under their care. Thus, the eldership as a body should systematically nurture all their sheep. Typically, pastoral nurture and care is facilitated by pastoral visitation of some kind. Since all the elders are pastors and bishops, all should visit and care for their sheep. The work is not for the minister of the Word alone, as though he were the only shepherd and bishop of the flock. Accordingly, it is beneficial to implement an annual or semi-annual house visitation of each member, in which each elder somehow participates. Similarly, it is also of benefit to address not only the preacher, but each elder as “pastor” as a means of further enforcing this perspective.

### **2. Parity implies that all the elders should participate in interviews of prospective members.**

All the elders are charged to watch for the souls of their people. The eldership as a body is charged with preserving the purity of the church. Accordingly, membership interviews should not be restricted to the minister of the Word alone, but rather should be open to all elders. As a general rule, as many elders as is feasible should attend. This will, practically speaking, require dedication. It may necessitate special meetings, or even an occasional day of interviews. There is great benefit, however, derived from each shepherd hearing the testimony of each lamb, and from each shepherd establishing at the outset a personal and pastoral communication with each new member in the things of God.

### **3. Parity implies that all the elders should be included in setting church policy.**

The eldership, as a body, is charged to oversee the entire life of the church. The rule of the church is not committed in Scripture to a bishop, but to the bishops, the eldership ([Acts 20:28](#)). Therefore, Christ does not authorize the minister of the Word to set church policy unilaterally. The elders are not his subordinates, who implement his directives, but peers, united with him in the same ruling body of church officers. Calvin, commenting on [1 Tim.5:17](#), confirms this implication:

The people elected earnest and well-trying men, who along with the pastors in a common council and with the authority of the church, would administer discipline and act as censors for the correction of morals. Ambrose complains that this custom has fallen into desuetude through the carelessness, or rather, the pride of the teachers who wanted undivided power for themselves.

Thus, fellow elders should address a minister of the Word as an equal, not as if he were superior in rank or office. Thus too, it is often expedient for elderships to meet weekly for prayer and to discuss and determine church policy. Similarly, it is prudent for elderships to meet with their diaconate regularly, and for a diaconate to furnish regular reports to their elders detailing their activities and requesting feedback and decisions on specific items of

concern. A word of qualification is in order. I do not intend to denounce delegation of specific tasks to individual elders or to committees of elders. Without delegation the whole work of the church would grind to a halt and stagnate ([Titus 1:5](#)). Rather, I merely intend to assert that the eldership, as a body, has the authority to delegate tasks and that those to whom a task is delegated are accountable to the entire eldership.

#### **4. Parity implies that each elder should get pastoral oversight from the eldership as a body.**

Paul charges the eldership at Ephesus to “take heed to yourselves.” Each elder is under the pastoral care of the eldership. Even a minister of the Word is a man under authority. He too needs and deserves pastoral care. Are ministers of the gospel willing to receive oversight for their own souls and families from their fellow elders? I hope so, for we, like any other sheep, surely need loving pastors to watch for our souls, to care about our devotional life, our love for our wives, our nurture of our children, our assurance of salvation, and our progress in personal holiness. Thus, even gospel ministers should have the benefit of regular pastoral visits from fellow elders. Yet how can such oversight be received if a gospel minister thinks of himself as a superior to all his fellow elders, and always relates to them as subordinates, as inferiors in rank? Here is prelacy in the bud. Here the rubber of parity meets the road. Perhaps parity practiced more humbly and faithfully would nip discouragement or scandal in the bud, and prevent the crippling of useful ministers. This underscores why an eldership shouldn’t make any man an elder unless they can conscientiously submit to his pastoral care. This implication of parity gives new force to “lay hands hastily on no man.” Some may retort that each gospel minister is under the oversight of fellow ministers. Which fellow ministers are so charged, and by whom? Do they pay him pastoral visits? Does ministerial friendship or occasional fellowship equal pastoral care? Does any larger body of gospel ministers (such as a ministerium, or general assembly, or association) appoint someone to visit each minister regularly in his home to watch over his soul and family? I hope that any who appeal to the care of fellow ministers enjoy such oversight. I am confident, however, that Reformed Baptists have no such practice. Our souls would be ill cared for indeed if our oversight were left to association meetings or ministeriums. Thus, it is proper, and often most prudent, for a lone elder, with the consent of his congregation, to seek pastoral care for his own soul and family from the elders of another church until his own church has a plurality of elders. Such an expedient could be beneficial to prevent much harm to Christ’s servants and reproach upon his name.

#### **5. Parity implies that the elders are equally eligible to lead the observance of the sacraments.**

Since all the elders represent Christ as God’s stewards, all may lead the church in the Lord’s Supper ([1 Cor.11:25](#)). Any elder, not just a preacher, may preside over the distribution of the elements. Similarly, any elder may perform a baptism. Of course, ministers of the Word will usually baptize new disciples, since their preaching often is instrumental in the conversion of the persons baptized.

#### **6. Parity implies that the elders are equally eligible to represent their church in associations.**

This also follows from the fact that each elder equally represents both Christ and the church. Representation of their church in association meetings should not be restricted to gospel ministers, but open to all the elders of the churches.

## **7. Parity implies that each elder must grasp sound doctrine and be apt to teach and defend it.**

Paul requires this of all elders, not merely of preachers ([1 Tim. 3:2](#); [Titus 1:9](#)). Each elder must have a firm grasp on God's Word and some aptness to teach it. Else an eldership could not even begin to implement the parity called for here, or give oversight to its preachers. We need not insist that each elder have a formal seminary education. Nor do I mean that each elder must possess teaching gift to such a degree as to warrant making preaching his vocation. Yet, if the elders are largely ignorant of the truth, and unable to defend it, devastation will befall the churches from the hand of subtle ministers sent fresh from seminary with liberal or neo-orthodox notions. Again, if elders are ignorant of the historic Reformed creeds of their churches, how will they stand fast against the waves of diluted doctrine eroding the foundation of orthodoxy all around us? Again, biblical thinking is essential to sound living. Thus, elders must be grounded in the faith to give sound counsel to brethren struggling to live for God's glory. Lenski, commenting on "apt to teach" in [1 Tim.3:2](#), confirms this implication:

Those who still need much teaching and are themselves incompetent to impart knowledge should not be given an office in which some proficiency in teaching is required. When we read in [5:17](#) that honor is to be accorded "especially to those laboring in the Word and teaching", we take it that the elders divided the work among themselves, and that those who were most able to teach attended to most of the teaching and preaching. This does not mean that the others could not teach at all.

**Dabney, defending parity, affirms this implication and applies it powerfully and eloquently:**

Perhaps the most plausible objection ... against our theory is this, that if you teach the ruling elders are among the scriptural presbyters, then you can no longer draw any consistent line between them and ministers, you must make them all preachers. The Scriptures make no distinction between any of those whom they call presbyters, either as to qualification or ordination or functions ... it is asserted that the same qualifications are exacted, in [1 Tim.3](#), and [Titus 1](#), of all presbyters alike, and especially "aptness to teach"...as to this, we assert that the ruling elder needs it also just as truly as the preacher does ... It has been well remarked in support of this assertion, that the ruling elder should preach the gospel from house to house, that he should be a catechist and Bible-class teacher. This is all true, but it comes very short of the true strength of the case. Limit the ruling elder's task as strictly as is possible to the business of ruling, and still his function is just as truly and as purely a *teaching function* as that of the preacher. He rules only by teaching; that is, his whole authority is exercised through the inculcative process ... The church has legitimate power over the conscience only as she presents to that conscience, in the exercise of its own private judgment, what ought to be adequate evidence that her command is scriptural. The sceptre of Christ's kingdom is his Word; *to wield this is to teach*. And we would distinctly declare, that our tendency to consider that teaching must mean preaching alone arises only from our over-weaning and unscriptural fondness for public preaching over the quiet, efficacious inculcation of the spiritual inspector. Had we used Christ's plan more efficiently we should not have contracted this perverted notion. Were ruling elders what they ought to be we should perhaps find that, so far from regarding preaching as nearly all of religious teaching, it is less than half.

Conclusion: Why then, someone may well exclaim, this is nothing less than full blown Brethrenism! What room is left for any diversity at all in the eldership? Now therefore, we must address also the rich diversity of vocation, honor, and gift which the Lord designed for the eldership.