

In Defense of Parity: A presentation of the parity or equality of elders in the New Testament

CHAPTER THREE A Contemporary Reaction to the Parity of the Eldership

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Perhaps the most extended treatment of and public attack on the parity of the eldership within recent days comes in the form of a book that has for its express purpose to give ecclesiological guidance to Reformed and Baptist churches in the Particular Baptist tradition. The breadth of this book is far broader than the ecclesiological issue with which our little book is concerned. Yet a study of the contents of its content justifies the statement that one of the underlying motives which issued in its production must have been a desire to refute the parity of the eldership as it has come to be held by many in the Reformed and Baptist tradition. This is my reason for taking the time in this little book to set before you Poh Boon Sing's view of the Eldership as expressed in his Keys of the Kingdom.

Poh Boon Sing is a Malaysian Reformed Baptist who has experienced imprisonment for his faith. His book appears to represent the views of a number of Reformed Baptists and is being given some 'press' by them not only in America, but in the British Isles. It is in many respects, a good, learned, and helpful book. There are, however, a number of practical areas of ecclesiology where I have severe misgivings about Poh's views. In this chapter, then, after having given some account of the overall thrust of the book, I will limit myself to his views of the parity of the eldership. It is always difficult to be completely fair with someone with whom you disagree. Therefore, I shall attempt to allow Poh to speak for himself as much as possible.

There are eleven chapters in Poh's book:

Chapter 1: Autonomy

Chapter 2: The Headship of Christ

Chapter 3: Rule By Elders

Chapter 4. The Priority of the Ministry

Chapter 5: The Validity of Ruling Elders

Chapter 6. The Unity of the Eldership

Chapter 7. Popular Election

Chapter 8: Ordination

Chapter 9: Rule With Consent

Chapter 10: The Gathered Church

Chapter 11: The Communion of Churches

The heart of those things with which I am concerned is found in chapters 3-6, but there are relevant things said both in earlier and later chapters. The drift of his views is signaled in fact in his introduction where he says this:

Other churches, some of them influential, believe in the "equality of elders and carry this to an extreme, calling every elder "pastor". Closer scrutiny will reveal a Presbyterian influence in this system [p. 5].

Poh persists in describing the view which he is opposing as the absolute equality of elders. This description is an unfortunate oversimplification of our views.

A less disagreeable and very important aspect of Poh's treatment of the subject is also signaled in his lengthy and generally very good historical introduction to the eleven chapters of his book. He premises an important distinction between Independency and Congregationalism.

A shift in the meaning of the terms began to occur very early. The extreme Independents began to forsake rule by elders for popular democracy. The followers of Robert Browne appeared to have carried his teaching about the autonomy and power of the church to an extreme. Isaac Watts (1674-1748), writing to his brother Enoch, mentioned that "there were some of the Independents heretofore called Brownists, some of whom were very irregular in the management of church affairs, but they are not to be found now." John Owen alluded to the existence of "democratical confusion" in his days which hindered him from considering any other alternative to Episcopacy, apart from Presbyterianism, to which he adhered until his change of mind in 1644. He described in disdain the system of church government which was "absolutely democratical or popular". The term "Congregationalism" began to mean that the congregation has power to rule the church, or, otherwise expressed, the power of self-rule. The term "Independency" began to mean that the congregation is autonomous, although maintaining close fellowship with like-minded churches [p. 22].

It is Independency that Poh sets himself to defend throughout his book. In Chapter 3, Rule by Elders, for instance, he asserts that in Independency, "Unlike Congregationalism, church officers do not have their authority delegated by the church. Instead, that authority is communicated from Christ immediately, and through the church" [p. 89]. Throughout this chapter it is John Owen's view of the whole matter which is presented. Poh follows Owen to a fault. He adopts Owen's view that "prophecy" in Scripture sometimes merely refers to the ordinary gift of preaching [pp. 94, 95]. He also presents very favorably Owen's four office view of the church (pastor, teacher, elder, deacon), although he seems a trifle uncomfortable with it as well [pp. 96-100]. Reading the 1689 Baptist Confession through the lens of John Owen he concludes this discussion by saying, "Like the other Independents, the Particular Baptists believed that all pastors are elders, but not all elders are pastors" [p. 100]. While at other points it is difficult to be certain as to how to distinguish Poh from Owen, it is clear at this point (as his later chapters make clear) that Poh is stating his own position.

In Chapter 4 entitled, "The Priority of the Ministry," Poh begins to argue more systematically for his favorite theory of the distinction between pastors and elders. He begins by arguing for the priority of the ministry. Here in a way that I have nothing to quarrel with he argues for the primacy of the Word, of preaching, and the importance of

financially supported full-time preachers for the church. Utilizing [Eph. 4:11](#) and [1 Tim. 5:17](#) he argues properly and powerfully for the importance of the preaching ministry in the church [pp. 111-114].

At this point, however, Poh begins to introduce his theory of the pastor/elder distinction. He argues that in [Eph. 4:11](#) “the ‘pastors and teachers’ are therefore teaching elders. The context of the passage also shows that only teaching elders are referred to here” [p. 115]. He buttresses his view by appealing to the popular doctrine of the call to the ministry. He argues that a distinct call to the ministry of the Word assumes that it is a distinct office as over against the office of ruling elder. [Cf. Poh’s comments on pp. 177, 181 about a contradiction within A. N. Martin’s views on this subject.] Thus, he proceeds to say:

Within the office of elder, therefore, we find certain elders who also occupy the office of pastor or minister. This would be the significance of the [1 Tim. 5:17](#) passage.... There are two sorts of elders: those who rule and teach (often called “teaching elders” for convenience), and those who only rule (called “ruling elders” for convenience).... Our concern is only to note the truth that the teaching elder occupies the office of elder as well as the office of pastor or minister. There are, nevertheless, two basic offices in the church, not three completely different ones: that of elders, and that of deacons.... Thus, the Christian ministry has the priority not only because of the primacy of the word, the primacy of preaching, and the necessity of the call to the ministry, but also because it encompasses the two offices of the elder and minister of the word. As an elder, the pastor rules with the other elders. As a minister of the word, he alone preaches regularly in the church. [p. 117].

As these statements make clear, Poh – apparently oblivious to any contradiction in the matter – moves back and forth terminologically. First, he states the truth that there are only two offices in the church. Then, he states that the pastoral office encompasses the two offices of elder and minister of the Word.

In the following pages Poh argues that there should be clear leadership in the church. According to his viewpoint this requires that one man be the leader. He argues that Moses as the leader of Israel, Peter as the leader of the Apostles, James as the leader of the Church at Jerusalem, Paul as the leader of his missionary team, and the angels of the book of Revelation chapters 1-3 prove this theory [pp. 118, 119]. He concludes:

The word ‘priority’ includes the idea of ‘primacy’ and more.... Of the two types of elders, the teaching elder has the priority over the ruling elders.

There are practical implications to the principle of priority of the ministry. We mention two only here. First, a church should seek to appoint a teaching elder, or pastor, before a ruling elder.

Second, if there are more than one elders in the church, the pastor should be the leading elder. Elders lead the church, and the pastor (or one of them, if there are more than one pastors) leads the eldership. If the pastor is not the leading elder, his liberty to preach, to plan, and to lead the church will be hampered [p. 119-120].

Having argued for his theory biblically and stated some of its practical ramifications, Poh proceeds to present his case from church history. He begins with the astounding statement that “The position of the 1689 Confession of Faith on this matter is crystal-clear” [p. 120]. Reading it through the lens of the Savoy Platform (and by the way ignoring differences between the 1689 and the Savoy Platform) and John Owen he believes that the 1689 Baptist Confession perfectly exemplifies his pastor/elder distinction [pp. 121-126].

Poh concludes this chapter with a section entitled, Denials of “Priority”, and deals with two which he names: “*Absolute Equality*” in America which derives from Presbyterian influences, he thinks, and “*Absolute Equality*” in the United Kingdom which derives from Brethren influences. He summarizes this section as follows:

Some Reformed Baptists are advocating a view of the eldership in which all elders are regarded as equal, with no distinction between them apart, perhaps, from the different functions they perform. To them, all elders are pastors. One stream of opinion, arising from America, appears to have adopted Presbyterian ideas into a Baptist setting. Another stream, arising from the United Kingdom, appears to have been sympathetic to the charismatic movement and Brethrenism. Their emphasis on the equality, or parity, of elders, has the effect of undermining the Christian ministry. The principle of ‘the priority of the ministry’ is thus denied [p. 134].

So as to remove any doubt as to who he is talking about with regard to “*Absolute Equality*” in America, it must be said that he cites chapter 26 of S. Waldron’s book entitled *A [Modern Exposition](#) of the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith* and A. N. Martin’s tapes on the subject of the eldership.

In Chapter 5 Poh presents what he calls “The Validity of Ruling Elders”. The reactionary character of some of the opening sentences of this chapter set the tone for this chapter.

As will be shown below, the current fad to restore a plurality of elders, coupled with the emphasis on the equality of all elders, in Reformed Baptist circles, is in reality a struggle over the validity of the office of ruling elders [p. 139].

How Poh can believe in a plurality of elders in the local church, behold the widespread departure from this biblical doctrine, but use the derogatory language *the current fad to restore a plurality of elders* is mystifying. It manifests at any rate that there is a reactionary current in Poh’s thinking.

By saying that he is arguing for the validity of ruling elders Poh intends to distance himself from two other views and argue for what he calls the “Independent view”.

He is for ruling elders over against the Presbyterian view. Here he argues that the authentic Presbyterian view denies that ruling elders are the elders of the New Testament [p. 140f.]. Thus, from Poh’s perspective the Presbyterian view really does not uphold the validity of ruling elders, since ruling elders are not New Testament elders at all. This classification of Poh’s is not really fair to the historical facts. Poh’s own book shows that calling this the Presbyterian view is not quite fair. Indeed, he himself shows that such great Presbyterians as Samuel Miller, R. J. Breckinridge, J. H. Thornwell, and R. L. Dabney held that ruling elders were elders in the New Testament sense of the word. While Charles Hodge and Thomas Smyth held that ruling elders were not New Testament elders (but only official representatives of the church), Poh himself shows that the Westminster Assembly was divided on the issue. [p. 140, 141].

Poh also means to say that he is for the validity of ruling elders as opposed to those who hold the absolute equality view. He cites a Presbyterian man named, Thomas Witherow, who defended the view of equality in the presbyterian controversies on this issue. Witherow held that there was no New Testament distinction between ruling and teaching elders. Hence, in the sense that Poh believes in them, Witherow, and the absolute equality view, hold that there is no office of ruling elder as distinct from that of teaching elder [pp. 146, 147].

It is in this section while he is arguing against the absolute equality view that the low point of Poh's book is reached. Poh must be allowed to speak for himself:

We note here two dangers that the Absolute Equality View is prone to: namely, the extremes of the 'committee syndrome' and authoritarianism. The 'committee syndrome' sets in when there is no clear leadership provided by the pastor. All the elders are regarded as pastors. They are equal in power. They have equal right to preach. The elders may end up preaching in rotation, as have occurred in Brethren circles. There is also the constant tension of having to give deference to one another, or to prevent a strong personality in the eldership from having the preeminence in any way. The fact that one or two churches have functioned well with this system is no proof that it is correct. It only proves that the men involved have been long-standing friends who would have operated well in any other situation [pp. 153, 154].

It is difficult to restrain a sense of injustice at the many misrepresentations of the plurality and parity of the eldership as we hold it to be found in this paragraph. For instance, there is no need or desire in such a system to restrain and limit the gifts of a strong preacher or teacher. Such a system tends to enable and protect such a teacher or preacher to labor so that he may labor to his utmost at the thing he does best. We who believe in the parity of the eldership recognize vast differences in gifts and maturity among elders equal in office.

It is also difficult to restrain a sense of indignation at the cavalier disregard for the biblical mandate for humility and a servant spirit among the elders. We become indignant at the idea there can be no clear leadership where there is no single leader. Two responses occur to us. First, Jesus ought to be the senior pastor of every church. Second, the Bible teaches that wisdom consists in the ability to cooperate for great goals without a king ([Prov. 30:27](#)).

But unfortunate as these paragraphs are, the following two or three paragraphs are worse. In them he argues that "The Absolute Equality view is prone to the danger of authoritarianism." This view is then associated with "heavy shepherding", being "cocksure", and "the Diotrephes spirit" [pp. 154, 155]. In other words the assertion is made that somehow believing in parity of the eldership leads to an overbearing, harsh, and domineering eldership in which the proper freedoms of individual church-members are infringed. There are many problems with this charge. The main problem is that the charge is completely illogical. To accuse the view of church government which is most calculated to restrain a Diotrephes by placing him in a context of official equality to other elders or pastors is outrageous. Any Diotrephes who chose such a system within which to operate should have his head examined.

The following pages also reveal that a sense of personal irritation is skewing Poh's thoughts. There is here plain over-reaction. Consider such statements as these:

When no other man is qualified or ready to be appointed as another elder of the church, there will be much fuss made of placing the single pastor under the pastoral oversight of another church [p. 156].

A church with only one elder should not be condemned as unbiblical or sinful when there are no other qualified men around to be appointed [p. 157].

Reformed Baptists who practice 'plurality' have themselves become authoritarian oligarchies. The principle of 'plurality' is being bandied about as a new form of 'shibboleth'. In the face of these new problems, it would not be wise to stress 'plurality'. No, it might not even be right to do so [p. 159].

In Chapter 6 Poh concludes his extended treatment of the eldership by speaking of “The Unity of the Eldership”. He asserts that the claim that “all elders are pastors” [p. 165] is based on three wrong assumptions.

The first wrong assumption is that “no significant distinction is to be made between the elders since they occupy the same office”. Here he cites [1 Tim. 5:17](#), [Eph. 4:11](#), and [Revelation 1-3](#) to prove that such a distinction is found in the New Testament.

The second wrong assumption, says Poh, is that “all elders are pastors”. Here Poh argues that only the verb meaning to pastor or shepherd and not the noun meaning pastor or shepherd is found in [Acts 20:28](#) and [1 Peter 5:2](#). He then argues: “All elders do the work of shepherding, but it does not follow that they are the same as pastors of the church” [p. 166].

The third wrong assumption, says Poh, is the assumption of equality. He says, “The claim is made that since all are elders, all are equal in power, in standing before the church, and in rights to performance of all duties” [p. 167]. Here Poh, by the way, manifests his tendency to define office in terms of function and to assume that those who hold the parity of the eldership do not take into account the vast differences in gifts, maturity, financial support, and circumstances between different elders who are equal in office. Elsewhere, for instance, he says, “As far as authority is concerned, all elders have equal rights to perform all those functions” [p. 165].

Poh manifests his confusion further on page 169. Here he argues: “A difference in functions indicates a difference in gifts and therefore, a difference in the individuals who possess those gifts. Since that is the case, how can there be absolute equality of persons?” One can only respond to such argumentation by saying that we never thought of arguing for the absolute equality of persons. We can state our view in the very words which Poh uses to state his on the same page, “The only equality taught in Scripture with regard to leadership in the church is that of the office of elder itself.” We would have no disagreement with Poh, if only he did not introduce in some sense a pastoral office above that of elder. Thus, in the same paragraph Poh goes on to say, “The pastor is to be the leading elder If there are more than one pastors in the church, one of them should be acknowledged as the leading elder” [p. 170].

The extent of the authority which the pastor possesses in his peculiar “office” is revealed in statements of Poh both in Chapter 6 and later chapters. He asserts that the elders are responsible for what is preached in the church, and yet that the pastor is not subject to the elders of the church with regard to his preaching. Here are his own words:

Any defect in the teaching of the church must not be blamed on the preacher alone, but on the whole eldership. This does not mean that the ruling elders should be dictating to the preacher on what he may, or may not, preach. The preacher must be given the liberty to plan out a preaching syllabus, and to preach according to his assessment of the needs of the church, as he is led by the Spirit of God. On his part the preacher needs to take into account the occasional suggestions of the other elders with regard to his preaching [p. 174].

There is similar inconsistency and ambivalence with regard to the elders and pastor in Poh’s description of how elders’ meetings should be handled. Of course, the pastor, should be the chairman of officers’ meetings.

The deacons would meet with the elders often. The elders would meet by themselves often. In all such meetings, the pastor should normally be the chairman. If there are

more than one pastors in the church, one of them who has been recognised and approved by the church as the leading elder would be the chairman [p. 252].

Poh then describes how the pastor should resolve issues which come before the officers or elders.

In a meeting, he would put forward his proposal or decision with regard to any issue affecting the church, to the other elders. He explains to them why 'possibility A' should be adopted and why 'possibility B' should be rejected. He then asks for questions, comments, or suggestions from the other church-officers. Once the questions have been answered the comments heard, and the suggestions considered, he calls upon the meeting to give its consent to adopt 'possibility A' [p. 252].

All this might sound as if the other elders are allowed little or no initiative. But, of course, Poh does not want us to think he means that: "This is not to say that none of the elders, apart from the pastor, may initiate a suggestion or propose an item for the agenda of the meeting. All we are saying is that the leadership of the pastor should be recognized in practice" [p. 253]. Poh will have to pardon us for thinking that he is very ambivalent about other elders taking initiative in *the pastor's church*!

Poh's arguments against the view of the eldership commonly held among us raise a number of interesting and important questions which I think we would do well to consider more closely. Among them are the following:

- Is there any evidence for a distinction between elder or overseer and shepherd (pastor) in the New Testament?
- What validity has Poh's argument that only the verb and not the noun is used in [Acts 20](#) and [1 Peter 5](#)?
- What is the identity of the pastor-teachers of [Eph. 4:11](#)?
- Is it really wise to speak of a distinction between ruling elders and teaching elders?
- Does [1 Tim. 5:17](#) teach such a distinction?
- In what does the parity of the eldership consist?
- In what does legitimate diversity among elders consist?
- Does the 1689 Confession support or refute the pastor/elder distinction?
- Is the popular view that the seven angels of [Revelation 1-3](#) are the pastors of the seven churches really correct?
- What is the proper response to the instances of individual leaders pointed out by Poh?
- Is there really a tension between the common view among us of a distinct call to the ministry of the Word and the view that the office of elder is the same as that of pastor?

Many of these questions must and will be addressed in the following chapters.