

In Defense of Parity:

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

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Baptist Confession of 1689 and the Parity of the Eldership

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As we have seen in the previous chapter, no small part of Poh Boon Sing's attack on the parity of the eldership is rooted in the claim that the ecclesiastical tradition most closely associated with the Particular or ' Reformed Baptists clearly distinguished between pastors and elders. This claim comes to its most pointed and important expression in Poh's assertion that this distinction is "crystal clear" in the *1689 Baptist Confession of Faith*. This incredible claim seems very powerful. It contrasts strikingly with the reserved or restrained claims cited by Poh which I make in the exposition of the Confession. I, indeed, argue for the view that the Confession supports the parity of the eldership and rejects the pastor/elder distinction, but with less dogmatism than Poh claims for his interpretation of the Confession.

Poh Boon Sing notes in his defense of the pastor/elder distinction that I admit in my book, *A Modern Exposition of the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith* that there is some ambiguity in the Confession on this subject. The ambiguity to which I admitted was that its plain doctrine of two "offices in the churches (26:8, 11) appears to be somewhat clouded by its statement that pastors should be supported. What I precisely said is this:

The point of this paragraph is that Christ has appointed only two continuing offices in the local church—elders and deacons. Much more might be said, but the main proofs of this are these: (1) Only these two offices are mentioned in the classic New Testament passages on the continuing offices of the local church ([Phil. 1:1](#); [1 Tim 3:1-13](#)). The implication is that there were no other offices. (2) The office of elder or presbyter, overseer or bishop, and pastor or shepherd, are one and the same ([Acts 20:17, 28](#); [Titus 1:5-7](#); [1 Pet. 5:2](#); and [1 Tim. 3:2](#) with [Eph. 4:11](#)). It is common today to draw a distinction between pastors and elders. In [Acts 20:17](#) and [28](#), and [1 Pet. 5:2](#) the elders are commanded to shepherd or pastor the church. In [1 Tim. 3:2](#) it is required that all elders be able to teach. [Eph. 4:11](#)'s pastor-teachers are simply elders. There are not three offices in the church—minister or pastor, elder, and deacon. There are only two offices—overseer-elder-pastor and deacon. Pastors and elders are the same. The biblical teaching should not be subtly undermined by terminology like senior pastor or assistant pastor.

The norm is a plurality of elders in each local church. This is the clear implication of both the Bible and the Confession. No instance of a New Testament church with only one elder exists. Universally, a plurality of elders is mentioned ([Acts 14:23](#); [20:17](#); [Phil. 1:1](#); [1 Thess. 5:12](#); [Titus 1:5](#); [Heb. 13:17](#); [James 5:14](#)).

It must be admitted that the position here asserted concerning the equivalence of the terms, pastor and elder, is not asserted unambiguously in the Confession. There are, indeed, statements which do seem clearly to equate pastors, elders, and bishops. In paragraph 8 the Confession speaks of "bishops or elders" as one of the two continuing offices in the church. This equation of "the office of bishop or elder" is again stated in paragraph 9. In paragraph 11 this equation of bishops and elders seems clearly to be extended to pastors when the Confession speaks of "the bishops or pastors of the churches."

To be perfectly fair to the evidence, however, one must take into account the fact that in paragraph 10 where the financial support of elders is treated the term used is "pastors." Furthermore, this paragraph nowhere states that those elder-pastors which are first and foremost to be supported are those "who work hard at preaching and teaching." The implication of this might appear to be that all pastors (here distinguished from elders) should be supported. Yet, when the next paragraph equates bishops and pastors, this possible implication seems clearly to be contradicted. Another possible interpretation of this evidence might be that all elders should be preachers of the Word and, thus, supported by the church. While this interpretation provides a consistent interpretation of the evidence, it is difficult in my mind to see it as consistent with the clear teaching of paragraphs 8 and 9 that as a norm each church should have a plurality of elders. Could the Confession possibly be teaching that each church should normally have a plurality of elders and should support each one? This seems unlikely.

The interpretation which appears to do the most justice to the, admittedly ambiguous, language of the Confession emphasizes the qualifying phrase in paragraph 10, "according to their ability." In the original Scripture proofs of the Confession [1 Tim. 5:17, 18](#) is cited at this point. Perhaps, the Confession is asserting that "ideally" all elders should be supported, but this phrase may add this thought: All elders should be supported according to the ability of the church and according to the stated priorities for pastoral support stated in the Bible. Whether or not this is precisely the right way of understanding [1 Tim. 5:17, 18](#), this interpretation does provide a consistent understanding of the statements of the Confession.

Any fair reader of these paragraphs will see that I was admitting that a greater clarity of statement might be wished in the Confession. I wished this in order that the Confession might not give the appearance of supporting the pastor/elder distinction which I was opposing from the Scriptures and on the basis of the Confession's equation of bishops, elders, and pastors. It never occurred to me that someone might think to impose upon the Confession and the Reformed and Baptist movement such a pastor/elder distinction and claim that this is clearly the doctrine of the Confession. Now, therefore, I must say that if there is some slight ambiguity in the Confession viewed from the perspective of my denial of the pastor/elder distinction, there is a much greater problem for anyone who attempts to draw from it actual support for the pastor/elder distinction. I would much rather attempt to teach my view from the Confession than to defend the pastor/elder distinction from the Confession as Poh Boon Sing does.

The key statements of Chapter 26:8-11 of the Confession are italicized in the quotation below:

8 A particular church, gathered and completely organized according to the mind of Christ, consists of officers and members; and 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 intrusts them with, or calls them to, to be continued to the end of the world, are bishops or elders, and deacons.*

9 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*, if there be any before constituted therein; and of a deacon that he be chosen by the like suffrage, and set apart by prayer, and the like imposition of hands.

10 *The work of pastors being constantly to attend the service of Christ*, in his churches, in the ministry of the word and prayer, with watching for their souls, as they that must give an account to Him; *it is incumbent on the churches to whom they minister, not only to give them all due respect, but also to communicate to them of all their good things according to their ability, so as they may have a comfortable supply, without being themselves entangled in secular affairs*; and may also be capable of exercising hospitality towards others; and this is required by the law of nature, and by the express order of our Lord Jesus, who hath ordained that they that preach the Gospel should live of the Gospel.

11 Although it be incumbent on *the bishops or pastors of the churches*, to be instant in preaching the word, by way of office, yet the work of preaching the word is not so peculiarly confined to them but that others also gifted and fitted by the Holy Spirit for it, and approved and called by the church, may and ought to perform it.

Several comments will make plain the difficulty of interpreting these statements from the standpoint of the pastor/elder distinction. First, paragraph 8 asserts that there are only two offices in the church. Second, it equates the office of bishop and elder by using the phrase, *bishops or elders*. Third, paragraph 9 again equates the office of bishop and elder in the phrase, *the office of bishop or elder in the church*. Fourth, paragraph 11 equates the bishops of the church with the pastors in the phrase, *the bishops or pastors of the churches*, and asserts that it is their office to be instant in preaching the Word. In light of these plain statements it is a very small concern in paragraph 10 when the support of this office is discussed that only the term, pastor, is used. We may be bothered by the selection of this word. We may wish that another word had been selected, yet in itself there is nothing strictly inconsistent with our view in paragraph 10—as the comments above quoted from *The Modern Exposition* clearly show.

On the other hand the difficulties involved in imposing upon the Confession a preconceived pastor/elder distinction are really enormous. It runs counter to the explicit statements of the Confession equating bishops, elders, and pastors. This distinction is not derived and cannot be derived from the text of the Confession itself.

The only substantial reason to impose it upon or to read it into the Confession is the argument from church history given by Poh Boon Sing. The thrust of that argument is that we must interpret our Confession in light of the views of church government espoused by the Independents generally and John Owen particularly. While our faith does not stand in the wisdom of men—even good men like John Owen—, yet it may be well to point out that this mode of interpreting our Confession faces some very real difficulties. We admit, of course, that as Reformed Baptists we owe a great deal to the Independents and John Owen particularly with reference to our church government. Yet when we come to an issue as precise and fine as that about which Poh Boon Sing has taken issue with many Reformed Baptists in America, it is not so certain that we may simply read the Independents' view into our Confession. I have argued in *A Modern Exposition ...* that the immediate confessional ancestor of our *1689 Baptist Confession* was, indeed, the [*Savoy Declaration of Faith*](#) and its platform of Church Polity. Independents edited this Confession from its own confessional mother, the Westminster.

When the Savoy's Platform of Church Polity is examined carefully, it is plain that, though it was greatly influential in the construction of Chapter 26 of our Confession, its statements were not adopted thoughtlessly or uniformly. With reference to this whole issue of the pastor/elder distinction very important alterations were made in key statements imported into Chapter 26 from the Savoy platform. For instance, the Savoy teaches what has been called the four-office view of the church in the original form of its statement with regard to church offices. The language of this paragraph is identical to that of 26:8 of our Confession until it comes to the last few words. Here is how it reads with the language altered in the 1689 Confession italicized:

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 intrusts them with, or calls them to, to be continued to the end of the world, are *pastors, teachers, elders, and deacons*.

It is plain that the editors of our Confession deliberately altered the words that suggest that there are more than two offices and substituted for them words which plainly and emphatically teach that there are only two, *bishops or elders and deacons*.

A similar alteration appears in the paragraph about "the way appointed by Christ for the calling of any person" to office in the church. The 1689 reads exactly the same except for the words italicized below:

9 The way appointed by Christ for the calling of any person, fitted and gifted by the Holy Spirit, unto the *office of pastor, teacher, or elder in a church* ...

Again the 1689 changes "pastor, teacher, or elder" to "bishop or elder".

In paragraph 11 of the 1689 another significant alteration takes place. The almost identical paragraph of the Savoy Platform reads as follows:

Although it be incumbent on the *pastors and teachers*, to be instant in preaching the word, by way of office, yet the work of preaching the word is not so peculiarly confined to them but that others also gifted and fitted by the Holy Spirit for it, and approved and called by the church, may and ought to perform it.

Again the 1689 altered "pastors and teachers" to "bishops or pastors".

These patent alterations in the Savoy platform are very significant. Poh Boon Sing's attempts to explain them in light of the differing historical situations in which the two Confessions were written do not carry weight since the Particular Baptists in 1689 and the Independents in 1658 faced very similar situations. The true reason for these changes appears plainly to be that the editors of our Confession did not wish to confess the four office view of the church taught by the Savoy or its distinction between the office of elder and pastor.

It must be remembered that there were other influences bearing upon the minds of the original signers of our Confession. Among them was the language and thinking of the First London Confession of 1644. In contradistinction to the Savoy, but in perfect unison with the 1689 that Confession teaches very plainly the two office view of the church with no distinction visible between elders and ministers (paragraphs 36-38).

There is also evidence that the 1689 desired to take an intermediate position between the congregationalism of the 1644 and the remaining clericalism of the Savoy in its pastor/elder distinction. Hence, though the Savoy restricted the administration of the sacraments to the

“minister of the Word lawfully called” (Savoy, Chapter 28:4), and the 1644 permitted any disciple to baptize, yet the 1689 marks out what appears to be intended as a less definitive and an intermediate position by saying, “These holy appointments are to be administered by those only who are qualified and thereunto called, according to the commission of Christ” ([1689, 28:2](#)).

Before we conclude this discussion of the relation of the *Savoy*

Platform of Church Polity and the *1689 Baptist Confession of Faith*, it is important to point out an interesting document which sheds further light upon the views and intentions of the signers of the *1689 Baptist Confession*. Benjamin Keach was one of the original signers of the *1689 Baptist Confession*. In 1697 he authored a little book entitled, *The Glory of a True Church, And Its Discipline Displayed*. While we may not assume that Keach’s views were unanimously or slavishly followed by other Particular Baptists of the day, it is still of great interest for the present discussion to note that Keach plainly contradicts Poh’s interpretation of the Confession at several points. First, Keach clearly equates the office of pastor and the office of elder. Here is one of his opening statements:

A church thus constituted ought forthwith to choose them a pastor, elder or elders, and deacons, (we reading of no other officers or offices abiding in the church) Moreover, they are to take special care, that both bishops , overseers, or elders, as well as deacons, have some competent manner all those qualifications; and after in a day of solemn prayer and fasting, that they have elected them, (whether pastor, etc. or deacons) and accepting the office, must be ordained with prayer, and laying on of the hands of the eldership; being first proved, and found meet and fit persons for so sacred an office: Therefore such are very disorderly churches who have no pastor or pastors ordained, they acting not according to the rule of the gospel, having something wanting.

After this introductory statement, Keach discusses in order only two offices. The first section is entitled, *Of the work of a Pastor, Bishop, or Overseer*. The second is entitled, *The Office and Work of Deacons*. Clearly, Keach makes no distinction between pastors, bishops, and elders.

This conclusion is made even more certain by the second point of relevance in Keach for our present discussion. Keach denies that there is any office of *ruling elder* as distinct from pastor in the church today.

Query, *Are there no ruling elders besides the pastor?*

Answer. There might be such in the primitive apostolical church, but we see no ground to believe it an abiding office to continue in the church, but was only temporary.

1. Because we have none of the qualifications of such elders mentioned, or how to be chosen.
2. Because we read not particularly what their work and business is, or how distinct from preaching elders; though we see not but the church may (if she sees meet) choose some able and discreet brethren to be helps in government; We have the qualifications of bishops and deacons laid down, but of no other office or officers in the church, but these only.

The contrast between Poh and Keach could not be more pointed. Poh argues for the validity of ruling elders. Keach denies that any such office (as distinct from the office of preaching elder) exists in the church today. Keach’s view also plainly contrasts with that of

John Owen. This fact shows that important Particular Baptists like Keach did not see themselves as adopting Owen's church polity without alteration in the *1689 Confession*.

A third matter relevant to the interpretation of the *1689 Confession* emerges from a study of Keach's little book. As I pointed out above, I argued in *A Modern Exposition ...* that one plausible interpretation of [26:10's](#) discussion of the support of pastors was that the Confession might be assuming that all pastor-elder-bishops should be supported. This appears to have been the view of Keach. In the quotation given above from page 9 of his book he appears to recognize only preaching elders. Furthermore, in a section entitled, *Of the Duty of Church Members to their Pastor*, Keach points out eight duties of church members to the one he also describes in this section as "pastor or elder" [p. 8]. The sixth one deals with their financial support.

It is their duty to provide a comfortable maintenance for them and their families, suitable to their state and condition... ministers are not to ask for their bread, but to receive it honourably.

It would appear that at least Keach's interpretation of 26:10 of the 1689 Baptist Confession was that all pastors should be supported by the church.

It is, of course, not certain whether other Particular Baptists understood 26:10 or the eldership in exactly the way Keach did. It is also very unlikely that Keach's view that all pastors should be supported can be maintained in the light of Scripture. It is possible that there are other weaknesses in Keach's view of the eldership. A reading of his little book gives the impression that he was weak on the Bible's teaching that normally the government of the local church rests in the hands of a plurality of elders in each local church. However all this may be, it is abundantly clear that Keach rejected anything like a distinction between pastors and elders in the church.

We may conclude this brief discussion of the pastor/elder distinction by summarizing the results of this examination of the teaching of the *1689 Baptist Confession* with regard to the pastor/elder distinction which Poh thinks is so crystal clear within it. We have seen, first, that the most natural reading of the Confession itself clearly supports the view which equates pastors and elders. We have seen, second, that at points crucial to the pastor/elder distinction alterations which reject it are introduced into the language of the Savoy Platform in the *1689 Confession*. We have seen, third, that Benjamin Keach one of the signers of the *1689 Confession* and one of the most influential Particular Baptists of the era clearly and explicitly rejects the pastor/elder distinction and supports the idea that at just this point Particular Baptists felt free to modify the teaching of Owen and the Independents. It may be that we cannot quite conclude by saying that the Confession is "crystal clear" in its rejection of the pastor/elder distinction. Yet we can say that no fair-minded assessment of the evidence here presented will have much doubt about which side should be citing the Confession in their favor in the present debate. Indeed, I suspect that most readers will feel that the evidence justifies the assertion that the Confession is *crystal clear* in equating pastors and elders.