

Elders and Deacons in Historic Baptist Confessions

Baptist Church Government Illustrated from Historic Baptist Confessions

The purpose of this historical survey is to show that from their earliest beginnings Baptists have held to the view that the two ongoing church offices presented in the New Testament are elders and deacons, and that only in more modern developments has the eldership largely disappeared.

1. A Short Confession of Faith in Twenty Articles, by John Smyth, 1609

Article 16:

The ministers of the church are, not only bishops (episcopos), to whom the power is given of dispensing both the word and the sacraments, but also deacons, men and widows, who attend to the affairs of the poor and sick brethren.

2. A Declaration of Faith of English People Remaining at Amsterdam, 1611

Article 20:

That the Officers of every Church or congregation are either Elders, who by their office do especially feed the flock concerning their souls, Acts 20:28, 1 Peter 5:2,3. or Deacons Men, and Women who by their office relieve the necessities of the poor and impotent brethren concerning their bodies, Acts 6:1-4.

3. Propositions and Conclusions Concerning the Christian Religion, 1612-1614

Proposition 76:

That Christ hath set in His outward church two sorts of ministers: viz., some who are called pastors, teachers or elders, who administer in the word and sacraments, and others who are called Deacons, men and women: whose ministry is to serve tables and wash the saints' feet (Acts 6:2-4; Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:2,3,8,11; and chap.5).

4. The London Confession, 1644

Article 36:

That being thus joined, every Church has power given them from Christ for their better well-being, to choose to themselves meet persons into the office of Pastors, Teachers ["Pastors" and "Teachers" are omitted in later editions.], Elders, Deacons, being qualified according to the Word, as those which Christ has appointed in his Testament, for the feeding, governing, serving, and building up of his Church, and that none other have power to impose them, either these or any other.

5. Second London Confession, 1677, 1688

Article 26, paragraph 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 entrusts them with, or calls them to, to be continued to the end of the World, are Bishops or Elders and Deacons.

6. Articles of the Baptist Bible Union of America, 1923

Article 13:

We believe that a church of Christ is a congregation of baptized believers. . . that its officers of ordination are pastors, elders and deacons, whose qualifications, claims and duties are clearly defined in the Scriptures.

7. Statement of Faith of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1925, 1963

Article 6:

This church is an autonomous body, operating through democratic processes under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. In such a congregation members are equally responsible. Its Scriptural officers are pastors and deacons.

8. Swedish Baptist Confession of Faith, 1861

Article 9:

We believe that a true Christian church is a union of believing and baptized Christians, who have covenanted to strive to keep all that Christ has commanded, to sustain public worship, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit to choose among themselves shepherds or overseers and deacons, to administer baptism and the Lord's supper. . .

9. Confession of Faith and Ecclesiastical Principles of the Evangelical Association of French- Speaking Baptist Churches

Part 2, Article 2:

In addition to pastors or elder, the local church may have other responsible servants, for example deacons and deaconesses whose role it is to assist the pastors or elders in their ministry, by assuming especial responsibility for everything that relates to the material interests of the congregation.

10. A Comment on Tradition

Of course our only infallible rule for faith and practice is not tradition, either old or new, but rather, the Word of God. Nevertheless, we believe that humility and wisdom commend the careful consideration of what our fathers in the faith have taught and practiced. We are not the sole possessors of truth. And we are very prone to be blind at the very points perhaps where they saw clearly. The least we can say from this historical survey of Baptist Confessions is that it is false to say that the eldership is unbaptistic. On the contrary, the eldership is more baptistic than its absence, and its disappearance is a modern phenomenon that parallels other unbiblical developments in doctrine that make its disappearance questionable at best.

Note: The story of the presence and then gradual disappearance of multiple elders from the Congregational churches of New England in the 17th and 18th century is told briefly by Iain Murray in Jonathan Edwards: A New Biography (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1987), pp.344