

## **DO WE NEED ELDERS AS WELL AS DEACONS?**

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Today many Baptist churches have appointed elders as well as elected deacons on the ground that this is pattern for church life laid down in Scripture. But although this was the pattern operating in the churches of Ephesus for which Timothy was responsible (see 1 Tim 3.1-13), it was by no means the universal pattern. The fact is that the church at Jerusalem was structured differently from the church at Corinth, and the church at Corinth was structured differently from the church at Ephesus. There is no one Scriptural pattern for leadership. Furthermore, to complicate matters, we have no sure knowledge of the precise role which deacons played over against elders at Ephesus. When he wrote to Timothy, Paul was far more interested in the qualities necessary for deacons as distinct from their duties. However, a Baptist tradition has developed whereby elders are seen to have a leadership role in the spiritual and pastoral affairs of the church, while the deacons are seen as responsible for the more practical tasks. This Baptist tradition, however, has some very real drawbacks. First of all, it is not always easy to distinguish between the spiritual and the practical: the handling of money, for instance, normally seen as a 'practical' task, actually calls for a high degree of spirituality. Many a pastor has reason to thank God for a godly church treasurer, endowed with the spiritual gift of wisdom. Secondly, this distinction between the spiritual and the practical almost always leads to connotations of 'first' and 'second'-class leaders – for the former are inevitably viewed as more spiritual than the latter. Thirdly, there is a tendency for elders to be in the same mould as their pastor – indeed, often the elders are chosen by the pastor. The result is that elders often fail to complement their pastor. Fourthly, the introduction of elders into our churches appears to me to be a throw-back to a past culture and smacks of irrelevancy today. Certainly the term 'elders' is positively quaint, if not ludicrous, when applied today to middle-aged men (and they do tend to be men). However, in Paul's day there was no such thing as middle-age: in Roman society, for instance a man was called a young man (literally a 'juvenile', *iuvenis*) when he was under forty, and an 'old man' (*senex* – the word from which we get 'senile'!) when he was forty or over. My own preferred option is to have one 'leadership team' (yes, let's do away with the 'diaconate' – that too belongs to a past era) who serve their Lord and his church by giving direction to the church in its ministry and mission. Accountable to the leadership team and through the leadership team are then a number of small task-oriented teams with responsibility for overseeing and developing clearly defined areas of the church's life, such as social action and evangelism, nurture and development, pastoral care, as well as areas such as finance and fabric. But let's not have elders – leadership becomes too complicated!

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