

Letter: "Cross-Ex"

By Dr. Greg Bahnsen

In your first issue of *Antithesis*, Dr. Greg Bahnsen states: "It is in the essentials of presbyterian government, found today in various Reformed churches, that we find the above Biblical points coming to their best expression." (*For the Record*, p. 58). I agree with this statement wholeheartedly, especially in its caution, i.e., "the essentials" of presbyterian government are praised, not their every codicil. Leaving aside the traditional wisdom to "leave well-enough alone," and with the highest regard for "the essentials" of the Reformed position, I would like to point out an area of presbyterian government, which, though minor, does not have the sanction of Scripture. The Presbyterian position holds that elders must be elected by the congregation. While I believe that this is a permissible method under certain circumstances, it is not required by Scripture, and in many cases may not be desirable.

Election of Elders

The Presbyterian view that elders are elected by the congregation is largely based upon Acts 6, where the "seven" were appointed to distribute food to widows, and Acts 14:23, where Paul and Barnabas elected elders ("by show of hands," as the case is made) for the churches of Lycaonia and Pisidia. In studying these and related passages, I come to a different conclusion, which is summarized below. (This is my personal view, and is not representative of the position of my denomination or my local church.)

Acts 6

In this passage we are told that the apostles asked the church to "select from among [them] men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom," whom they could place in charge of the distribution of food to the Hellenistic widows. It is generally assumed that the seven were deacons, although the text does not specify that office or any other. All we know for certain is that the men were placed in charge of the distribution of material goods.

The fact that Philip and Stephen later performed other functions (baptizing in the one case and generally fulfilling the office of a preacher, or perhaps a prophet, in the other) may indicate that these men had other gifts and/or offices, but does not in any way indicate that their appointment to "office" is recorded in Acts 6. On the contrary, we cannot argue that their preaching and baptizing is the proper fulfillment of their appointment to wait tables!

It is important to note what we cannot deduce from this passage. (1) We cannot deduce that church officers are appointed with the will of the congregation because we do not know if the seven were appointed to any church "office" in Acts 6.[\[1\]](#) They were appointed to wait tables, and no office is specified. While the traditional wisdom is that they were appointed deacons, the text does not specify, and the Scriptures nowhere limit the office of deacon to the ministry of material goods, or specify such a function. (2) Even if we assume these men were appointed to the office of deacon, we cannot transfer a protocol from this passage, on the alleged appointment of deacons, to the appointment of elders. The apostles made a clear distinction in kind between the ministry of food and the ministry of the word (Acts 6:2). Given this distinction, where do we get the right to use Acts 6 as a model for the election of an entirely different form of ministry? It would be a very dangerous form of interpretation to assume that these men were appointed deacons, to which the text gives no testimony, and then assume that the same procedure applies to elders, who minister to spiritual rather than to material needs.

I Corinthians 16

Yet Acts 6 is not the only passage that relates to the ministry of material goods. We have another example of the selection of men for such ministry in I Corinthians 16:3. There Paul tells the church that he intends to carry the Corinthian church's gift for the relief of the poor in Jerusalem with "whomever you may approve." Acts 6 and I Corinthians 16 show a pattern: the distribution of material goods is to be managed by representatives of those who give. This only makes sense, since it is consistent with a belief in private property and voluntary giving. If I wish to give over and above my tithe (which belongs to God and is to be managed by His officers), it is my prerogative to administrate those monies, i.e., my gifts of charity, as I see fit, and to place whomever I wish in charge of them. (See, e.g., Acts 5.) This is the message of Acts 6 and I Corinthians 16. It also conforms with reason.

Acts 14:23

This passage is often cited in defense of the election of elders. The English Bible tells us that "they," presumably Paul and Barnabas, "had appointed elders for them in every city." It is claimed that the word translated "appoint" implies "by show of hands," i.e., by election. Thus says Calvin. *Institutes*, Book IV, Chapter 3, 15. So, it is presumed, that the appointment of elders follows the same lines as the appointment of the seven.[\[2\]](#)

There are several problems with Calvin's interpretation of Acts 14:23. First, it is not so clear that the word actually means "appoint by election." Bauer's *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* specifically disclaims this meaning in Acts 14:23. "[T]he presbyters in Lycaonia and Pisidia were not chosen by the congregations....This does not involve a choice by the group; here the word means *appoint, install*." This is a lexical question that far surpasses my knowledge of Greek, but it ought to be noted that competent scholars disagree on the meaning of the word in this verse. We should be careful not to build a doctrine on a questionable reading of one verse.

Second, even if the word does mean appoint by election we cannot, on that basis alone, infer a congregational vote. The phrase "appoint by election" does not specify who is voting. It could easily be the apostles, or in the context of our local churches, the Session that votes. The text, even given Calvin's reading of "appoint," does not specify who votes. On the contrary, I think that reason argues against a congregational vote. It seems incredible to believe that the apostles would entrust to brand new converts, many of whom were just recently snatched from paganism, the awesome responsibility of electing their own spiritual leaders.

Third, Acts 14:23 is not the only verse on the appointment of elders. If we wish to decide who does the voting in Acts 14:23, assuming Calvin's reading for the sake of argument, we need to consult a passage that forces one interpretation or another. For instance, if the "appointing body" were composed of only one man and there was still an indication of a vote, we could be relatively certain that it was the congregation who voted.[\[3\]](#) However, in Titus 1:5 we read Paul's command to Titus to "appoint elders in every city, as I directed you." The word translated "appoint" here is an entirely different word and carries no connotation of election whatsoever. If the congregation were, as Calvin would say, the "voting body," we would expect to see the same word in Titus as we see in Acts 14:23. Its absence here pokes a big hole in the traditional Presbyterian interpretation. It seems clear to me that if "appoint" in Acts 14:23 does in fact mean "by election," it means "by the election of the apostles," and not "by the election of the congregation." This reading accords with the Titus 1:5 passage.[\[4\]](#)

Fourth, allowing the congregation a vote in appointing officers does not take into account the difference in kind between the ministry of what belongs to men, i.e., material goods above and beyond the tithe, and the ministry of what belongs to God, i.e., His word. Men have every right to manage the disbursement of their own funds. Men have no right to tell God how to manage His church.

Fifth, election by the congregation has severe practical problems. Unlike virtually any decision of the Session, there is no appeal from a congregational vote. If the congregation votes down a candidate for unscriptural reasons, shouldn't there at least be an appeal process? (Rather, I say,

have the elders appoint the men, and the congregation can appeal their decision to Presbytery if they see fit.) Further, the congregation of your average Presbyterian church is a hodgepodge of doctrinal persuasions. How are we to entrust the discernment of qualities such as "holding fast the faithful word that is in accordance with the teaching that he may be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict" to such (Titus 1:9)? I say it is unreasonable to do so, and God never intended it so. The elders are to judge the qualification of candidates and, with a majority vote of the Session, appoint them.[\[5\]](#)

Appointment by the Session

The Session is best qualified to appoint elders because they are: (1) presumably, the most spiritually mature; (2) the most in-tune with the needs and vision of the congregation as a whole; and (3) those whom God has given the responsibility, and therefore a degree of grace, to manage the affairs of the church. It is the Session's responsibility to select and train men for church leadership. It is also their responsibility to do this in a way that edifies and nurtures the church. If a Session determines that the best way, given their particular circumstances, is to have a vote, there is no Scriptural proscription. On the other hand, if the Session does not feel that a congregational vote is the best for their church, they may appoint the men in some other way. The Scriptures do not require them to have a vote. *However, where the Scriptures give this decision to the elders, the denomination ought not to take it from them by legislating one method or the other.*

It seems clear to me that the biblical record supports the installment of elders by the judgment of the Session and the selection of men to administer material goods in whatever way the people desire. This accords with Scripture and with reason.

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Bahnsen Responds:

Mr. Krembiel and I agree that the Biblically sanctioned form of church government is presbyterian -- the point of my original article. Pushing the discussion a bit further now, however, Mr. Krembiel questions whether Scripture requires that the congregation take part in the process of choosing its elders. He believes this is permissible, but not usually preferable. I appreciate the spirit and thoughtfulness of his discussion.[\[6\]](#)

Mr. Krembiel feels that in most cases, the Session is best qualified to make appointment of new elders for the congregation.[\[7\]](#) My article spoke of a two-step procedure in the selection of elders: certification of candidates by the governing board of elders[\[8\]](#) and selection by the congregation of those men to whom they are willing to submit. How does Scripture direct us in the selection of congregational officers? The only passage which seems to answer that question in any detail is Acts 6 (the selection of original deacons), and accordingly, it is taken as the divinely approved paradigm for all church officers, despite Mr. Krembiel's resistance to that idea.[\[9\]](#)

Mr. Krembiel first denies that Acts 6 deals with the office of deacon because the passage does not "specify" (explicitly mention?) that office as such. This is a weak argument. What the passage describes certainly has the characteristics of an office (e.g., election, approval, authority), and the function of this corresponds to what Scripture teaches to be a main function of deacons. Indeed, the very word (in verb form) is found in verse 2. If something waddles like a duck and quacks like a duck, we should take it to be a duck; so it is with identifying deacons in Acts 6.

Mr. Krembiel secondly denies that the appointment of deacons in Acts 6 can be transferred as a protocol to the appointment of elders. His reasons are dubious, if not also theologically suspect. He resists applying the procedure for deacons to elders because his method of distinguishing between the offices of elder and deacon is to draw a hard and fast dichotomy between the realms dealt with by the two offices -- a categorical contrast between the essential kind of things that pertain to the two offices. They are so different, according to him, that a procedure for selecting the one kind of officer would not at all be appropriate for the other. In particular, he divides the work of the elders and deacons sharply into "spiritual" and "material" needs -- between what "belongs to God" and what "belongs to men"[\[10\]](#) -- within the work of the church. This dichotomy is not supported by Scripture and is artificial. The offerings given to the church and used by the deacons -- whether from tithes or not -- just as much "belong to God" as the word of God handled by the elders. Ministering to the "material" needs of hurting brethren is just as surely a "spiritual" duty and benefit as is sharing Scripture with them.

If the false antithesis set up by Mr. Krembiel between the offices of elder and deacon is corrected, he loses his rationale for refusing to apply the procedure for selecting deacons to the selection of elders. I would argue that they both belong to the class of continuing church offices and, therefore, should have the one text which specifies a selection procedure applied to them both (in the absence of any Biblically based reason to the contrary). The authority exercised by the elders under Christ is very weighty indeed: the "power of the keys of the kingdom." Placing oneself under such authority by joining a church is a serious matter, one that is done voluntarily and can no more be compelled than can a profession of faith. Mr. Krembiel's preferred method of appointing elders (by those who are already elders) is well intentioned, but allows for the abusive possibility that the

congregation will be ruled by some men against its will (involuntarily). Presbyterians have always opposed such potential tyranny -- as well as the actual tyranny experienced under Rome -- within the church of Christ.

[1] It is interesting to note that most Presbyterians would say that the seven were deacons and yet deny deacons the right to do the works recorded of Philip and Stephen. In any event, the seven are an unknown commodity. We do not know what offices they held, if any. All we can say for sure is that they were appointed to serve the church by means of the distribution of material goods, and to this service they were appointed by the will of the people. It is merely speculation that they were deacons.

[2] Here we must pause to consider the two this conclusion is based upon: first, that the seven were appointed church officers in Acts 6, which is entirely speculation; and second, that the appointment of one type of church officer, namely deacons, is applicable to the appointment of another type of church officer, namely elders. This too is entirely speculation.

[3] Certainly there need be no vote when only one ballot is to be cast.

[4] It is also consistent with the appointment of Paul and Barnabas in Acts 13.

[5] This does not preclude consulting the congregation's opinion, and possibly, in the judgement of the Session, deferring to it. There may be a place for that. On the other hand there may be a place for overriding the opinion of the congregation. These considerations are best left in the hands of those whom God has entrusted with the spiritual welfare of the church, i.e., the elders, and not required by denominational standards.

[6] His appeal to "reason" (e.g., the last sentence) as an authority in addition to Scripture is troublesome, though. "Reason" means many things both inside and outside of philosophical circles -- from Aristotle's laws of logic, to the Goddess of the French Revolution, to what is alleged as "common sense." The Roman Catholic magisterium always felt "reason" was on its side. The Reformers found that unreasonable.

[7] This does raise the interesting question of how the original elders were to be chosen, if not by the congregation. Having the Presbytery unilaterally imposing officers on a congregation is episcopalian in nature.

[8] This answers Mr. Krembiel's concern that members of the church, holding a hodgepodge of doctrinal views, are not qualified to discern a candidate's doctrinal soundness or lack thereof. This is the very reason why within the presbyterian system a man who does not also pass the scrutiny of the elders may not serve. Mr. Krembiel's objection at this point seems to have confused presbyterianism (two-step procedure) with congregationalism (where the congregation does indeed have the unilateral authority to appoint elders).

[9] In Titus 1:5 Paul instructs Titus to appoint elders "in the manner" that Paul had "directed" him to follow, but the text does not inform us what that method was. The word for "appoint" is the very same as that used in Acts 6:3, from which I infer that the method was not unlike what we find in the Acts 6 (more detailed) passage. (And as Mr. Krembiel recognizes, the different verb used in Acts 14:23 can and usually does take the meaning of "elect.")

[10] There is a curious line of reasoning here, which seems to go like this: (1) Electing someone to office renders the offices representative in nature, but (2) representation is only appropriate in the realm of private property. Now since (3) the material goods and money given to the deacons are over and above the tithe (which is controlled by the elders), (4) they may be governed by principles pertaining to private property. Thus (5) election to office is appropriate only for deacons. The first two premises are critically vague or arbitrary -- and not argued from Scripture anyway. Electing leaders indicates submission to them, but not necessarily the way in which they are to function or make their decisions (e.g. representatively). But even if deacons are representatives of contributors, is there absolutely no representative element in the work of the elders? Why is representation restricted to matters of private property? Are not the elders representatives of my spiritual interests and well-being (cf. Heb. 13:17)? The third and fourth premises are even weaker. It is unwarranted to think that diaconal distributions could not (or do not) come from the tithe. Moreover, offerings given to the church -- whether tithes or free-will gifts -- are no longer the contributor's private property or any longer controlled by him (even through a representative) anyway.