

GOSPEL HIGHWAY

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Against "Parity": Part 1

by B. S. Poh

A book entitled, "In Defense Of Parity", subtitled, "A Presentation of the Parity Or Equality of Elders in the New Testament", was published by "Truth For Eternity Ministries" in America, in 1997. It consisted of a collection of essays on the subject of the parity of the church eldership, written by four contributors - Samuel E. Waldron, Gregory G. Nichols, James A. Hufstetler and David J. Chanski. The first three are pastors of the Reformed Baptist Church of Grand Rapids, Michigan, while David Chanski is the pastor of the Providence Reformed Baptist Church of Minneapolis, Minnesota, a daughter church of the former.

This book sets for itself two goals: (i) as polemic, "to address recent attacks on and defend the doctrine of the parity of the eldership" (p. 7); and (ii) positively, to present what the authors believe to be "a balanced, biblical view of this subject" (p. 8). The contents of the book, set forth in 138 pages, are as follows:

Chapter 1: "Parity and Diversity in the Eldership: Parity", by G. Nichols.

Chapter 2: "Parity and Diversity in the Eldership: Diversity", by G. Nichols.

Chapter 3: "A Contemporary Reaction to the Parity of the Eldership", by S. Waldron.

Chapter 4: "An Exegetical Defense of the Parity of the Eldership in the New Testament", by S. Waldron.

Chapter 5: "A Careful Exposition of 1 Timothy 5:17", S. Waldron.

Chapter 6: "An Historical Examination of the Parity of the Eldership in Independency and John Owen", by D. Chanski.

Chapter 7: "The Baptist Confession of 1689 and the Parity of the Eldership", S. Waldron.

Chapter 8: "The Call to the Ministry and the Parity of the Eldership", by J. Hufstetler.

Chapter 9: "The Practice of the Parity of the Eldership", by D. Chanski.

Any reader of the book will quickly realize that it is primarily a response to the book "The Keys of the Kingdom", written by the present writer. The name of Poh Boon Sing is mentioned critically in every chapter, including in the Preface, except for the two chapters by Greg Nichols. A copy of the book was sent "hot from the press" to me by D. Chanski. This followed an earlier letter to me from Chanski, co-signed with Waldron, in which was stated, "I am writing primarily to lodge a protest and offer some criticism concerning some of the things you wrote, and also to make you aware that some Reformed Baptist pastors here in the States intend to publish a response to 'The Keys of the Kingdom'".

I have attempted to remain level-headed while reading the book, with the intention of amending my view on the eldership, and even of completely replacing it, if necessary. After reading through the book three times, I have not been convinced by the view it propounds. (By the time this article is completed, I would have read through the book at least another time.) My initial reaction had been to leave the issue alone and let the readers form their own judgement on it. However, the manner of its espousal is such that I am convinced of the necessity of replying to it. The circumstances in my life have not permitted me to write a response earlier.

General considerations

The spirit

The spirit of the book is hardly eirenic, although the authors evidently attempt to restrain themselves. I hazard the guess that the spirit of the book is the result of the following: (i) The authors have taken my

criticism of their view personally; (ii) The authors have engaged in selective and cursory reading of my book; and (iii) The differences in age, experience and personality among the contributors. Indications of these will become apparent as we proceed.

In my book, I have said in the Foreword, "The reader will have to pardon the author if, at places, the preacher in him shows!". I am primarily a preacher, by calling and vocation, and only secondarily a writer. The language of speech is usually different from that of writing, but I have always attempted to write the way I would speak. Furthermore, preachers often use hyperbole to gain the attention of the hearers and to drive home a point, although I would hasten to add that the point being made must be factual. It is the *manner* of presentation that has been commonly dubbed "the preacher's hyperbole". Although I was generally aware of the possibility of being picked upon in this area, and hence the qualifying statement in the Foreword of my book, it came as a disappointment and a surprise that this really happened. One of the contributors to the book on "parity" took exception to my stating that the 1689 Confession is "crystal clear" in making a distinction between the pastors and ruling elders (pp. 4, 116, and three times on p. 125). Clearly, that writer is not only challenging the clarity of the issue, but is also unhappy with the expression "crystal clear".

The same writer takes exception to my remark that those who hold to the "parity" view "have had an influence that is out of proportion to their small numbers." In a footnote, he said, "It is at least my impression that most of the largest Reformed Baptist Churches in America and a host of smaller churches hold our view. In fact, we believe that the vast majority of those churches which hold formally to the 1689 Confession in America espouse our view. We further think that any fair survey of the rest of the world would probably contradict his assertion that we are in the minority" (p. 120). The tentativeness of the contributor's claim that those who hold to his view are not in the minority is obvious. In fact, in reference to my book, which propounds a different view, he said, "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" (p. 51). In reference to my view that there is a distinction between the teaching elders and the ruling elders, the same writer admits: "He is not alone in holding or assuming this distinction. This distinction is held or at least assumed by many in their views of church government" (p. 63). The book further identifies my view of the call to the ministry as "the traditional view", which these advocates of "parity" attempt to counter (pp. 4, 131).

I stand by my remark that those who hold to the "parity" view are in the minority, since it is based on my perception of the situation in United Kingdom, America and other parts of the world. Let those who so desire make a survey of the matter, but I will not be tempted to "number Israel" (2 Sam. 24:10; 1 Chron. 21:1, 7-8). After all, we do equally hold to the conviction that at the end of the day, it is the authority of Scripture that must hold sway. What is saddening is that the contributors to that book take my criticism of their view so personally.

In another place in the book, it is stated, "At best, Poh gives a poor caricature of the views of such Reformed Baptists as Sam Waldron and A. N. Martin based, we presume, on ignorance of their actual teaching and practice" (p. 100-101). It needs to be noted that my references to Sam Waldron and A. N. Martin were rather minimal, and restrained, in a quarto-sized ("standard sized") book of over 400 pages with print-size "point 11" (smaller than the normal "point 12" print). While not pretending to be a scholar, I was writing a book which could be used "as a manual for church-officers and a textbook in seminaries" (Preface). As such, I had to quote sources to support my points, which included Sam Waldron and A. N. Martin, who happened to be among the few who have actually published on the "parity view" (in print and on tapes). I know of others who have propagated that view in Malaysia, Singapore, Australia and Philippines, but they have not published their view in print (as far as my knowledge goes).

The book characterizes my book (or, more accurately, some sentences in my book) as "reactionary" (p. 56). An extract from my book reads as follows: "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."

The writer claims to be mystified by the "derogatory language" of the phrase, "the current fad to

restore a plurality of elders". How that phrase constitutes derogatory language is mystifying to me! If anything, that contributor and his colleagues appear to be aware that their book is reactionary in character! (Along the same line, Chanski and Waldron expressed their indignation, in their letter to me, that I have asserted that those who call all elders pastors are "extreme". What I actually said in my book - and please remember that it is being isolated from its context - is, "Other churches, some of them very influential, believe in the 'equality of elders' and carry this to an extreme, calling every elder 'pastor'", p. 5. Carrying a belief to an extreme is different from saying that those who do so are extreme. Why should it be construed as the latter?)

Then, offence is taken over the fact that I associate the "parity" view with "heavy shepherding", being "cocksure", and "the Diotrephes spirit" (p. 58). I have argued soberly on the dangers that are inherent in the "parity" view, and then proceeded to discuss the damage it may cause to other churches. This is based on actual situations in this country and elsewhere which I know of. The contributors, however, have chosen to take it personally and retaliated by using the language of ridicule and scorn. If only they had kept their cool, and read everything carefully and in its total perspective, the outcome would have been happier! For example, I mentioned the danger of the "Diotrephes spirit" in connection with one who is agitating for the "parity" view to be accepted in his own church (p. 155 of my book). This is different from saying that those who are already in a "parity" setting are Diotrephes, or that they are promoting the "Diotrephes spirit". The perceived charge of being "Diotrephes" has clearly stirred up the ire of these men, for it is raised again in other parts of the book (pp. 135, 138, and also in the letter to me).

Consider further the following statements, which aim at criticising Poh Boon Sing and his view of the eldership:

"The following pages also reveal that a sense of personal irritation is skewing Poh's thoughts" (p. 58).

"All this might sound as if the other elders are allowed little or no initiative... Poh will have to pardon us for thinking that he is very ambivalent about other elders taking initiative in *the pastor's* church!" (emphasis original, pp. 60-61).

"Poh Boon Sing's interpretation of John Owen's church polity is inaccurate, especially on the key matter of parity in the eldership. His portrayal of the views of other Reformed Baptists is also flawed. Regrettably, he has evidently studied neither well" (p. 114).

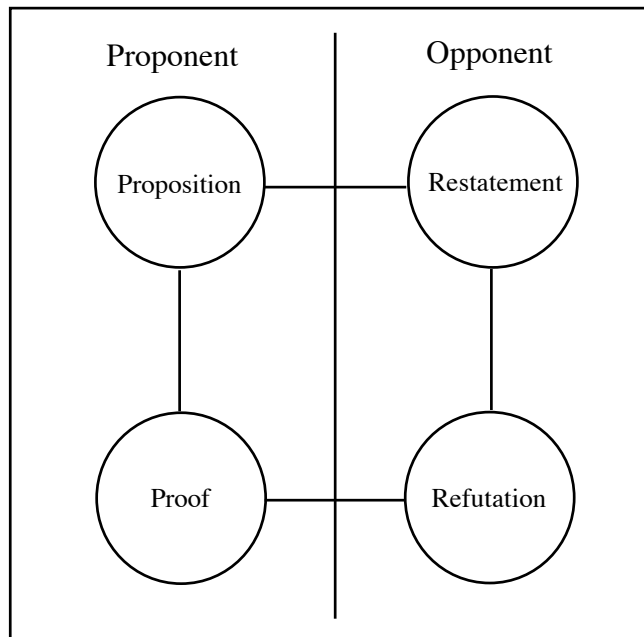
One cannot help it but ask, "Is such language really necessary?" The last quote also shows that the writer has either missed, ignored or taken advantage of the statement in the Preface of my book: "Research has been hampered by the absence of a good theological library in this part of the world. God has mercifully provided the basic books needed, ..." It may be that Poh Boon Sing has not read as much as that contributor, nor studied as well as him. Suffice to say here that Poh Boon Sing has read all the relevant articles and books listed in the bibliography, which number over 100 items, and he is always ready to learn and read more. (For the record, I studied through John Owen's "The True Nature Of A Gospel Church" no less than 15 times.)

So much for the spirit of the book. We now make some general observations on its methodology or approach.

The approach

In any debate, the contending parties are constantly switching roles as the proponent and the opponent. The proponent will put forward his case by two basic steps: first, that of stating his view; and, second, that of supporting his view. These two steps may be called "proposition" and "proof". In its simplest form, the "proof" consists of the presentation of the relevant proof-texts, which should speak for themselves. Or, more commonly, it will involve the presentation of the "premises" and "the scheme of inference" (or pattern of reasoning, which leads to the conclusion), based on the Bible texts, and the correct rules of biblical interpretation. The conclusion is, of course, the "proposition" which is being proved. The proponent will also need to restate his opponent's view and then refute it. The "restatement" serves the purpose of showing that he has understood the position of his rival, and

sometimes of casting it in its true light so that the refutation will be easier and clearer. The four steps of a debate may be portrayed schematically as follows:



The Table Of Debate

It can be seen that the "table of debate" has four legs. If any of the legs were missing, the table would not be stable. If only two legs are left, it will topple easily. If only one leg is left, the case has collapsed! An example of the two-legged position is found in my book (p. 260), in which there are the "proposition" and the "refutation", but there is no "proof" offered, while the "restatement" is rendered void by a *misrepresentation* of the opponent's view. Needless to say, in advocating my view in this article, I shall be presenting all four "legs", with emphasis on two of them, namely the "restatement" and the "refutation" of my opponents' view. At this point, we only wish to present some observations on the approach adopted by Sam Waldron and his colleagues, vis-a-vis "the table of debate".

Throughout the book, the contributors have ignored my proofs. They refuse to counter the biblical considerations that I have put forward in proof of my position. In short, they do not engage in "refutation" and, instead, throw forth an abundance of verbal barrage and insinuation - perhaps with the intention of shouting their opponent, and also of putting off the readers from reading my book for themselves. When dealing with the spirit adopted by the book above, we have given examples of the sort of language that is employed. Here, we give a few more examples of how verbal barrage and insinuation take the place of the "refutation" process:

"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" (p. 57).

"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" (p. 57).

"But unfortunate as these paragraphs are, the following two or three paragraphs are worse" (p. 57).

"Poh manifests his confusion further on page 169" (p. 59).

"There is similar inconsistency and ambivalence with regard to the elders and pastor in Poh's description of how elders' meetings should be handled" (p. 60).

"Do New Testament pastors really stand in the tradition of the prophets in terms of their divine call? Are they really "personally" commissioned by Jesus Christ to be His ambassadors? Does this mean they receive direct revelation as the prophets did concerning their calls? Does this mean that a light appears from heaven and a voice calls out as it did to Saul of Tarsus? I am certain Dr. Poh would not want to say such things" (p. 130).

These substitutes for a proper "refutation" may appear cogent to the unwary reader simply because the contributors have misrepresented and distorted my view, by outright assertions and selective quotations. In other words, the contributors have not only failed to present the "refutation", but also the "restatement" in the debate. The verbal barrage is aimed at the strawmen they have erected.

For example, in the last quote above, the writer is countering a *conclusion* of mine that the pastor needs the divine call of God to be in the ministry; that he needs to be personally commissioned by Jesus Christ to be His ambassador; that there is this inner compulsion in him to proclaim the word. The *conclusion* is in effect the "proposition" of my case. A proper refutation would be to show that my *premises* have been wrong, or that my *scheme of inference* has been defective. I have argued in my book (p. 115) that the context of Ephesians 11:4 shows that the "pastors and teachers" are preachers of the word who are mentioned in the same breath with apostles, prophets and evangelists. I have further amplified my arguments in another chapter of the book (pp. 192-197), which the contributor seems not to have read, showing that the pastor is an ordinary officer of the church who must fulfil the qualifications of eldership in the New Testament, at the same time that he is a minister of the word and stands on the same platform with the apostles, prophets and evangelists. It is these arguments that should have been refuted. Instead, that contributor has chosen to scornfully insinuate that my view necessarily involves the pastors receiving extraordinary communication from God.

Another example should suffice. One contributor of the book quoted a passage from my book:

"The ministry of the word should have *primacy* (that is, the supreme place, the pre-eminence) in the life of the church. It should have *priority* (that is, being earlier, occupying the position of greater importance) over other important matters. Of the two types of elders, the teaching elders have the priority over the ruling elders."

Based on this quote, it is asserted that I believe, "that elders who labour in the word have a higher degree of authority than elders who do not labour in the word" (p. 108). The assertion is pressed home with the further statements: "Owen never argues that, on the basis of the "superiority" of the *teaching function*, the one who labours in word and doctrine has greater *governing authority*. Poh evidently senses this when he attempts to enlist support for his assertion from Owen" (p. 109). These are not the only places in which the assertion is made that I believe that pastors have the greater *governing authority* compared to other elders (pp. 99, 100, 112, 134). This assertion, however, is a blatant misrepresentation of my position.

In the passage quoted (above), I was arguing for *the priority of the ministry* which, of course, cannot be dissociated from the *minister*. I was not dealing with "governing authority", which I see as distinct from, although closely related to, "teaching authority". With John Owen, I hold to the view that Scripture makes a clear distinction between the authority to teach and the authority to rule - the two "keys of the kingdom of heaven". With Owen, I hold to the view that all the elders, both the teaching and ruling ones, are equal in the sense that they occupy the same office of ruling. I further asserted that all the elders rule in unity, as a body. The teaching elders are the ones who *execute* the authority of teaching, while the whole eldership has the *responsibility* over both the teaching and the ruling of the church. This is expounded in some detail under a chapter in my book entitled, "The Unity of the Eldership" - which chapter seems to have been by-passed by that contributor.

A major point in my book is that, historically, three views of the eldership have been practised in Presbyterianism, which are today being duplicated in Reformed Baptist circles. I have called these views the "Presbyterian View", the "Independent View", and the "Absolute Equality View". In the "Independent View", to which I subscribe, the minister of the word is an elder who shares the same office of rule with the "ruling elders", while in the "Presbyterian View", the minister of the word holds

an office distinct from, and above, that of the ruling elders. Sam Waldron and his colleagues have, throughout their book, failed to state my view clearly, apart from making a passing reference to it (p. 63). Instead, they have lumped the Presbyterian and the Independent views together as the "three-office" view (pp. 32, 63, 90, 91). In fact, the distinct impression is given that I actually hold to the three-office view of church government, in which the church officers consist of the minister, elders, and deacons. Sam Waldron and his colleagues chafe over the fact that I have labelled their two-office view (consisting of elders and deacons, with no distinct position of the minister of the word) as the "Absolute Equality View". The propriety of using this name has been shown in my book (chapter 5), and will be discussed again below. Here, we wish only to show that they have obscured a major point in my view of the eldership - namely, that there are basically two offices in the church (those of elders and deacons), in which are two categories of elders (the teaching elders and the ruling elders).

We summarize this section on "General Observations", which covers the *spirit* and the *methodology* of the book on "parity". The authors of the book on "parity" have been unable to conceal their ire at my book, "The Keys of the Kingdom". They have retaliated by pouring scorn and ridicule on my view of the eldership. As far as the methodology goes, they have failed to present a proper "restatement" and a proper "refutation" in the debate. Instead of the "restatement", my position has been misrepresented by ignoring the relevant points, making untrue assertions, and presenting selective quotes. Instead of the "refutation", they have engage in throwing verbal barrage at, and making insinuations about, my view. Two "legs" are missing from their "table of debate". In effect, what they are left with is only one of their two declared objectives: to positively present their view of the eldership.

It remains now for us to make a more detailed analysis of the book. We shall focus on the methodology and the substance of each contributor. We consider first the doctrinal chapters, and then the historical ones.

Analysis of contents

Chap. 1. "Parity in the Eldership," by Greg Nicols

To his credit, Greg Nicols is the only contributor who does not engage in diatribe in his two articles. He positively expounds his view of the eldership by highlighting two characteristics - "parity" and "diversity"

In his first article, he establishes the concept of "parity" from Scripture, showing that the parity in the eldership is a parity of office. He argues from the various relevant passages that one who is a bishop (or overseer) is a presbyter (or elder), and also a shepherd (or pastor). In my book, I have argued out the case that all pastors are elders but not all elders are pastors. One of the arguments I used in support of this is that the verbal form "to pastor" is used in Acts 20:28 and 1 Peter 5:2, in reference to the work of elders in general, while the noun "pastors" is used in Ephesians 4:11, in reference to the ministers of the word. Nicols ignores this argument, leaving it to Sam Waldron to deal with in a later part of the book.

Nicols next shows that parity in the eldership entails equality in *authorization* and *representation*. The elders are equally authorized by and accountable to Christ. As a body, they are authorized to govern the entire life of the church according to the word of God. The elders also represent Christ before the church, and represent their church before the other churches and before the world.

The practical implications of parity follow: (1) Parity implies that all the elders should participate in visiting and counseling the flock. (2) Parity implies that all the elders should participate in interviews of prospective members. (3) Parity implies that all the elders should be included in setting church policy. (4) Parity implies that each elder should get pastoral oversight from the eldership as a body. (5) Parity implies that the elders are equally eligible to lead the observance of the sacraments. (6) Parity implies that the elders are equally eligible to represent their church in associations. (7) Parity implies that each elder must grasp sound doctrine and be apt to teach and defend it.

To be noted in the list of implications is the absence of any mention on preaching. One would have expected Nicols to say, "Parity implies that all the elders *should participate in* (or *should be included*

in, or *are equally eligible to*) preaching regularly from the pulpit." Statement No. 7 is a rather lame replacement for what we would expect to be the more natural implication of parity. It is in fact not an *implication*, but a *requirement* of Scripture. The *implication* should be rather that all the elders are eligible to preach regularly from the pulpit.

Sensing the likelihood of this being picked up by the careful reader, Nicols attempts to cover up by quoting Dabney, who defended exactly this point (p. 23). Dabney said:

"Perhaps the most plausible objection... against our theory is this, that if you teach the ruling elders are among the scriptural presbyters, then you can no longer draw any consistent line between them and ministers, you must make them all preachers..."

Dabney's defense, however, is not strictly applicable to Nicols' case, because Dabney was a Presbyterian who held to what I have called the "Independent View" of the eldership, in - which there is a clear distinction between the teaching elder and the ruling elder. In his defence, Dabney went on to assert that the function of the ruling elder is just as truly and as purely a teaching function as that of the preacher, that he rules by teaching, that his whole authority is exercised through the inculcative process. This, of course, answers well the question why the ruling elder, who is among the scriptural presbyters, should be "apt to teach" when *he does not preach regularly in the pulpit*. To Dabney, the ruling elder "is never to mount the pulpit" simply because he is a ruling elder and not a minister of the word. In Nicols' view of the eldership, there is no sharp distinction drawn between the teaching elder and the ruling elder. Dabney's defence can be harnessed to support the point that all elders are required to have the qualification of being "apt to teach", but it does not answer the question why all the elders should not have equal eligibility to preach.

Chap. 2. "Diversity in the Eldership," by Greg Nicols

In his second article, Nicols demonstrates the principle of "diversity" by the same steps as before. He first shows from Scripture that there is such a concept as "diversity" in the eldership, based on 1 Timothy 5:17, Romans 12:6-8; 1 Corinthians 12:28, 31, and 1 Peter 4:10-11. All elders have the same office, rank, and authority. They all belong to the same ruling body of church officers. Yet Scripture teaches that the eldership displays a diversity of vocation (or career), of proficiency, and of giftedness

These three areas of diversity are next discussed. Much space is devoted to the discussion of "diversity in vocation", revolving around the vocation of the minister. The caution is given that we are dealing with the ordinary vocation of the pastor-teachers, and not the extraordinary ones of apostles, prophets and evangelists. In virtue of their ruling office, they may be called bishops, pastors, and elders. In virtue of their life's work and vocation, they are preachers, teachers, and ministers of Christ, of the word, and of the gospel. It is not unbiblical to address them either in terms of their office, or their vocation, or a combination of both. Little space is given to the discussion of the call to the ministerial vocation. It appears that Nicols is leaving it to Hufstetler to deal with the subject more thoroughly in a later chapter. The essential duties and aims of the ministerial vocation are then laid out

Of interest to us is the fact that Nicols' discussion on the "diversity in vocation" revolves exclusively around the vocation of the ministry of the word. He has said, "Whereas some elders spend their day labouring at farming, engineering, carpentry, medicine, or law, other elders labour full-time in the study, exposition, and proclamation of the Scriptures" (p. 27). Why aren't the other vocations discussed? It seems clear that Nicols is here responding - consciously or unconsciously - to the emphasis of Scripture on the preaching vocation. True, the other elders labour at other vocations, but theirs are *mundane* vocations - vocations shared by other man who are not elders, and even by those who are not Christians. Preaching is a *special* vocation, different from the ordinary vocations. Its uniqueness should not be lost sight of. It may not be classed together with the mundane vocations. Nicols and his colleagues have chosen an inappropriate term - "the diversity in vocation" - to describe the eldership, for it does not do justice to the high position given in Scripture to the one vocation of the ministry of the word.

Nicols goes on to discuss "diversity of proficiency and honour in the eldership", based on 1 Timothy 5:17 - "Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honour, especially those

who labour in the word and in teaching." He argues that the adverb "kalos", translated "well", is comparative. "Though all men qualified to be elders rule with a modicum of competence, some elders rule with marked proficiency" (p. 36). This understanding is open to question, but we will reserve it for later when we consider Sam Waldron's exposition of 1 Timothy 5:17. Nicols next talks about "special respect and appreciation" which must be shown to the elders who rule well. He says, "All elders are very valuable to the church, and she should highly esteem them (1 Thess. 5:12), but elders doing a good job are doubly valuable, that is, emphatically more valuable, and she should increase dramatically her esteem for them. This primarily applies to her vocational pastors, her preachers" (p. 38). Here again, the preachers are singled out as those deserving an abundance of honour, different from the elders who hold other vocations. As mentioned already, the term "diversity" does not bring out this truth. Nicols goes on to show that the "double honour" shown to preachers who rule proficiently should include adequate financial remuneration - which point we have no problem with.

Nicols ends the second section of his article by discussing "diversity of giftedness in the eldership". This is followed by the final section, in which he enumerates some of the practical implications of diversity, which include: (1) Diversity implies that some elders may have a larger share of the pulpit or lectern. (2) Diversity implies that some elders may take a larger share of visiting and counseling. (3) Diversity implies that some elders may have a higher profile in church administration. (4) Diversity implies that some elders may have a wider influence or recognition. (5) Diversity implies that all pastor-preachers need not have the same "job description". (6) Diversity implies that some are gifted to teach and preach who have not the office of elder. (7) Diversity implies that all pastor-preachers need not necessarily receive the same salary.

To be noted is the fact that the principle of "diversity" is now worked out to its logical conclusion - namely, that the special place accorded to the ministerial vocation in Scripture is diluted to become just one of a number of vocations, just one of a number of gifts. Therein lies a major point of difference between my view and that of Nicols and his colleagues. In my view, due cognizance is given to the special position of the preacher, at the same time that the twofold division of the office of elders are noted. And there is no neglect of the fact that there is a parity of office. I have described my view with the principles of "rule by elders", "the priority of the ministry", and "the validity of ruling elders". Together with the other principles which I have established in my book, a completely self-consistent description of the biblical eldership emerges: "rule by elders", "the priority of the ministry", "the validity of ruling elders", "the unity of the eldership", and "rule with consent". The diversity of gifts, the diversity of tasks, and the consequent diversity in influence, respect and salary are all subsumed under these principles. These are mere practicalities that each church has to wrestle with in its own situation. These are not essential to a true description of the biblical eldership.

We repeat. In the view of Nicols and his colleagues, no special place is accorded to the ministry of the word as required by Scripture and no recognition is given to the twofold division of the tasks of the elders -namely those of ruling and preaching. We are not saying that they are not aware of these scriptural points. In the discussion of their view, Nicols has concentrated on the vocation of the ministry of the word, as we have pointed out above. He has also noted the two divisions in functions of the elders, saying, "Scripture delineates various pastoral gifts. Some gifts relate mainly to the ruling office, some primarily to the preaching vocation. In Rom. 12:6-8, the ability to teach (12:7) and to exhort (12:8) relate mainly, though not exclusively, to the preaching vocation. The ability to manage or govern (12:8), relates chiefly, though not only, to the ruling office. In 1 Cor. 12:28-31 Paul first lists three ministerial vocations which God placed in the church, apostles, prophets, and teachers. Apostles and prophets were restricted to the founding of the church (Eph. 2:20). Teachers are permanent, set by God in the church in every generation. I take it that Paul refers mainly to official teachers, elders who labour in the word, whom he denominates in terms of their vocation. Yet I concede that the phrase may encompass, not only preachers, but, in Hodge's words, all 'uninspired men who had received the gift of teaching'" (pp. 42-43). Nicols and his colleagues are insistent in maintaining that teaching is a gift that is tied to a vocation, but not to office. We would have more to say on this later, when we come to Hufstetler and his view of "the call". That aside, the fact is that they are aware of the two categories of duty - ruling and teaching - even if they insist that it is no more than a matter of gifts or vocation (pp. 42-43, 71, 86, 106). Their description of the church eldership, by the principles of "parity" and "diversity", however, does not indicate this biblical distinction.

Deficiencies of "parity" and "diversity"

Perhaps this is the right place to point out that their adoption of the two principles of "parity" and "diversity" is a departure from the usual approach of advocates of their view, who would use the "parity-plurality" combination, instead. The contributors to this book have themselves used the "parity-plurality" combination elsewhere. In this book, however, they emphasize the characteristic of "diversity" instead of "plurality", although they occasionally lapse into using the term "plurality" (pp. 22, 97, 117, 135). By emphasizing "diversity", they avoid having to answer for the weaknesses inherent in the "parity-plurality" combination which, I believe, has played no small part in creating havoc in weaker churches that have tried to implement it. I have pointed out these weaknesses in my book (pp. 152-159), and it has not gone down well with our esteemed friends. It is hardly fair for them to shift the emphasis to a "parity-diversity" combination in their book and yet pour forth such wrath upon me for pointing out the weaknesses of the "parity-plurality" system!

Is the "parity-diversity" system substantially different from the "parity-plurality" system? The difference is not in substance, but in emphasis. It is my contention that the difference in emphasis is enough to offset to some extent the weaknesses of the "parity-plurality" combination, but it is still not good enough to constitute the biblical model of the church eldership. We have seen that it fails to give due weight to the special place of the ministry of the word, and it fails to indicate the ruling-preaching distinction in the eldership. This is because the terms "parity" and "diversity/plurality" are too general and too vague. They describe the *consequential* characteristics, not the *essential* characteristics, of the eldership. "Parity" is the consequence of there being only one office of rule. "Diversity" and "plurality" are the consequences of there being some elders who rule by "labouring in the word and doctrine" and others who rule without "labouring in the word and doctrine". Describing the eldership by the principles of "parity" and "diversity/plurality" is like describing a cup of coffee as "a drink that is black and sweet". While this is a true description of coffee, it is not good enough. There are other drinks which are both black and sweet. One can think of "coke", and many other drinks, which fit that description. Furthermore, one will have to qualify himself by saying, "I want black coffee, not coffee with milk or cream added," or, "I want percolated coffee, not instant coffee," or, "I want coffee with sugar, not plain black coffee."

It is a fact that there are marked differences among those who subscribe to the "parity" view. The Brethren would preach in rotation, and not have a "minister", nor a "leading elder". Some Reformed Baptists would have the elders take turns to be the leading elder, while others would appoint a permanent leading elder on the basis of seniority, gift, or some other criteria. Some others would believe in the traditional "call" to the ministry, while others would rely only on the qualifications listed in the 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 to choose a minister. Some churches would have preaching elders only, while others would have ruling ones as well. All these would describe their views by the terms, "parity" and "diversity/plurality". These terms may, in fact, be used to describe my view of the eldership! I believe that the minister is an elder who shares the same office of rule with the ruling elders, and they rule as a body. There is parity! I also believe that ruling elders should be appointed to help the minister in governing the church. There is plurality! Yet my view of the eldership is substantially different from that of Nicols and his colleagues!

Consequential characteristics are *descriptive* in nature and should never be made prescriptive. When they are made *prescriptive*, disaster is in the offing! Consider the likely outcome of making the principles of "parity" and "diversity/plurality" prescriptive. When a church is told, "Make sure that there is parity among the elders!", everyone's attention will be focused on the rank, authority and eligibility of each elder relative to the others. When a church is told, "Make sure that there is diversity among the elders!", everyone's attention will be focused on the gifts, tasks, and influence of the elders. When a church is told, "Make sure that there is plurality among the elders!", everyone's attention will be focused upon the need to appoint more than one elders, all for the sake of "plurality". We see then the potential disaster to a church that makes these principles prescriptive. Much as we would like to avoid it, the attention is focused upon the individuals and the power they have, or do not have.

The outcome is not the same when the principles in my model of the eldership are made prescriptive to a church. Furthermore, my model cuts the roots off the hierarchy that is encountered in

Episcopacy and some Presbyterian denominations, and also steers clear of the single-pastor-plural-deacons situation seen in many independent churches. This is not to claim that churches which practise the Independent model of the eldership will be free from problems, for anything right, true and good in itself can be abused, misunderstood, or misapplied. What we are claiming is that the "Independent View" of the eldership takes into account all the relevant biblical data in a way not done by other views.

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