

GOSPEL HIGHWAY

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Against "Parity": Part 3

by B. S. Poh

We have completed the analysis of the doctrinal chapters of the book, "In Defence Of Parity: A Presentation of the Parity or Equality of Elders in the New Testament." We now proceed to the analysis of the historical chapters, before concluding this series of articles.

Chap. 6. "An Historical Examination of the Parity of the Eldership in Independency and John Owen," By Dave Chanski

If there is a master at misrepresentation, he is David Chanski.

He begins the chapter with "eirenic" words. He then attacks my suggestion that it is preferable to advocate "the validity of the office of ruling elders" instead of "plurality", claiming that it is a *de facto* retreat from the biblical emphasis. He supports his position of "plurality" by quoting John Owen, but does not make clear the fact that Owen was advocating a plurality arising from there being teaching elders and ruling elders - which is the position that I hold to! Put in other words, Owen's "plurality" is equivalent to my "validity of ruling elders", and different from Chanski's "plurality".

Parity

Chanski asserts that I believed in an hierarchy of authority among elders, and that I incorrectly maintained that Owen granted a greater authority to the pastor than the ruling elder when it comes to the government of the church (p. 100). Where did Chanski get this blatantly untrue idea about my view? He bases it on my statement, "The pastors have the priority over the ruling elders," without reading carefully what I meant by "priority".

I have stated clearly in my book: 'The word "priority" includes the idea of "primacy" and more. The element of comparison is introduced when we speak of "the priority of the ministry".' The ministry of the word of God should have the primacy (i.e. supreme place, preeminence) in the life of the church. It should also have the priority (i.e. being earlier, occupying a position of greater importance) over other important matters. We are here comparing the relative importance of the officers in the church. ... Of the two types of elders, the teaching elder has the priority over the ruling elders' (pp. 119-120).

I have also stated clearly, under the chapter entitled, "The Unity of the Eldership": '... the whole eldership is responsible for both the teaching and the rule of the church. The two "keys of the kingdom of heaven", the authority to teach and to rule, are committed to the eldership as a body. The teaching elders are the ones who *execute* the authority of teaching, but the whole eldership has the *responsibility* over that department of the government of the church (p. 174).'

To occupy a position of greater importance need not be read as "possessing greater governing power". As far as *governing* is concerned, all the elders (including both the teaching and ruling ones) share the same power, since they occupy the same basic office of presbyter.

Chanski then quoted from my book: "Some Reformed Baptists are advocating a view of the eldership in which all the elders are regarded as equal, with no distinction between them apart, perhaps, for the different functions they perform. To them, all elders are pastors."

To this, Chanski commented as follows: 'This is a fair representation of the doctrine of parity held by a number of Reformed Baptists. However, Poh does not regard this difference from his own view

as either minor or innocent. He writes, "Some... [churches] believe in the 'equality of elders' and carry this to an extreme, calling every elder 'pastor'." He also caricatures their view of parity by calling it the "Absolute Equality View", and asserting that those who hold to parity believe "that all the elders are equal in authority *in every way*". One might be led to think that those who hold to parity teach that elders in every church must wear the same shoe size and part their hair in the same way. 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' (emphasis added by Chanski, p. 100).

Many things can be said about the paragraph above, but it will be a tedious exercise to attempt to do so. We will only point out his dubious way of presenting my view in this instance. In the quote of the phrase, "that all the elders are equal in authority in every way", he chooses to emphasize the phrase "in every way", without due attention given to "equal in authority". On the same page of my book from which this quote was extracted (p. 165), I immediately proceeded to elaborate by saying:

"This is based on the argument that in Acts 20:17, 28 and Titus 1:5, 7, the words 'elders' and 'overseers (or bishops)' are used interchangeably to refer to the same persons. From this, it is claimed that all the elders are pastors, and that the difference between the elders is only in the functions they perform. The different functions are distributed by mutual agreement among the elders. As far as authority is concerned, all the elders have equal rights to perform all those functions."

This is virtually a repetition of the earlier quote to which Chanski favourably commented as being "a fair representation of the doctrine of parity". It is clear that my emphasis was on "equal in authority". I have not been wrong in saying that the "parity" view believes "that all elders are equal in authority in every way", for they have equal rights to perform all the functions. This contrasts with my view in which all the elders are equal only in the sense that they occupy the same office of ruling, and share the same responsibility (or "office-power", according to Owen, Works, Vol. 16, p. 37) over both the teaching and the rule of the church. The authority (or "rights", according to Owen) to teach and to rule are committed to the eldership *as a body*. Only the teaching elders *execute* the authority of teaching, although the whole eldership has the *responsibility* over that department of the government of the church.

No homogeneity

Chanski next attempts to show that, historically, there was no homogeneity in "Independent" church polity, particularly on the matter of plurality and parity in the eldership. John Owen insisted on the scriptural norm of the plurality of elders in each church and the scriptural validity of the office of ruling elders. In contrast, Benjamin Keach - a leading Particular Baptist of the seventeenth century - denied the continuance of the office of ruling elders. Chanski then garnered the support of the Baptist Association of Charlestown, South Carolina, which wrote in their "Summary of Church-Discipline" in 1774: "The ordinary officers of the church, and the only ones now existing, are ministers and deacons (Phil. 1:1)... Ministers of the gospel, who are frequently called elders, bishops, pastors, and teachers, are appointed by Christ..."

We do not deny the fact that there was no homogeneity in "Independent" church polity. Equally, we should not deny that there was a clearly discernable "majority view" (if not a clear consensus) which constituted "Independent" church polity. By the process of selective quotation, Chanski is attempting to establish the former and subtly deny the latter. Much as we respect Benjamin Keach, we must not think that his view was representative of that of the early Particular Baptists. Another well-respected leader of the seventeenth century Particular Baptists, more senior to Benjamin Keach, who signed both the 1644 and the 1689 Baptist Confessions, was Hansard Knollys. His name appeared first in the list of church representatives who issued the 1689 Confession. In the area of eschatology, he was a convinced Fifth Monarchist, much to the embarrassment of the other Particular Baptists. (The Fifth Monarchists believed that Christ would soon return to earth to inaugurate the millennial reign of the saints, the "Fifth Monarchy", and that it was legitimate to use force to establish the rule of Christ on earth.) We do not draw the conclusion from this that the 1689 Confession reflected a Fifth Monarchy view of eschatology, nor that it does not reflect the majority view of the Particular Baptists on eschatology.

To be noted is the fact that Independency, as espoused by John Owen, was sufficiently well established in the seventeenth century to the point that his book, "A Brief Instruction In The Worship Of God And Discipline of the Churches Of The New Testament", published in 1667, became known as "The Independents' Catechism". Owen's subsequent book, "The True Nature Of The Gospel Church", published posthumously in 1689, became the definitive exposition of Independency. Isaac Watts (1674-1748) made the observation: "The Baptists differ not from Calvinists in their doctrine, unless in the article of infant baptism. ...In church government they are Independents. ...the generalities of Independents follow rather Dr. Owen's notions: ...That the power of church government resides in the pastors and elders of every particular church."

Benjamin Keach's view of the eldership, published in 1697, i.e. two decades after the 1677 Baptist Confession (reaffirmed in 1689), must be seen as a departure from the majority view of the Particular Baptists. John Gill (1697-1771), who was a leading Particular Baptist in his days, and a contemporary of Isaac Watts, held to the same view of eldership as Benjamin Keach. That view, in which the office of ruling elders is denied, was to lead to the prevalent situation in later days, in which one pastor ruled with the help of many deacons.

The 1677/89 Confession was adopted by the Calvinistic Baptists of North America in 1744, and called by them the Philadelphia Confession of Faith. These Baptists believed in the scriptural validity of the office of ruling elders, even if they maintained that it was "wholly a distinct office" from that of the minister, as noted by Chanski (p. 105). The Charlestown Baptist Association, referred to by Chanski, may have been the oldest association in the South which adopted the the Philadelphia Confession in 1767, but it was not the first, nor the only one, to do so in America. Its "Summary of Church Discipline", published in 1774, reflected the influence of the view of eldership held by Benjamin Keach and John Gill, which, as we have stated already, was responsible in its measure for the decline to the one-pastor-many-deacons situation in later Baptist life. Chanski and his colleagues will need to shout "plurality" louder in order to prevent their view of the eldership from sliding down the same slippery path!

Poh and Owen

Chanski proceeds to compare my view of the eldership with that of John Owen's. He claims that "Poh follows Owen to a point" (p. 101), while Sam Waldron claims that "Poh follows Owen to a fault" (p. 53). Chanski insists 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), that I believe that "the one who labours in word and doctrine has greater ***governing authority***" (p. 109), that I believe that the teaching elder "has ***de jure*** authority above that of the non-teaching elder(s)" (p. 112). I believe no such thing.

Chanski's propensity at misrepresentation shows again when he claims that I had difficulty finding explicit support from John Owen for the view that the teaching elders have "greater ***governing authority***" over the ruling elders (emphasis his, p. 109). He says, "Poh evidently senses this when he attempts to enlist support for his assertion from Owen. He appears to realize that he has no explicit support from Owen here and that the strongest statement he can make is that there are some indications that Owen did believe in 'the priority of the ministry' in the sense in which he (Poh) understands it." What I was establishing was "the priority of the minister", which is different from "the greater governing authority of the minister". I mentioned that Owen did not explicitly teach the principle of the priority of the ministry because there was no reason for him to do so, since this principle was already in recognition and it needed no defence (p. 122 of my book). I then proceeded to show that there are indications, nevertheless, that Owen believed in the priority of the ministry. I said, "Below are some indications that Owen did believe in the priority of the ministry" (p. 123 of my book). A total of fourteen passages from John Owen, grouped under five sections, followed. The phrase "some indications" clearly means "some of the many indications", whereas Chansky makes it to mean "there are only some indications". Chanski! Chanski!

Chanski further claims that I differed from Owen on who is to preside in the elders' meetings (pp. 112-113). I ground the teaching elder's chairmanship in "the priority of the ministry", whereas Owen cited other factors in the determination of who is to preside. Chanski quotes Owen, to show that he

allowed for the elders to "take turns" at this duty, and that he consistently maintained the parity of authority. However, the context of those words from Owen needs to be noted. Owen was about to launch into a detailed discussion of the office of the pastor (which, to him, meant the teaching elder). Before he did so, he deliberately digressed to prove that the office of bishop, presbyter, or elder is one and the same, as opposed to the view of prelacy (Works, Vol. 16, p. 44). It was in this context that he emphasized the parity of authority among the elders, although advocating the necessity of one of them acting as chairman when there are many elders. The following points may be noted, which Chanski chooses to obscure:

(i) Allowing for the elders to "take turns" is not the same as advocating that this should be the case in every situation. The norm is to be distinguished from the exception. Similarly, in my view of the priority of the ministry, the minister should be the leading elder, but that does not exclude exceptional situations in which a senior ruling elder may act as chairman for a time.

(ii) Owen's "plurality of elders" was one made up of elders divided distinctly into teaching and ruling ones, in which the two distinct functions of teaching and ruling are distributed among them in the way he clearly spelled out. Even in the present section of his book, in which he digressed to prove that the office of bishop, presbyter, or elder is one and the same, the two distinct functions of teaching and ruling are made clear. He said, "I shall never oppose this order, but rather desire to see it in practice, - namely that particular churches were of such an extent as necessarily to require many elders, both teaching and ruling, for their instruction and government,..." (Works, Vol. 16, p. 46).

(iii) Owen was countering the claim of prelacy that the minister or bishop is an officer higher in authority than the presbyters or elders. He was not discussing the relative roles of the teaching and ruling elders yet. Immediately after that digression, he began to discuss the role of the pastor, saying: "The first officer or elder of the church is the pastor. A pastor is the elder that feeds and rules the flock, 1 Pet. 5:2; that is, who is its teacher and its bishop..." (Works, Vol. 16, p. 47). Owen did not minimize the special role of the pastor. Later on, when discussing the teachers in the church, he emphasized that there is "no difference... as unto office or power" between bishops and presbyters, at the same time advocating the leadership of "one pastor or bishop in one church, assisted in rule and all holy administrations with many elders teaching or ruling only" (ibid., p. 105).

In these points, obscured by Chanski, lie our quarrel with the "parity" view: the "parity" view fails to give due recognition to the scriptural distinction between the teaching function and the ruling function, and between the teaching elders and the ruling elders. It also fails to give due recognition to the special role of minister of the gospel. Chanski begins his discussion by acknowledging that John Owen believed there is only one office of elders, in which are two sorts of elders - the teaching elders and the ruling elders. He also admits to "the peculiar calling and work of some elders to labour in word and doctrine", claiming that "This is a scriptural distinction" (p. 106). But as he proceeds, he blurs that distinction and minimizes the special role of the minister, by insisting that these are a mere matter of "diversity of functions" between the elders. Chanski has the temerity to claim that he and his colleagues "agree with Owen in substance, but not in form" (p. 106), that they "hold to Owen's views on the eldership *essentially*, differing from him basically in terminology" (p. 114).

Chanski wants us to believe that the moon is the sun.

Chap. 7. "The Baptist Confession of 1689 and the Parity of the Eldership," by Sam Waldron

Waldron shows forth his irritation that I had claimed in my book that the 1689 Confession is "crystal clear" in its teaching on the eldership. He attempts to support his opinion that one cannot be dogmatically clear about the view of eldership taught in the 1689 Confession by the following steps:

(i) Asserting that the distinction between teaching and ruling elders "is not derived and cannot be derived from the text of the Confession itself" (p. 120). But this is true only if the prior assumption is made that the pastors and the elders are to be absolutely equated, as has been done by Waldron and his colleagues, which I have pointed out in my book (p. 127). If, on the other hand, the terms "pastor" and "minister" in the 1689 Confession are understood to mean the teaching elders, Waldron's case

crumbles.

(ii) Casting doubt on my view, by repeating much of what I have said concerning the differences between the Savoy Platform and the 1689 Confession, and then throwing in the statement: "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" (p. 122). Where, and in what ways, had Poh Boon Sing attempted to explain the alterations in the light of differing historical situations? I had, in fact, explained them in the light of similar historical situations.

(iii) Harnessing Benjamin Keach's view of the eldership to support the idea that the Particular Baptists altered the Savoy Platform because of disagreeing that there is a sharp distinction between the ruling elders and the preaching elders. Yet, severe reservations and qualifying disclaimers are made over Keach's view of the eldership (p. 125)! This is what Waldron says: "It is, of course, not certain whether other Particular Baptists understood 26:10 (of the 1689 Confession) 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."

Waldron's case is unconvincing. He totally ignores the arguments that I employed in support of my view that the 1689 Confession actually assumes that there is a sharp distinction between the pastors, who are the teaching elders, and the ruling elders (pp. 120-131 of my book). I supported that claim by a historical consideration of the document, based on the Savoy Platform, the 1644 Baptist Confession, the Separatist Confession of 1596, and John Owen. I also referred to the fact that the Particular Baptists altered certain terms found in the Savoy Platform, to reflect more accurately their view. It was also pointed out that the 1689 Confession teaches that it is the prerogative of the preacher to administer the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's supper, since the proof texts used in the original Confessions were those referring to preachers of God's word.

Waldron has not engaged in a "refutation" of my case, nor provided cogent "proofs" for his case. Instead, his arguments are very much of the nature of assertions, protestations, and tentative suggestions.

Chap. 9. "The Practice of the Parity of the Eldership," By Dave Chanski.

In this closing chapter of the book, Chanski persists in claiming that I hold to the view that the teaching elders have "supremacy or priority of authority in the rule of the church" (p. 134). He lists four weaknesses inherent in that view. Since that is not my view, the points he raises are irrelevant to our debate. He is, in effect, shooting at the strawman that he has erected. We only wish to point out another case of the dubious way by which Chanski handles the debate between us.

Chanski, and Waldron, have made much of Benjamin Keach's view of the eldership to their advantage. Chanski now uses Keach in an unfavourable way to discredit me, saying: "Remember that Benjamin Keach saw neither scriptural warrant nor practical necessity for any other than preaching elders in the church. Dr. Poh similarly fails to appreciate the importance of pursuing the scriptural ideal at this point when he writes: 'The principle of "plurality" is being bandied about as a new form of "shibboleth". In the face of these new problems, it would not be wise to stress "plurality". No, it might not even be *right* to do so.' Chanski continues by quoting a passage from Cotton Mather, which referred to the Reforming Synod in 1679, lamenting the situation in which churches had only one teaching officer, to drive home the importance of having a plurality of elders. He further quotes Owen to the same effect. What Chanski does not point out are the following:

(i) He is misrepresenting my position by selective quotation. Immediately after those words which he quoted from my book, I had written: "It is preferable to advocate instead *the validity of the office of*

ruling elders. This would be a wider principle that encompasses the concept of "plurality", for when ruling elders are appointed to help the pastor, would not there be a plurality of elders? The plurality advocated by the early Independents, like John Owen, was one in which both teaching and ruling elders share the rule: not one in which only teaching elders bear the rule" (p. 159 of my book). Indeed, I also advocated "the unity of the eldership" in place of "the equality of all elders", in another chapter of my book (p. 173), which Chanski does not appear to have read.

(ii) In the Reforming Synod of 1679, the New England ministers were lamenting the absence of ruling elders and teachers to help the pastors (or teaching elders). Owen was similarly concerned that there should be officers other than the pastor to rule the church together. Theirs was a plurality that included teaching elders and ruling elders. Indeed, all the authors, except for Benjamin Keach and possibly R. C. H. Lenski, quoted by Chanski and his colleagues, held to the view that there is a distinction between the teaching and ruling elders - a point not made clear by them.

(iii) Historically, it was the "parity" view of eldership, exemplified in Keach, that played a major role in the demise of the office of ruling elders (see p. 178 of my book). Chanski now wishes to distance himself from Keach when, in fact, his view and that of Keach's are basically the same. They both share the idea that there is only one office of elder absolutely, in which is no sharp distinction between the teaching elders and ruling elders. They both deny the validity of the office of ruling elders. They both hold to the view that all the elders are pastors or bishops. The same passage from Keach's book has been quoted favourably by Chanski (p. 105) and Waldron (pp. 124, 125) in the earlier parts of the book. It is now being used unfavourably.

Chanski and Waldron want to have the cake, and eat it too!

Conclusion

The book, "In Defence of Parity", has failed to present a proper "restatement" and "refutation" of my view of the eldership. Instead, the "restatement" has been replaced with a serious misrepresentation of my view, and the "refutation" has been replaced by invectives leveled at my person and my view.

In the "statement" (or "proposition") of their view, the contributors have clearly spelled out what they mean by "parity" and "diversity". We have shown that theirs is an inadequate description of the biblical eldership, for the following reasons: (i) it fails to give due recognition to the priority of the ministry; (ii) it fails to show the biblical distinction between the teaching elders and the ruling elders; (iii) it uses terms ("parity", and "equality/diversity") that are too general and vague, that are consequential and not essential, and, therefore, cannot be made prescriptive to the churches without problems ensuing; (iv) it can only consistently uphold a doctrine of "the call to the ministry" that is different from the traditional view, and which minimizes the priority of the ministry.

In the "proof" of their position, the contributors have offered unconvincing exegesis of two key passages of Scripture, namely Ephesians 4:11 and 1 Timothy 5:17. Their proof of "parity" and "diversity" is such that I can agree with much of what they claim, for these pertain to things that we hold in common, and are of a general nature. In the areas where we differ, the contributors have largely ignored the arguments I have used in support of my case, and engaged in misrepresentation and ridicule of my view.

The view of eldership propounded by these contributors may rightly be called "the Absolute Equality View", with no negative connotation implied or intended. This view has the immediate effect of undermining the ministry of the word, and the long term effect of undermining the office of ruling elders.

My view of the eldership, which I have called the Independent View, takes into consideration all the relevant biblical data in a way not found in other views. A self-consistent view of the eldership emerges from the principles that constitute the Independent View, namely, "rule by elders", "the priority of the ministry", "the validity of ruling elders", "the unity of the eldership", and "rule with consent". These principles cover the full intent of earlier advocates of the Independent View, such as John Owen, and avoid the pitfalls spelled out by them.

It remains now to commend my book, "The Keys of the Kingdom", to those who have not read it. Those who have read "In Defence of Parity" will then be able to judge for themselves the merits, or demerits, of the present series of articles.

My aim throughout has been to seek a better understanding of the biblical teaching on church government, and in particular the biblical teaching on the eldership. I have restrained myself in my comments on those who differ from me, mentioning only those things which I believe right, true and necessary. If, in the process, of debate, unworthy words and attitudes have been displayed, it is much regretted.

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