

Southern Baptists and Elders

June 25, 2007

Morris Chapman wrote an interesting piece in the [Baptist Press](#) last week about the confessional status of the SBC's doctrinal statement, "The Baptist Faith and Message 2000" (BF&M). His article comes on the heels of the annual meeting of the SBC in San Antonio where Southern Baptists voted to reaffirm the BF&M as a sufficient guide for SBC leaders when they make convention-wide policies ([read story](#)). Because Chapman is president of the executive committee of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), his reflections carry a lot of weight with many Southern Baptists.

I'm not going to interact with Chapman's entire essay, but I do want to comment on a small piece of it that has to do with leadership in the church. Chapman writes:

"The matter of elders leading the church as officers is often discussed in association with Calvinism. The Baptist Faith and Message in Section VI. The Church, states, 'Its scriptural officers are pastors and deacons.' Are they or are they not?"

I'm not exactly sure what Chapman means to say in this statement. Is he suggesting that the BF&M sanctions only two offices in SBC churches, "pastors and deacons" and that the BF&M does not, therefore, give a place of leadership to "elders" within the polity of Christ's church?

In any case, there is a lot of confusion among Southern Baptists on this point. Many Southern Baptists would indeed argue that the BF&M does not sanction "elder" leadership within the churches. But I think this view is an unfortunate and common misunderstanding both of the BF&M and of the scriptures. First, a word about the BF&M. Southern Baptists have affirmed three editions of the BF&M, one in 1925, another in 1963, and another in 2000. A [comparison](#) of the three editions on this point is very illuminating:

BF&M 1925	BF&M 1963	BF&M 2000
"Its Scriptural officers are bishops, or elders, and deacons."	"Its Scriptural officers are pastors and deacons."	"Its scriptural officers are pastors and deacons."

The 1963 and 2000 versions are identical. The revision of language happens in the 1963 statement which substitutes the word "pastors" for the words "bishops or elders." Why did Southern Baptists change the wording in 1963? Were they adopting a church leadership structure that differed radically from that reflected in the 1925 statement? The answer to the latter questions is clearly *no*, if we understand what the scriptures teach about pastors, bishops, and elders.

And that brings me to my second point. In the New Testament, the terms translated as "pastor," "elder," and "bishop" are but three ways of referring to the same office of leadership. The apostle Paul equates *elders* with *overseers/bishops* in [Titus 1:5](#) and [7](#) by using the term *overseer/bishop* (*episcopos*) interchangeably with the term *elder* (*presbuteros*). In [1 Peter 5:1-2](#), the apostle Peter

commands the *elders* (*presbuteros*) to *pastor/shepherd* (*poimainō*) and to *exercise oversight* (*episcopēō*). The book of Acts records the apostle Paul as he refers to the *elders* (*presbuteros*) as *overseers* (*episcopos*) and as he commands them to *pastor/shepherd* (*poimainō*) the flock of God.

What all of this means is that a pastor *is* an elder and a bishop. These three terms are but three ways of referring to one office. So the change in wording in the BF&M 1963 does not reflect a change in leadership structures of Southern Baptist churches. It merely reflects a different (and equally biblical) way of referring to the same office of leadership. There is no change in theology at all.

So the answer to Chapman's question is "yes." The scriptural officers of the church are "pastors and deacons." Nevertheless, the Bible teaches us that those "pastors" are also "elders." To say that a "pastor" is an "elder" is not a Calvinist distinctive. It's a biblical one.