

Interaction with Benjamin Merkle's *40 Questions About Elders and Deacons* (Kregel, 2007).

In *40 Questions About Elders and Deacons*, Benjamin Merkle answers some of the most common questions regarding church leadership. The book is divided into three main sections. First, he discusses the importance, function, and Scriptural basis for various church offices. He also considers how these findings bear on common forms of church government found in denominations today. Second, he focuses particularly on the office of elder (which is says can also be called pastor, overseer, or bishop). Third, he concludes by answering a few questions regarding the office of deacon, including a person's qualifications and his role in the church. Because Merkle is so comprehensive while keeping our attention on the Bible, a number of key points stand out.

First, a church should pattern its leadership structure in conformity to the explicit teachings of Scripture. The author notes the trend in some churches to organize itself around business model. Also, tradition or convenience can keep a church from using biblical titles, exercising godly authority, and selecting biblically qualified leaders. Merkle appropriately concedes where he finds grey areas; yet, he exhorts the reader to at least do what is clear and press on to weigh the possible arguments in favor of one option or another. In this way, both leaders and the congregation are continually challenged to submit to the standards of the Bible.

Second, the Bible affirms that both elders and deacons are to be men of character. The greater stress of Scripture is a leader's *moral* qualifications. Of course, other issues are considered. For example, an elder must be able to teach. Although the argument for male eldership is stronger than that for male deacons, nevertheless, on balance, Merkle argues that woman are permitted to serve in the office of deacon.

Third, Merkle helpfully explains why having a biblical form of church government is desirable. He suggests that it affect who can serve as leaders, the function of leaders, and the manner by which those who leader will be held accountable. Further, it determines the role of the congregation at large, the strategy of the church, and the allocation of resources. In the end, Merkle argues well for congregationalism, explaining that other forms of governing requires more speculation or depend on arguments from silence.

Fourth, it is important to avoid subtly creating new offices in the church by making distinctions in nomenclature or authority. For example, the isolation of one person as “senior pastor” or a sharp division between paid-elders and lay-elders may undermine the two-tier system commended by Scripture.

Fifth, any transition to a new form of church government much be very intentional, gradual, and sensitively executed. Models or leadership are often long rooted in a church history. Congregants need education and persuasion. Legal documents and procedures may need revision. Pastors would do well to incorporate the congregation in the process so as to avoid offense. Trust must be earned.

Sixth, any position of leadership represents the church, whether an elder or a deacon. Therefore, selecting, training, and correcting leaders are quite serious tasks. They serve as examples to the church. The Bible is less than clear on an exact manner by which a local church should makes its decisions, therefore, Merkle demonstrate the importance of wisdom, considering the practical advantages and disadvantages of any process.

Seventh, a church should clearly define the function and qualifications expected of its leaders. For example, elders are called to shepherd and teach the church; whereas deacons serve

the material and temporal needs of the church. The latter does not directly serve the former. Instead, both help the church further the gospel and other goals.

Eighth, on the question of the phrase, “the husband of one wife,” Merkle’s treatment is both conservative and fair. After examining the most common interpretations, he concludes that Paul refers to a man’s being faithful to his wife, not given to promiscuity or flirtatiousness. He is careful not to quickly confuse the contexts of 1 Timothy and Titus with 1 Cor 7. Therefore, regardless of one’s position on divorce and remarriage, Merkle claims that neither is explicitly made a qualification for church leadership, though wisdom would give a church pause in such instances. Instead, he insists that the thrust of those sections in 1 Timothy and Titus is moral: Does this person presently exemplify godly character? The point is not primarily status or position. As church would not ask whether *previously* was this candidate not beyond reproach, not gentle, not able to teach, etc. Of course, their past would have much sin. Similarly, the issue, says Merkle, is not the past failure of a marriage, but their *present moral* condition.

Evaluation of *40 Questions About Elders and Deacons*

The strength of Merkle’s book is its consistent appeal to Scripture. He does well to review the various options of government and the arguments given for different questions; however, he always brings the discussion to the biblical text itself. Equally commendable is fair exegesis. He resists the temptation to overstate his case; in fact, he gives a few chapters to positions he does not hold (such as the arguments *for* women as elders and as deacons). As a result, he avoids an opposite error—dogmatism, wherein plausible conclusions are weakly defended with speculations and proof-texts.

The format and breadth of the text makes it very accessible for the reader. The forty questions considered are not only among the most important and frequently asked, in addition they are answered in a rational order. It is only after he defends the importance of church leadership that he begins the section on central office of the church—the elder—concluding with the deacons. In this way, churches can clearly identify what issues are most foundational and best defended by the Bible. Easily, this book could be used to educate and guide a church through a change in leadership structure. The conversation is thorough without being too technical.

Finally, the author skillful handles ambiguity. For example, where the Bible does not overtly tell churches and elders how to make decisions, Merkle lays out a number of options with their potential strengths and pitfalls. All the while, he reminds the reader not to forsake the principles that are clear. In addition, when discussing the difference between the terms “elder” and “overseer”, he does not ignore what has often been assumed, namely, that they are the same office with two names. Instead, he shows how “elder” speaks more to one’s position and honor where as “overseer” stresses function or responsibility. As a result, the writer gives an example how to handle some of the most divisive issues that face a church.

Some questions for discussion:

1. How are we to understand the role and requirements of other staff members, perhaps which may not be an elder or a deacon? The author says we should not use the term “pastor” for them. However, what else can be said about them? Who should they report to? What roles are restricted to men (since having a staff roles typically implies some authority)?
2. Even if a man has formerly divorced and/or remarried, does that forever disqualify him even though that same standard is not applied to other moral failings? Does it matter if the divorce and/or remarriage happened prior or post-conversion?
3. Besides preaching, what would a “first among equals” model means without devolving to a single-pastor model? (pp. 174-176)
4. Given Merkle’s arguments, should ordaining (as has been traditionally done) be altogether forsaken? What about practical considerations like marriages recognized by the government?
5. Who should handle the bulk of the counseling needs, deacons or pastors?
6. What types of examination should a pastor and elder undergo to ensure their theological competency?
7. Since leaders are to judge “prophecy”, how are we to understand this concept?
8. Should elders only emerge from within a congregation rather than hired? If hiring from the outside is allowed, what can be done to ensure they have proven themselves qualified?
9. In view of Carson’s comment on p. 162, is there anything that would rule out multi-site churches?
10. Wouldn’t female staff members de facto be women deacons?
11. What are some practical guidelines to help us assess whether someone is a “recent convert”?
12. Would publically rebuking an elder either necessitate or amount to his being removed from office and perhaps the final step before excommunication? (This assumes he is not repentant.) Even if he were repentant, would a rebuke be in order for the sake of discipline and giving public warning to others? Would he need to leave his office?
13. What are some practical boundaries for delineating both the elders and the congregation’s authority? Should it generally be restricted to affirming elders and a budget, leaving other matters to the elders?