REEVALUATION/REAFFIRMATION OF ELDERS?

Dub McClish

Dub McClish is a native Texan, the son of a Gospel preacher, grandson of an elder, father of a Gospel preacher, and son-in-law of a Gospel preacher. He attended Freed-Hardeman College and received a B.A. degree from Abilene Christian College. He has done local work in Idaho, Texas, Alabama, Kentucky and New Mexico. Dub is a well known author, editor, debater, publisher, and speaker who has preached the Gospel in several states, Jamaica, Singapore, the Philippines, Thailand, and Indonesia. He has delivered special lectures at Southwest School of Bible Studies, Houston College of the Bible, Southern Sumatra Bible College (Indonesia), and Brown Trail Preacher Training School. He is on the advisory staff of **Firm Foundation** and has contributed numerous articles in various brotherhood publications as well as hundreds of bulletin articles and chapters in over one hundred books. He has extensive radio preaching experience.

Since 1982, he has directed the Annual Denton Lectures and has edited the Annual Denton Lectures books. On September 1, 1992, he began a new work under the oversight of the Pearl Street elders (Denton, Texas), devoting full-time to preaching in Gospel meetings, mission trips, lectureships, and in writing and publishing sound Biblical materials. He is President of Valid Publications, Inc.

Dub is married to the former Lavonne James, and they have three children: Bronwen, Hal, and Andy, and seven grandchildren.

INTRODUCTION

The following note was in a printed worship announcement program of a local congregation of the Lord's church earlier this year:

> ELDER AFFIRMATION: As part of our service this morning, our five current elders will be re-confirmed [*sic*] and Brother ____ _____ will be re-appointed [*sic*] as an elder. This is as a result of the overwhelming response of the congregation to the recently distributed Elder Recommendation Forms.[1]

A brother who champions the "reaffirmation" of elders based upon periodic "reevaluation" of them began a manuscript on the subject as follows: "The reaffirmation of elders is new ground for most congregations. It is an uncharted course—a path not traveled. Few congregations have had any experience with reaffirmation."[2] While (as noted above) this practice is generally of recent vintage among us, it has

been observable in the denominational world for many years.[3] My first exposure to this practice in a church of Christ was in about 1987 when the Richland Hills Church of Christ in Forth Worth, Texas, announced in its bulletin that it follows such a process for both its elders and deacons. Due to its history of leadership in all things liberal for many years this unscriptural idea was not at all surprising. However, the next time I heard of such a practice was both surprising and disappointing. The Brown Trail congregation, Bedford, Texas, generally known through the years for its scriptural soundness, used the reevaluation/ reaffirmation process in 1990 to restructure its eldership, which included selection of one new elder.[4] Although there are doubtless many others, in my research for this chapter I only have documentation of the employment of this practice by the following congregations, including the two mentioned immediately above:

1. The Richland Hills congregation, North Richland Hills (Forth Worth), Texas
2. The Houston Park congregation, Selma, Alabama
3. The Pleasant Ridge congregation, Arlington, Texas
4. The Airport Freeway congregation, Euless, Texas
5. The 11th and Willis Streets congregation, Abilene, Texas[5]
6. The Crestview congregation, Waco, Texas[6]
7. The Brown Trail congregation, Bedford, Texas (the only congregation in the list without a reputation for liberalism to a greater or lesser degree.)

DEFINITIONS

In order to understand the practice under discussion we need to understand the definition and application of the principal terms used by its advocates:

1. "Reevaluation" is based upon the word *evaluate.* To evaluate is to determine or fix worth or value of an object or person (in this case, the latter) based upon examination. To reevaluate is to evaluate again or anew. To reevaluate elders means to reexamine them in order to determine their worthiness or unworthiness to continue to be elders.

2. "Reaffirmation" is based upon the word *affirm,* which means to validate by positive assertion. Thus, to reaffirm means to validate again that which was once validated. In respect to elders, reaffirmation means that men already serving as elders have their continued service validated and positively asserted. Please note that reaffirma-

tion implies prior reevaluation; without it there is no basis for reaffirmation in this procedure.

3. "Reconfirmation" is based upon the word *confirm.* This word means to make firm, strengthen, ratify, or give approval to. Reconfirmation obviously means to repeat the giving of approval or ratification. Since this word is actually a synonym for reaffirmation, when applied to elder selection the two words may be and are often used interchangeably.

4. *Deaffirmation* and *deconfirmation* (admittedly coined words, DM) are effective antonyms for *reaffirmation* and *reconfirmation*, respectively. It logically follows that a man who is not reaffirmed/reconfirmed after reevaluation is thereby "deaffirmed"/ "deconfirmed"!

APPLICATIONS—SOME CASE STUDIES

In his sermon manuscript, John Cannon asserted the existence of two general parts to the application of the reaffirmation process:

> First, each elder as an individual should reaffirm his desire to continue to serve. Self-examination requires an elder to ask, "Do I still have my heart set on serving the Lord's church as an elder?" (1 Tim. 3:1). If the answer is "no," he should be willing to resign or retire with dignity. If the answer is "yes," then he should be concerned about the congregation's attitude toward him, Second, the congregation's attitude should be determined. The congregation can reaffirm its desire to have any or all of the present elders to continue to serve. They can reaffirm their commitment to follow the leadership of the elders as individual men and as a group or body of elders—the eldership. In the event an elder is not reaffirmed by the congregation, he is given the opportunity to retire with dignity. If reaffirmation is positive, the elders resume their leadership role in the congregation with a vote of confidence.[7]

His purpose is to argue the case for the concept and process. Therefore, he does not set forth the details of how either the reevaluation or reaffirmation is to be executed, although he later advocates "frequent evaluation of leaders," "periodic evaluation," and that elders should undergo "congregational evaluation periodically."[8] While I have confirmation that the congregation where Cannon preaches (Pleasant Ridge, Arlington, Texas) uses this approach, I do not have documentation of the specifics of it.

The Richland Hills Congregation combines a specifically-structured tenure plan with its approach to reevaluation, reaffirmation, and selection process for both elders and deacons, as follows:

1. Each newly-appointed elder is appointed for only a three-year tenure before reevaluation.

2. At the end of the three-year term he can resign if he chooses to no longer serve, or he can choose to be a candidate for reaffirmation, subject to reevaluation by the congregation.

3. If his reevaluation "ballots" are sufficiently negative, he understands that he will not be reaffirmed. If they are sufficiently positive, he is reaffirmed. (I was not able to learn the formula by which one is reaffirmed or deaffirmed.)[9]

4. New elders are selected and appointed based upon the evaluation process and formula used for the reevaluation of existing elders.

5. Deacons are reaffirmed and new deacons selected by the same process, except the tenure of deacons is one year.

The Crestview Congregation, Waco, Texas, patterned its process after the plan of the 11th and Willis Congregation, Abilene, Texas (as mentioned above) (notwithstanding its claim to be following "a model patterned after that revealed in the book of Acts"). A summary of this plan is as follows:[10]

1. The congregation selected fifteen members for a "Drafting Committee" to "draft the procedures for selecting elders and present them to the congregation at an open meeting."

2. The Drafting Committee prepared a list of "introspective" questions for prospective elders, which, when filled out by the eventually-determined candidates, were made available to the entire congregation.[11]

3. The chairman of the Drafting Committee conducted an "open" meeting of the congregation in order to select a seven-member "Administrative Committee." This committee could not include any man who presently served as an elder or who might be an elder candidate.

4. The Drafting Committee tabulated the nomination ballots for members of the Administrative Committee, with the top seven vote-getters being appointed, after which the Drafting Committee dissolved.

5. The Administrative Committee, after selecting its chairman, had the responsibility to review and supervise the elder selection procedure.

6. The congregation was urged to submit written, signed nominations for elders over a given number of days, with existing elders au-

tomatically nominated unless they removed themselves from consideration (which four of the five Crestview elders did on February 12, 1987—four days after nominations began). Each candidate had to receive at least twenty nominations to be considered for appointment/reappointment.

7. The Committee then met with each candidate to determine his willingness to be appointed if selected. The list of those who were willing was then placed before the congregation.

8. A period of several days was allowed during which any member could lodge scriptural objections to any of the men. These must be in writing, signed, and delivered to the Committee by the pre-announced deadline.

9. "Ballots" (their word) were distributed and voting on the candidates took place on a given Sunday morning after worship. "Making the cut" for reaffirmation/affirmation was based on "yes," "no," and "I don't know" "votes" (their term) cast for each man according to the following intricate formula:

> The minimum level of confidence is a percentage of all affirmative votes cast for a nominee after his "I Don't Know" votes have been subtracted from the total number of votes cast. The minimum level of confidence for elders shall be set at no lower than 70%. The maximum percentage of "I Don't Know" votes shall be set at no higher than 25% of the total number of votes cast.[12]

10. The Committee tabulated the elder ballots on the same day the voting was done, thus determining which nominees had been "affirmed." This being done, the ballots were destroyed.

11. The Committee then announced the results of the voting and set a date for installation/reaffirmation of the new eldership.

12. The Committee prepared a written report, in conjunction with suggestions from the congregation, evaluating the selection procedures and projecting the date for the next selection process. The Committee then dissolved and its functions ceased.

The specifics of the reevaluation/reaffirmation/selection blueprint implemented at Brown Trail, although not as intricately detailed, have many similarities to the above. The document in which they set forth their plan is reproduced in full below:

> 1. The elders formed a committee to regulate and monitor the process. Committee members: Gary Fallis, Dave Miller, Johnny Ramsey, Don Simpson.[13]

2. Formally apprise the congregation of the commencement of the evaluation/selection process (Dave Miller—April 8). Present sermons on elder qualifications and responsibilities (Johnny Ramsey—April 15 & 22).

3. Distribute evaluation/selection forms to the membership (April 22). Give membership one week to carefully/prayerfully evaluate present eldership as well as potential new elders and submit forms to the committee no later than April 29.[14]

4. Tabulation of forms by the committee. Present elders must receive 75% support of those submitting forms.[15] Individual interview appointments will be scheduled. Interviews will facilitate introspection and review biblical qualifications [*sic*].

5. Names presented to the congregation (May 13). A two week period will be given for the submission of signed scriptural objections to the committee (Deadline: May 20).

6. If any objections are forthcoming, interview appointments with objectors will be scheduled in order to ascertain the validity of objections. The objector will not be required to meet with the one to whom he objects. The objector's anonymity will be maintained. Scriptural objections will then be discussed with those receiving objections.

7. Appointment/ordination service (May 27).[16]

All of the plans above, while differing in some details have numerous things in common, including the following: (1) A committee (or committees) which stands between existing elders and the congregation. (2) The committee is vested with authority and oversight of the entire reevaluation/selection process. (3) The committee establishes an arbitrary (and sometimes complex) formula by which it determines who is to be reaffirmed/affirmed. (4) The congregation reevaluates existing elders and suggests prospective elders. (5) A period of time is allowed for lodging objections against any of the candidates. (6) Those who satisfy the pre-established formula and who are not disqualified because of sustainable scriptural objections lodged against them are then reaffirmed or affirmed, respectively.

Having seen the nature of the process, we turn now to consider the attempts to justify and defend it on the basis of Scriptures.

JUSTIFICATIONS OFFERED BY ADVOCATES

Those congregations that have adopted a reevaluation/reaffirmation approach to elder and/or deacon appointment (such as the ones described) indicate varied attitudes toward justification of same. These range from no justification attempt to setting forth of an alleged scriptural basis.

John Cannon observes that the New Testament says little about the appointment of elders. Just as it says nothing of elder tenure, resignation, retirement, leave of absence, or sabbatical, "Likewise, the reaffirmation of elders, either individually or congregationally, is not addressed in the text." He concludes that reaffirmation is in the realm of "congregational judgment."[17]

The documents from the 11th and Willis Congregation (Abilene, TX) offer no justification for their plan, however, the "Crestview Plan" (Waco, TX) (which is based entirely upon that of the Abilene Church) attempts to do so. This is likely explained by the fact that the Abilene Congregation had been using their plan so long that they assumed that none of its members would question it. On the other hand, this was all new and novel to Crestview, and its implementors seemed to have anticipated objections to it on scriptural grounds. For whatever reason, the Crestview Administrative Committee offered the following in the opening paragraph of its "Procedure" explanation: "We are choosing to follow a model patterned after that revealed in the book of Acts in which the Church [*sic*] sought to determine its leaders." I suppose that the passage referred to above is the same as that mentioned in a later statement made orally to the congregation by Norman Murphy, Chairman of the Administrative Committee:

> The purpose of this process is simply for this congregation to recognize the shepherds/elders among us whom God has already chosen. Notice how Matthias was chosen as the apostle to replace Judas. Acts 1:24 says: "And they prayed and said, 'Lord, who knowest the hearts of all men, show which one of these two thou hast chosen'" [RSV, DM]. Not even the apostles sought to impose their will on the church.[18]

The Brown Trail (Bedford, TX) Elder Selection Screening Committee went to much greater pains than those previously cited in its attempt to provide scriptural justification for employing its elder reevaluation process. This would be expected for at least two reasons: (1) The Brown Trail Church has had a long history of seeking to do only what the Scriptures authorize (admirably so), and the other congregations involved in this work have not exactly distinguished themselves in this pursuit. (2) Both the Brown Trail elders and the committee of its preachers and instructors surely anticipated that its adoption of this process would identify them with generally-recognized liberal congregations in the minds of many sound brethren and that they would therefore receive criticism because of this fact.[19] Due to the

committee's concerns about such matters it issued the following lengthy (by comparison) "Rationale" for the program they adopted:

> (1) The members select elders to begin with (Acts 6:3). Since the complexion of congregational membership changes over the years, an eldership may conceivably no longer consist of the same individuals whom the present membership would select.
>
> (2) Shepherds cannot lead where sheep will not follow. Even if a man is technically qualified to be an elder, if the membership where he attends does not perceive him as a leader whom they respect and trust, he cannot shepherd effectively.
>
> (3) The Bible makes provision for the evaluation of an elder's spiritual standing (1 Tim. 5:19). Should a current elder be found to be disqualified, he no longer meets the qualifications to be an elder. An evaluation process is simply one expedient means of ascertaining the elder's conformity to God's will. "Once an elder, always an elder" is as false as "once saved, always saved."
>
> (4) Elders have the authority to ascertain the amount of confidence that members have in their leadership capabilities. Any shepherd who genuinely wishes to serve the flock will naturally desire the continued approval and respect of that flock. Should an elder no longer sustain that respect from a sizable portion of the flock for whatever reason, the only proper attitude would be to remove oneself from a position that depends upon credibility. A Christian does not have to be an elder to go to heaven.[20]

Let us summarize the assertions offered in justification of the concept of reevaluation and reaffirmation of elders from all of the foregoing sources:

1. The New Testament authorizes the selection and appointment of elders, but does not instruct us how to do so. Therefore, we must use our judgment concerning the best way to do so.

2. The selection of Matthias as an apostle (Acts 1:24) is a model for selection of elders. God had already made His choice and the other apostles simply employed a means by which He could reveal who it was.

3. Elders are to be selected by the members (Acts 6:3).

4. Elders must have respect of the church members to be able to serve effectively.

5. Elders should be evaluated to see if they continue to be qualified (1 Tim. 5:19).

6. Elders have the authority to determine whether or not the congregation still has sufficient confidence in them to respect and follow their leadership.

RESPONSES TO THE JUSTIFICATIONS

The initial response that needs to be made in reference to the proffered justifications is to observe the following: All of the justifications have linked (whether wittingly or unwittingly) **selection and appointment** of elders with **reevaluation and reappointment** of elders as if they were inseparable and without distinction. The basic argument of the reevaluation advocates may thus be stated as follows:

1. The Scriptures authorize local congregations to select and appoint their own elders, but the details of doing so are in the realm of expediency.
2. Reevaluation and reaffirmation are merely alternate names for and means of the selection and appointment of elders.
3. Therefore, the Scriptures authorize reevaluation and reaffirmation of elders as expedients for selection and appointment of elders.

The first premise above is true. Assuredly, the Scriptures authorize the selection and appointment of elders/bishops/pastors in every congregation in which two or more men can be found who are scripturally qualified (Acts 14:23; 15:4ff; 16:4; 20:17; 1 Tim. 3:1-7; 5:17-20; Tit. 1:5-9). Moreover, the specifics of how these are to be done are not provided either by example or precept in the New Testament. Such matters are therefore left to the exercise of human wisdom that works in harmony with the overall context of scriptural principles.

The problem arises with the second premise above: It assumes that which requires proof and evidence, which are not offered. It should be obvious to all that programs of "reevaluation" and "reaffirmation" (or "deaffirmation," such as those described above) of previously-selected and appointed elders are not the same as mere selection and appointment procedures. The plans referenced above use separate and different forms for evaluating present elders and nominating new elders—a tacit admission that reevaluation and initial selection are separate processes even in their minds. Moreover (as noted above), the Brown Trail plan stipulates: "Present elders must receive 75% support of those submitting forms." No such stipulation was applied to those who had not previously served. Since the second premise is false, the third premise (conclusion) is necessarily false. The reevaluation, reaffirmation, deaffirmation process concerning elders is a separate issue from the mere selection and appointment of elders and thus must be separately tested in light of the Scriptures. There is both im-

plicit and explicit authority for the latter. There is neither for the former.

What about the use of Acts 1:24 as justification, per the Crestview documents? I must admit that I have never before seen this passage used in any connection with the selection or appointment of elders, and, I think, with good reason! The setting here is the meeting of the 120 disciples, including the eleven apostles, in Jerusalem between the ascension of the Lord and the Day of Pentecost. In the process of selecting a replacement for Judas, the group prayed (apparently led by Peter, Acts 1:15): "Thou, Lord, who knowest the hearts of all men, show of these two the one whom thou hast chosen, to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas fell away" (Acts 1:24-25). It is argued that the apostles did not "impose their will on the church." This would hardly have been possible since the church had not yet been established! But granting that this was after the church was established, it hardly helps the argument unless those making the argument are willing to cast lots and rely upon the same means by which God signals His choice of elders. The fact that this was a selection involving the miraculous element invalidates it as a precedent for any generation of the church since the cessation of miracles. True, this incident shows that the apostles did not independently or arbitrarily make the choice of Matthias, but this has little to do with the question before us. The "church" did not make the final selection, either. God did! The argument seems to be that, because the apostles did not choose Matthias, we therefore have scriptural authority for reevaluating and reaffirming or "deaffirming" elders. This is a very large stretch—even for a Texas church!

I turn my attention now to the "Biblical Rationale" statement (hereafter referred to as the "Rationale") issued by Brown Trail (see above). Due to the fact that it is by far the longest attempt at a biblical justification it will require a longer response than the other attempts. While realizing that the Bible need teach a thing only once for it to be the will of God, it is still noteworthy that the four paragraphs of the "Rationale" are not all that "biblical." That is, only two passages are cited (not even quoted), and little application of them is made. Had there been more Scripture in their favor they surely would have used it! I intend to demonstrate that neither of these passages justifies what these brethren purport to see in them.

The first passage cited is Acts 6:3. What, if anything, does it have to say about the issue before us? The only point the "Rationale" drew from it was that "The members select elders to begin with (Acts 6:3)." The context of this passage is the response of the apostles to the complaint from the Grecian Jews that "their widows were being neglected in the daily ministration" (Acts 6:1). The apostles called the church together and told them, "Look ye out therefore, brethren, from among you seven men of good report, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business" (Acts 6:3). While admitting in his sermon cited earlier that the seven men selected were not elders (in his opinion they were deacons),[21] Dave Miller concludes: "Let's simply note that here is an inspired selection process given by the inspired apostles." I have no problem with this conclusion. In fact, I believe it a correct use of the passage and have so used it for many years. However, I ask how this justifies the reevaluation, reaffirmation, deaffirmation program? All this passage does is furnish the principle that the whole congregation is to be involved in the selection of elders (and deacons), not in some intricate reevaluation process of men who were already selected, appointed, and serving.

Next, the "Rationale" states: "Since the complexion of congregational membership changes over the years, an eldership may conceivably no longer consist of the same individuals whom the present membership would select." My initial reaction to this statement was registered immediately after the Brown Trail program was implemented, and it remains the same:

> Just because the "complexion" of a congregation changes over the years (as all do) says nothing to justify the practice (i.e., of reevaluation/reaffirmation). When saints come to place membership with a congregation they are under the same directive to submit themselves to the elders of that congregation, just as every other member is (Acts 20:28; Heb. 13:17). If said members cannot follow the leadership and work under the oversight of those elders, why should they want to place membership?...
>
> I see certain harmful consequences that may accrue from this practice: (1) The congregation is "up for grabs" with the change of congregational "complexion." Any group of errorists of any sort (antis, premillennialists, Crossroaders, Kingites, whatever) could move into a congregation over a period of months and so change the "complexion" of a church as to demand their own chosen elders. Of course, this has been done as a power move in more than one place, but the "reevaluation" program invites and encourages same. (2) This "reevaluation/reconfirmation/deconfirmation" concept removes the oversight of the congregation from the elders (Acts 20:28) and

> gives it to 25% of the congregation! Majority rule in the absence of elders has its drawbacks at times, but allowing a mere 25% to determine who will or will not serve as elders, and that, perhaps on the basis of personal likes and/or dislikes rather than on Scriptural qualifications, is absurd. Moreover, the 25% apparently relates to the number of forms received by the...screening committee, rather than 25% of the actual membership ("75% support **of those submitting forms**," "Procedure..." statement [emp. DM]). Depending on how many forms were submitted, the 25% could represent a much smaller percentage of the entire membership. Talk about "minority rule"![22]

A similar response was made by Garland Elkins to the "change of complexion" idea:

> Those who contend for "reconfirmation" argue that many of the present members were not there when the present elders were appointed, and if they were given the opportunity at present they would not be in favor of appointing the present elders. That may be true, but remember that they agreed to work under the oversight of the present elders when they placed their membership with a given congregation.[23]

W. Terry Varner reacted to the "change of complexion" statement as follows:

> [The] argument for "Reconfirmation" based on "the complexion of a congregation in terms of its membership can change over a period of time...no longer consist of the same individuals..." proves nothing. Hopefully, the case would be that...the congregation would grow by winning souls and transfer of memberships, so that membership would indeed change. If the eldership continues to meet the divine qualifications, whether the complexion of the congregation changes or not, he remains God's servant as an elder.... For a congregation's complexion to change wherein the members would not submit themselves places the members in violation of Heb. 13:17, "obey them that have rule over you" [*sic*].[24]

There is not even any reasonable, much less scriptural, connection between the "change of complexion" of a congregation and the justification for some sort of reevaluation/reaffirmation process for elders.

The next item in the "Rationale" asserts: "Shepherds cannot lead where sheep will not follow." It goes on to argue that while a man may be "technically qualified" to be an elder, if the congregation does not respect and trust him as a leader, he cannot "shepherd effectively." Does not this open the flood gates to abuse of and rebellion against the eldership or at least of certain men who are elders? Does not this place all of the responsibility upon the elders to be men (even though scripturally qualified) who the members want to follow (based on carnal standards), rather than placing it on the members to obey the

elders because they are qualified and because God commands them to (Heb. 13:17, et al.)?

Mac Deaver wrote the following perceptive observations in response to the attempted justification of "reevaluation" of elders on the basis that the members will not follow him even though he is scripturally qualified:

> Brother Miller did not exactly prove what he set out to prove regarding the alleged scripturalness of evaluating elders who are already elders in order to determine whether or not the sheep are going to follow them.
>
> I think the matter of stressing that elders can't lead if the sheep won't follow needs to be thought about more thoroughly. The evaluation process, as far as I can see from the material you sent, is to determine whether or not the congregation is willing to submit to certain men. It is not simply an effort to find out who is or is not scripturally qualified to remain an elder.
>
> I think the position that brother Miller takes implies that at any time there is an effort on the part of the elders to lead in a direction in which the sheep don't want to go, then all they have to do at that time is to reevaluate the eldership and remove all those to whom they do not want to submit. **This would imply that the elders are not ruling the congregation but that really the congregation is ruling the eldership** [emp. DM]....[25]

The argument that a man could meet the qualifications, yet not be perceived by the members as a shepherd or one to whom they would submit themselves "is filled with questions and problems," according to W. Terry Varner:

> 1. If an elder met the divine qualifications, he would, by virtue of his qualification, "know" the flock he helps to oversee (1 The. 5:12-13) and be a watchman of (Acts 20:28-31; Heb. 13:17).
>
> 2. The subsequent result would be that the eldership would be known (come to be known by all newcomers in the membership). There is no justification for "Reconfirmation of the Eldership."[26]

This pretense of an argument in fact adds a qualification to those in the Scriptures, namely, that "the bishop therefore must measure up to certain 'leadership qualities' as determined by at least 75% of the membership."

The second passage of Scripture cited in the "Rationale" (1 Tim. 5:19) is supposed to demonstrate that "the Bible makes provision for the evaluation of an elder's spiritual standing." In this passage Paul teaches: "Against an elder receive not an accusation, except at *the mouth of* two or three witnesses." He then adds, "Them that sin reprove in the sight of all, that the rest also may be in fear" (1 Tim.

5:20). The "Rationale" goes on to state the redundancy that "should a current elder be found to be disqualified, he no longer meets the qualifications to be an elder." It is then alleged that "an evaluation process is simply one expedient means of ascertaining the elder's conformity to God's will." The paragraph closes by stating: "'Once an elder, always an elder' is as false as 'once saved, always saved.'"

My immediate response to this use of First Timothy 5:19 when I first read the "Rationale" was that it was a misuse of it, and my convictions have not changed. I wrote the following concerning this part of the "Rationale":

> I find no Scriptural precedent for it [i.e., the "reevaluation/reconfirmation" practice] in 1 Timothy 5:19-20. To find this practice in this text requires some imaginative eisegesis, rather than sound exegesis. Of course, "once an elder, always an elder" is faulty. However, the task and necessity of removing an elder because two or three witnesses sustain a charge of sin against him is one thing, and "reevaluating" and either "reconfirming" or "deconfirming" an entire eldership as a matter of policy or routine is something altogether different. Further, I know of no basis for removing a man as an elder unless he is proved to be unqualified on the basis of 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1. To say that a man should be removed because "25% of the congregation doesn't want to follow him" or "doesn't like him" [is not in this passage or any other].
>
> Brown Trail has not announced that it will do this annually or at any other stated interval, but the precedent has now been set for doing it. "If it was a good thing to do once, why not a good thing to do regularly?" it might be argued.[27]

The late Bill Jackson wrote some incisive comments relating to the "reevaluation" practice and removing a man from the eldership as set forth in this part of the "Rationale":

> The work of the eldership is permanent—the congregation will always need elders. The men appointed were appointed because they met the qualifications set forth in the Bible. I think all of us would agree that an elder can resign, and certainly, if unqualified, should be removed if he does not resign. But that is the point: An elder is "examined, evaluated" day-by-day in his life and in his functioning. Fellow-elders and the congregation should be able to see the man, know the man, day-by-day in the work of the kingdom. It becomes nothing but a political arrangement, giving every man a vote, however wrongly motivated he may be, and through this process, good and qualified men can be rejected on this second evaluation, and thus unscriptural and liberal forces can move their own men into office![28]

Once more, from the pen of W. Terry Varner came the following words:

> Elders must meet the divine qualifications set forth in 1 Timothy 3:1-7, Titus 1:3-9, 1 Peter 5:1-3, and other related Scriptures. This is not to affirm "once an elder, always an elder," as brother Miller seems to accuse those of us of who would oppose the "Reconfirmation of Elders."
>
> Since an elder must meet the divine qualifications in order to be appointed an elder, it follows by implication, that an elder becomes disqualified when he fails to meet and/or violates the divine qualifications. To imply any other manner of removing an elder or eldership is to assume more than the Bible teaches. There is no hint of "Reconfirmation of Elders" in the divine qualifications.[29]

The "reevaluation" process is merely an expedient means of determining whether or not an elder is conforming to God's will, the "Rationale" asserts. John Cannon made the same basic assertion in his attempt to justify the reevaluation procedure to the Pleasant Ridge Congregation (Arlington, TX):

> The reaffirmation of elders, either individually or collectively is not addressed in the text.... If congregational judgment or opinion is valid for current practices of dealing with "elder questions," then reaffirmation would be in the same realm of congregational judgment.[30]

The attempt to place the reevaluation/reaffirmation phenomenon in the realm of expediency overlooks an elementary principle of biblical hermeneutics: Authorization must precede expediency. In other words, no matter can be expedient unless it is first authorized, and the authorization for this practice has not been produced.

The final paragraph of the "Rationale" asserts that elders have the authority to determine what level of confidence the members have in their "leadership capabilities." Granting that they have this authority, where is there any emphasis in the New Testament relating to a craving for such information? This sort of uneasiness smacks more of the cold, sterile, secular concerns of executives in the business world than it does of God's elders. It is evident throughout the "Rationale" that there is a severe preoccupation with whether or not an elder is perceived as having "leadership" qualities that will inspire members to follow him. There seems to be a corresponding under emphasis on the actual Scriptural qualifications themselves in the whole reevaluation/reaffirming process. Elders have authority in the local congregation in matters of expediency and judgment, but they do not have authority to empower a committee, whatever its purpose, that supersedes the authority God gave them alone!

A LIST OF CONCERNS

I will now list a number of matters that need to be seriously considered by any congregation that is contemplating adoption of a reevaluation/reaffirmation plan. This plan concerns me because:

1. It professes to "reappoint" (the practical meaning of reaffirming or reconfirming) men who are already appointed and who have not resigned (both contradictory and nonsensical).
2. It renders duly-selected and appointed elders only "de facto" or "quasi" elders during the reevaluation process.
3. It places an administrative or screening committee in authority to which the elders must give account and submit.
4. It prevents elders (who are to oversee all of the members and all of the work of all of the congregation) from having any voice in or oversight of who will serve as elders.
5. It sets a precedent that will be very difficult to abandon. It will thenceforth appear unfair to those to whom it was originally applied if all succeeding elders are not likewise subjected to it.
6. It adds the qualification of "leadership characteristics" to the qualifications found in the New Testament.
7. It may result in removing certain unqualified men from the eldership, but it also provides an opportunity for forces of error to quickly and easily gain control of the eldership of a congregation with a minimum number of people by removal of qualified men. What if the elders in a congregation are qualified men who are determined to keep the church pure, but in the reevaluation process a twenty-six percent element of liberals in the church turn in negative ballots? Just this easily (and unscripturally) can a dedicated, qualified eldership be restructured!
8. It creates a great potential for dissension and division in a congregation should the elders dare contradict the committee the existence of which they have authorized and whose policies and procedures have been sanctioned by the congregation.
9. It gives an opportunity for fraud, deceit, and favoritism in the process of tabulation of the ballots by the committee members.
10. It could encourage an elder who is being reevaluated to engage in politicking and "promise-making" in order to be able to attain the necessary percentage of votes for reaffirmation.

11. It establishes arbitrary percentages for "reaffirmation" or "deaffirmation."

12. It necessarily tabulates the percentages only of those who actually participate in the balloting, which may represent much smaller percentages of the actual membership.

13. It allows a small percentage of the members of a congregation to determine who will be its elders and how long they will serve.

14. It smacks more of the standards of failure and success employed by business rather than the standards set forth in the New Testament.

15. It replaces the scriptural mandate, "them that sin rebuke before all" (1 Tim. 5:20) with "in the event an elder is not reaffirmed by the congregation, he should be given opportunity to retire with dignity."[31]

16. It supplants the scriptural instruction for dealing with sin and/or failure in qualifications of elders (1 Tim. 5:19) with a humanly-contrived scheme of detailed and intricate "reevaluation" relating more to "leadership characteristics" than with Scriptural qualifications.

CONCLUSION

The one major concern that overrides all others for lovers of Truth is that the formal, arbitrary, highly-structured reevaluation, reaffirmation, or deaffirmation procedure that is almost a fad running through liberal congregations (and that has ensnared even some unwary conservative ones) is **without scriptural authority**! Most of those who defend it hardly make an appeal to the Scriptures. Those who attempt such an appeal fail.

Philip Gould, a deacon at the Brown Trail Congregation at the time the "reevaluation" and "reconfirming" plans were being implemented, expressed his grave concern about this and several other matters in a letter to the elders. The words below are germane to the point at hand:

> Regarding the office of an elder, brother Peterman [one of the elders at that time, DM] mentioned something called "reconfirming" the existing elders through a majority or some percentage of votes of the congregation. I assume that this is similar to the bishops' way of electing a new pope, **because there is no basis for it in God's Bible** [emp. DM]. The eldership is not a popularity contest. You are either qualified or you are not—you know the Truth. It was interesting to see where the Airport Freeway Congregation [Euless, TX], now home to many past Brown Trail members, "reconfirmed" their elders a few weeks ago as they installed others. Is the Brown Trail Church going to import doctrinal error from those who previously left when God's will and not theirs prevailed?[32]

Many other astute Bible students have recognized this dearth of authorization and have boldly stated so:

Robert R Taylor, Jr.:

> Like you, I do not believe there is Biblical authorization for what they [the Brown Trail Elder Selection Screening Committee] proposed. I constantly stand amazed at our brethren seeking to tamper with God's crystal clear pattern. The eldership is clear in Holy Writ. They are seeking to muddy the clear water of such. I view such with great alarm.[33]

Bill Jackson:

> There is absolutely no Bible, or justification, for that matter, of "reconfirming, reexamination, or reevaluation" as to either elders or deacons. It smacks of political maneuvering done in foreign countries whereby a new government is formed, based on "reevaluation" and a "vote of confidence." It reflects adversely on a congregation, and those behind this process, to move in this direction.[34]

W. Terry Varner:

> The process of "Reconfirmation of Elders" is without Scriptural basis and results in a way to remove Scriptural men as elders and to place men into the office of the eldership that harmonize more nearly with the thoughts and desires of the membership rather than the divine qualifications.[35]

Garland Elkins:

> I do not know of any Bible authority for "electing" elders as if it were a political process. Neither do I know of any Bible authority for "reconfirming" existing elders. If elders lose their qualifications, they should resign. If qualified elders resign, the congregation has the same right to appoint them again in the future (if they are qualified) as they did the first time they were appointed.... I do not know why brethren cannot be content to simply "appoint" (ASV), "ordain" (KJV) (Acts 14:23) rather than to come up with an imaginary "reconfirmation" of present elders.[36]

Mac Deaver:

> I find no authority for such a procedure in the New Testament.[37]

I concluded my written reaction to this practice at the time it was being carried out with the following assessment:

> The best argument against it is the same as that against the instrument and a thousand other innovations that men have dreamed up: "There ain't no Bible fer it," as the hillbilly saint declared![38]

ENDNOTES

[1] *The Sunday Morning Review,* Houston Park Church of Christ, Selma, Alabama (Jan. 19, 1997). My thanks to Michael Hatcher for this document.

[2]John H. Cannon, Jr., "A New Direction for Church Leadership: The Reaffirmation and Selection of Elders Among Churches of Christ," manuscript of sermon delivered at Pleasant Ridge Church of Christ, Arlington, TX (n.d., but 1991 or later), p. 1. Cannon excerpted and edited this manuscript from his unpublished Doctor of Ministry dissertation by the same title, for the College of Biblical Studies, Abilene Christian University. (The quotation endnoted is one of the very few things in the entire manuscript with which I can agree, incidentally!) My thanks to Jesse Whitlock for this document.

[3]Garland Elkins tells of first seeing such procedures in the Christian Church perhaps thirty years ago (from a personal letter to Goebel Music, May 14, 1990 [used by permission and with appreciation]). As with most of the other innovations the change agents are continually introducing into the worship, organization, and work of the New Testament church, this one apparently originated in sectarian/denominational circles where the issue of scriptural authority is rarely considered. My thanks to Goebel Music for several letters and documents relating to this subject.

[4]I have known and loved many of the brethren at Brown Trail, including her preachers and some of her elders, for many years. I have also worked closely with this congregation in many ways for a number of years. Therefore, while it particularly grieves me to report this information concerning her, fairness and consistency demand it. I am not opposed to Brown Trail as such, but only to the error in which I believe she was involved in this matter.

[5]Three of its six elders (in 1989, the date of documents in my possession) were firmly ensconced at Abilene Christian University (Ian Fair, Dean of the College of Biblical Studies; Neil Lightfoot, Professor of Bible; Dub Orr, board member). My thanks to Darrell and Ruth Hanson for extensive documents pertaining to the 11th and Willis plan.

[6]This concept was adopted in 1986-1987, after instruction sessions at Crestview by Ian Fair and Dub Orr. The Crestview documents and forms are almost "carbon copies" of the ones produced by 11th and Willis. (I infer from a cover letter accompanying the documents from 11th and Willis that brethren Fair and Orr have introduced their procedure in other congregations where they have lectured on the eldership.) My thanks to Darrell and Ruth Hanson for numerous documents relating to the Crestview procedures.

[7]Cannon, p. 2.

[8]Cannon, pp. 6-7.

[9]Interestingly, the Richland Hills "Affirmation-Reaffirmation" ballots for 1992 contained only a "yes" or "no" box to check for each candidate. The 1996 ballots contained a third box to check: "Don't know this elder." Since the "I don't know" response is a prominent part of the formula coming out of 11th and Willis (Abilene, TX) and adopted by Crestview (Waco, TX), this addition by Richland Hills may reflect influence from one or both of these congregations.

[10]Quoted from "Suggested Procedures for Participative Appointment of Elders," Crestview Church of Christ, Waco, TX, (1987), p. 1. The plans of these two churches are so similar that there is no need to summarize both of them.

[11]"Introspective Questionnaire for Elder Candidates," Crestview Church of Christ (1986, Revised 12/17/86). In explaining the rationale for the questions, I find it significant that the Committee stated the following: "These carefully chosen and sometimes delicate questions are intended to let the congregation know the heart and

mind of prospective elders. Per the guidance of brethren Fair and Orr, there are no questions about specific doctrinal matters such as the Holy Spirit, divorce and remarriage, etc." How's that for a telling bit of liberal advice from the ACU bigwigs and an equally-telling mark of liberalism in the Crestview folk that they readily swallowed it?

[12]"Suggested Procedures..." p. 3.

[13]In his sermon at Brown Trail (4/8/90), Dave Miller also added the following information concerning the committee membership and function: "Maxie Boren has an opportunity to have input on this committee, but is out of touch and out of town so much that his participation will probably be rather minimal" (from transcription of taped sermon).

[14]Originally, members were not required to sign these forms, per Miller's sermon: "You won't be asked to sign that form. In fact, our five current elders have made that point, that this is strictly your opportunity without any pressure from anywhere or anyone to state your feelings about the current eldership in light of what the Bible teaches." By the time the forms were distributed on April 22, this part of the procedure had been changed per a document entitled, "Announcement from the Elder Selection Screening Committee": "Only one change has been made in the procedures which were presented two weeks ago to the congregation. The committee is asking that you sign all forms. No forms will be considered which do not include a signature.... The only purpose for requiring signatures is to insure that all participants are members of this congregation and to 'provide things honest in the sight of all men.' "

[15]In his sermon, Miller referred to the need for one in a leadership position to voluntarily resign if he "no longer sustains the respect from a sizable portion of the flock" and "present elders would need to receive a sizable percentage of support from this congregation." He immediately used objections by 25% of the congregation as a percentage that should cause one to voluntarily resign.

[16]"Procedure for Implementing Elder Evaluation/Selection Process, Brown Trail Church of Christ." From the following statements at the beginning of brother Miller's sermon, this "procedure" was apparently suggested by him: "Plans were made several weeks ago more concretely and they [the elders] asked me to present them with some information that would assist them in carrying out this objective." The "Procedure" statement seems to have been worded by the "elder selection screening committee" as a whole: "And so, in formulating this committee, as well as a number of guidelines that were discussed by the committee, we submitted to the eldership for their approval [*sic*]. A system has been set in place by which current elders might be evaluated and additional elders might be added to the body of elders."

[17]Cannon, "A New Direction...."

[18]Norman Murphy, "Text of Statement to Congregation from the Administrative Committee" (Feb. 1, 1987).

[19]Dave Miller was defensive about this very charge in his sermon of April 8, 1990: "But what about this idea of reevaluating current elders or reconfirming? There are some brethren that are really up in arms it seems to me and say, 'That is what the liberals are doing.' ...We may use the term 'evaluation' of elders, we may use the term 'reconfirmation.' If those terms concern you, then call it something else."

[20]"Biblical Rationale for Evaluation of Elders" (n.d.). Ironically, according to a former Brown Trail elder, a "reevaluation/ reaffirmation" proposal was suggested by one of the other elders in about 1985, but it was rejected on grounds that there was no scriptural authority for such a procedure!

[21]I differ with the assertion that the seven men of Acts 6 were deacons: (1) These men (by Miller's admission) were appointed before the church had any elders. It is not reasonable (not to say not scriptural) to envision a congregation (then or now) with deacons before it has elders or without elders. (2) If these seven men were deacons in the sense of Philippians 1:1 we have two sets of qualifications for their selection, one in Acts 6:3 and another in 1 Timothy 3:8-10, 12-13. Why so and which should we now use? (3) The use of a form of the Greek word *diakonos* in reference to the "Jerusalem seven" no more implies an "official" position than when used in reference to civil rulers (Rom. 13:4, 6) or to Phoebe (Rom. 16:1). However, as Miller notes, whether or not they were deacons does not negate the fact of the selection process set forth in Acts 6:3.

[22]Dub McClish, personal letter addressed to Goebel Music (May 23, 1990). I would add to this that if one is a member of a congregation in which elders begin to deviate from the Truth, whether into some form of liberalism or anti-ism, if they cannot be persuaded either to return to the Truth or to resign, then one should leave that congregation and seek one that is committed to the Truth.

[23]Garland Elkins, personal letter addressed to Goebel Music (May 14, 1990), used by permission.

[24]W. Terry Varner, personal letter addressed to Goebel Music (n.d., but received May 29, 1990), used by permission.

[25]Mac Deaver, personal letter addressed to Goebel Music (May 10, 1990), used by permission.

[26]Varner, letter.

[27]McClish, letter.

[28]Bill Jackson, personal letter addressed to Goebel Music (May 4, 1990), used by permission.

[29]Varner, letter.

[30]Cannon, p. 3.

[31]Cannon, p. 2.

[32]Philip C. Gould, 8-page letter to the Brown Trail elders (March 24, 1990), p. 5. Note: Brother Gould and his family are no longer members at Brown Trail.

[33]Robert R. Taylor, Jr., personal letter addressed to Goebel Music (June 20, 1990), p. 2, used by permission.

[34]Jackson, letter.

[35]Varner, letter.

[36]Elkins, letter.

[37]Deaver, letter.

[38]McClish, letter.