

We Have a Baton to Pass On!



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A close-up photograph showing two hands. The hand on the right is holding a white baton with a black grip, and the hand on the left is reaching out to receive it. The background is a solid blue color.

We have a baton to pass on ...

“In recent years the importance of having a biblical church government has become a central issue in many churches. Pastors study the New Testament and realize that their churches do not reflect what they find in Scripture. Church members likewise read their Bibles and wonder why their churches do not have elders or why the deacons rule the church instead of serve the church. In my opinion this awareness is both a good sign and a bad sign. It is a good sign because it is healthy when God’s people desire to be faithful and committed to His word. The Bible should be our standard for all faith and practice. But it is also a bad sign because it reveals that we have drifted from God’s model for the church and demonstrates that the church has lost confidence in the sufficiency of Scripture. Instead, we have patterned our churches after the successful, corporate model. Consequently, a return to a biblical model of government is desperately needed in the church today.”

Benjamin L. Merkle, *40 Questions About Elders and Deacons* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2008), 13.

A close-up photograph showing two hands. The hand on the right is holding a white baton with a black grip, and the hand on the left is reaching out to receive it. The background is a solid blue color.

... or do we have a baton to pass on?

“... there was no normative pattern of church government in the apostolic age, and the organizational structure of the church is not an essential element in the theology of the church.”

George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*
(Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 534.

... some are happy to let the baton go

F. F. Bruce commenting on Romans 6

“From this and other references to baptism in Paul’s writings, it is certain he did not regard baptism as an ‘optional extra’ in the Christian life, and that he would not have contemplated the phenomenon of an ‘unbaptized believer.’

We may agree or disagree with Paul, but we must do him the justice of letting him hold and teach his own beliefs, and not distort his beliefs into conformity with what we should prefer him to have said (This applies to many other subjects than Paul’s baptismal doctrine!)”

F. F. Bruce, *Romans*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 136.

Emphasis mine. Please note this is from a 1983 reprint of the first edition (1963). These statements by Bruce seem to have been omitted in later editions of the commentary.



... which baton are we carrying?

Four Pillars of Spiritual Authority

Scripture

Apostolic Authority

derived from the
Apostles' witness,
traditions and
interpretations of
the Christ Event
preserved in the
inspired Scriptures
(hermeneutics)

*Have You Not
Read? ...*

Tradition

Ecclesiastical Authority

derived from the
Church as the
temple of the Holy
Spirit and its
Bishops as the
custodians/sole
interpreters of truth
(sectarian loyalty)

*Apostolic
Succession*

Reason

Human Authority

derived from
objective human
ingenuity and
science;
vulnerable to
modern rationalism
and cultural
conformity

*Human
Wisdom*

Experience

Human Authority

derived from
subjective human
experience and
will; vulnerable
to recreating
God and religion
in one's own
image

*Mysticism,
Egocentrism*

A close-up photograph showing a hand on the left reaching out to receive a baton from a hand on the right. The baton is a light-colored, cylindrical object with a dark tip. The background is a solid dark blue.

We have a baton to pass on? ... Absolutely!

Beloved, while eagerly preparing to write to you about the salvation we share, I find it necessary to write and appeal to you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints.

Jude 3

Assuming the priority of Second Peter (c. AD 64 – 66), Jude was probably written in the period AD 66 – 85 (some 35 to 55 years after Pentecost AD 30)



We Have a Baton to Pass On

Beloved ... I find it necessary to write and appeal to you to contend for the faith that was once for all [hapax – of perpetual validity, as in Christ's sacrifice, Hebrews 9:28] entrusted to the saints.

4 For certain intruders have stolen in among you, people who long ago were designated for this condemnation as ungodly, who pervert the grace of our God into licentiousness and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ.

Jude 3-4

Orthopraxy: Right Conduct (ethical and liturgical)

... let us sin that grace may abound?

Orthodoxy: Right Doctrine (teachings and beliefs)

... denying the incarnation?

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*Thus says the LORD:
Stand at the crossroads, and look, and ask
for **the ancient paths**, where the good way
lies; and walk in it, and find rest for your
souls. But they said, “We will not walk in it.”*

Jeremiah 6:16

*You then, my child, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus;
2 and what you have heard from me through many witnesses
entrust to faithful people who will be able to teach others as
well ...*

maintenance

2 Timothy 2:1-2

*Beloved ... contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted
to the saints ...*

restoration

Jude 3



We Have a Baton to Pass On

Following the Trail of Authority: the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit, and the Apostles

*²⁵ “I have said these things to you while I am still with you. ²⁶ But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you ...
²⁶ “When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf. ²⁷ You also are to testify because you have been with me from the beginning ... ¹² “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. ¹³ When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth ... ²⁰ “I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, ²¹ that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.*

John 14:25-26; 15:26-27; 16:12-13; 17:20-21



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Following the Trail of Authority: the Apostle Paul

But we must always give thanks to God for you, brothers and sisters beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the first fruits for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and through belief in the truth. ¹⁴ For this purpose he called you through our proclamation of the good news, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.

*¹⁵ So then, brothers and sisters, **stand firm and hold fast to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by our letter.***

2 Thessalonians 2:13-15 (AD 51)

*Anyone who claims to be a prophet, or to have spiritual powers, must acknowledge that **what I am writing to you is a command of the Lord.***

*³⁸ **Anyone who does not recognize this is not to be recognized.***

1 Corinthians 14:37-38 (AD 56)



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The Apostle Peter helps us understand the transition from the oral to the written medium:

Therefore I intend to keep on reminding you of these things, though you know them already and are established in the truth that has come to you. ¹³ I think it right, as long as I am in this body, to refresh your memory, ¹⁴ since I know that my death will come soon, as indeed our Lord Jesus Christ has made clear to me.

¹⁵ And I will make every effort so that after my departure you may be able at any time to recall these things.

2 Peter 1:12-15 (c. AD 65)



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That's why Paul told churches to share his letters with one another:

Give my greetings to the brothers and sisters in Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house. ¹⁶ And when this letter has been read among you, have it read also in the church of the Laodiceans; and see that you read also the letter from Laodicea.

Colossians 4:15-16 (AD 62).

1 Clement (AD 95) citing Matthew, Luke, Romans, Hebrews and 1 Corinthians (and probably Acts, Ephesians, 1 Timothy, James and 2 Peter; and perhaps Revelation and 1 Peter. See <https://etimasthe.com/2018/02/14/clement-of-romes-new-testament/>)

Paul's writings were, after all, recognised as Scripture:

*So also our beloved brother Paul wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, ¹⁶ speaking of this as he does **in all his letters**. There are some things in them hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other scriptures.*

2 Peter 3:15-16 (c. AD 65)



We Have a Baton to Pass On

Jesus' Apostles and prophets set in place the *foundation* of God's household:

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, ²⁰ built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. ²¹ In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; ²² in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.

Ephesians 2:19-22 (AD 60)



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The Apostolic foundation *includes the church's organisation ...*

*I hope to come to you soon, but **I am writing these instructions to you so that,** ¹⁵ if I am delayed, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of **God**, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and bulwark of the truth.*

1 Timothy 3:14-15 (AD 63)

What instructions?

*The saying is sure: whoever aspires to the office of bishop desires a noble task. ² **Now a bishop must be ...**
⁸ **Deacons likewise must be ...***

1 Timothy 3:1-2, 8



We Have a Baton to Pass On

42. (1) The apostles received the gospel for us from the Lord Jesus Christ; Jesus the Christ was sent forth from God. (2) So then Christ is from God, and the apostles are from Christ. Both, therefore, came of the will of God in good order. (3) Having therefore received their orders and being fully assured by the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ and full of faith in the Word of God, they went forth with the firm assurance that the Holy Spirit gives, preaching the good news that the kingdom of God was about to come. (4) So, preaching both in the country and in the towns, they appointed their first fruits, when they had tested them by the Spirit, to be bishops [*episkopous*] and deacons [*diakonous*] for the future believers. (5) And this was no new thing they did, for indeed something had been written about bishops and deacons many years ago; for somewhere thus says the Scripture: “I will appoint their bishops in righteousness and their deacons in faith.”

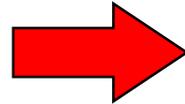
1 Clement cited in Francis A. Sullivan, S.J. *From Apostles to Bishops* (New York: The Newman Press, 2001), 94.



We Have a Baton to Pass On

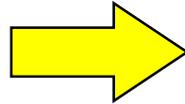
Father

Son



Trained & Commissioned the Apostles

Holy Spirit



Empowered & Guided the Apostles

“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.

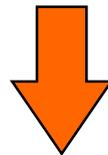
Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the

Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.”

Matthew 28:19-20



Apostolic Eye Witness (Twelve plus Paul)
Gospel heralded (Jesus' life, death, resurrection & Messiahship – incarnation, atonement, reign)



Apostolic Traditions

Gospel interpreted and applied (teaching and practice of the new covenant community)

Apostolic teaching initially oral; then in writing (Scripture). **The faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints in the first century AD is the same faith we have recorded and preserved in Scripture today. Our task is to contend for it and pass it on to the next generation!**



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“Not only does the New Testament record the existence of elders in numerous churches [from East to West], it also gives instruction about elders and to elders. In fact, the New Testament offers more instruction regarding elders than it does regarding such important church subjects as the Lord’s Supper, the Lord’s Day, baptism, and spiritual gifts. When you consider the New Testament’s characteristic avoidance of detailed regulation and church procedures (when it is compared to the Old Testament), the attention given to elders is amazing. “This is why,” writes Jon Zens, editor of the journal *Searching Together*, “we need to seriously consider the doctrine of eldership; it jumps out at us from the pages of the New Testament, yet it has fallen into disrepute and is not being practiced as a whole in local churches.””

Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership Booklet*, 32

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Elders are found in the churches of Judea and the surrounding area (Acts 11:30 prior to Herod Agrippa's death in AD 44; James 5:14 c. AD 46-49)

Elders governed the church in Jerusalem (Acts 15 c. AD 50): From the *singularity* (as in creation) of laying the foundation of the church by the Twelve (Acts 6) and prophets (Acts 13) to the *normative model* of government by elders (ministry of the word and prayer) and deacons (waiting on tables) and evangelists (church planters and nurturers)

Among the Pauline churches, leadership by a plurality of elders was established in the churches in:

- Derbe, Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch in Galatia (Acts 14:20-23)

A close-up photograph showing two hands. The hand on the right is holding a white baton with a blue ring near the top. The hand on the left is reaching out, with the index finger pointing towards the baton, as if to receive it. The background is a solid blue color.

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Pauline churches continued:

- Ephesus (Acts 20:17; 1 Timothy 3:1-7; 5:17-25)
- Philippi (Philippians. 1:1)
- “Setting things in order” on the island of Crete (Titus 1:5)

The general letter of 1 Peter assumes that elders existed in churches throughout north western Asia Minor: Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia (1 Peter 1:1; 5:1)

There is evidence that elders existed in churches in Thessalonica (1 Thessalonians 5:12) and in Rome (Hebrews 13:17)

1 Clement (AD 95) demonstrates that at the time of his writing the church in Corinth was governed by elders



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*Keep watch over yourselves and over all the flock, of which **the Holy Spirit** has made you **overseers**, to shepherd the church of God that he obtained with the blood of his own Son.*

Acts 20:28

The biblical model is the Holy Spirit's doing: Local church leadership by God's arrangement and according to God's criteria



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Selected Bibliography (recommended texts)

Merkle, Benjamin L. *40 Questions About Elders and Deacons*. Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2008.

Strauch, Alexander. *The Biblical Eldership Booklet: Restoring Eldership to its Rightful Place in the Church*. Littleton, CO: Lewis & Roth, 2004. This booklet is an abridgment of Alexander Strauch's book, *Biblical Eldership: An Urgent Call to Restore Biblical Church Eldership*. Colorado Springs, CO: Lewis & Roth, 2005. Expanded and revised, originally published in 1995. A free pdf copy of the booklet may be downloaded from: http://biblicaleldership.com/files/pdfs/BE_booklet.pdf

Sullivan, Francis A. *From Apostles to Bishops: The Development of the Episcopacy in the Early Church*. New York: The Newman Press, 2001.



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Restoration Writers

Anderson, Lynn. *They Smell Like Sheep*. West Monroe, LA: Howard, 1997.

Ferguson, Everett. *The Church of Christ: Biblical Ecclesiology for Today*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1996.

McGarvey, J. W. *A Treatise on the Eldership*. Chillicothe, OH: DeWard, 2010. Reprint of the original 1870 edition.

A book which is yet to be released that may prove to be a helpful resource for the development of church leaders:

Scharf, Greg R. & Kok, Arthur. *The New Elder's Handbook: A Biblical Guide to Developing Faithful Leaders*. Grand Rapids: Baker – available November 20, 2018.