

**Baptist Ecclesiology: A Faithful Application  
Of New Testament Principles**

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**Introduction**

Baptists are at an identity crossroads. A strong, distinct Baptist identity primarily remains in the memories of senior adult pastors and laymen. The vast majority of my generation in their late thirties and early forties are at a loss to understand any emphasis at all on being Baptist. This loss of appreciation for the Baptist heritage by Baptists is deeper and more fundamental than the removing of the name Baptist from church signs or bookstores. These actions are symptomatic of a pervasive condition within Baptist life; we are suffering from a self-induced denominational myopia. Most Baptists don't know their own heritage, and they cannot articulate what is unique and important about being Baptist. What has caused this condition? The cause is probably a culmination of various trends during the twentieth century, such as the complete loss of church discipline, theological liberalism, the church growth movement, pragmatism, the mega-church phenomenon, and post-modernity. All of these have contributed to a de-emphasis and de-valuing of Baptist distinctiveness and its importance to the Gospel.

Recent publications evidence an awakening of sorts in Baptist life to this present denominational identity crisis.<sup>1</sup> The specific crisis that has worked to bring about this recent flurry of activity is that more and more Baptist pastors and congregations have either implemented or are currently entertaining the idea of employing elders (ruling or leading) in addition to the traditional offices of pastors and deacons. This has served as the splash of cold water on the face of a theologically slumbering denomination. Baptist pastors and leaders are asking interesting questions about church polity. Many are wondering if an emphasis on Baptist identity is adverse to effective evangelism and church growth. Some are struggling with the historic differences between congregational and presbyterian church polities. Many are sincerely seeking to discern what the New Testament teaches concerning the polity of the local church.

This essay seeks to address these issues by examining the historical and biblical differences between the Baptist and Presbyterian traditions. After a brief overview of ecclesiological development in Christian history, this discussion narrows to these two differing Protestant groups for two reasons. First, an exhaustive examination of all the various Protestant traditions would be overly tedious, unnecessary, and too long. As distant cousins, Baptists share a more common ancestry with Presbyterians than other traditions, but like any extended family,

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<sup>1</sup>Recent publications from Broadman & Holman are *Who Rules the Church?: Examining Congregational Leadership and Church Government* by Gerald P. Cowen (2003), *More Than Just a Name: Preserving our Baptist Identity* by R. Stanton Norman (2001), and *Why I am a Baptist*, eds. Tom J. Nettles and Russell D. Moore (2001). Previous to these titles, Broadman & Holman released a revised version of James Sullivan's *Baptist Polity* in 1998. The Center for Church Reform recently published a collection of essays and historic documents, *Polity: Biblical Arguments on How to Conduct Church Life*, ed. Mark E. Dever (2001). In addition, The Baptist Standard Bearer is in the process of publishing a series of reprints entitled *The Baptist Distinctives Series*. Just a casual perusal of Southern Baptist literature about Baptist distinctiveness evidences the decline of denominational emphasis during the second half of the twentieth century, particularly the last twenty years. During the 1980s and 1990s most monographs concerning Baptist distinctiveness came from presses publishing moderate Baptist authors, such as Judson, Mercer, and Smyth and Helwys. Moody Press, not Southern Baptists, originally published the influential book *Baptists and the Bible* by L. Russ Bush and Tom J. Nettles in 1980. However, its 1999 revised edition was picked up by the new "more conservative" Broadman & Holman. The Sunday School Board (Convention Press) consistently published books and study guides on Baptist distinctives in the first half of the twentieth century. Currently, LifeWay offers *Basics for Baptists* (1989) discipleship curriculum. However, there is presently marginal concern for Baptist identity and doctrine reflected in LifeWay publications.

find their differences often significant. Differences between Baptists and Presbyterians are solely ecclesiological. Secondly, the current flirtation of some Baptist pastors and leaders with the elder-rule model makes this particular pairing not only historically relevant but of timely importance. A natural question arises because of the common Reformation commitments of the two traditions mixed with their ecclesiological differences. Which model is correct? Or for Baptists, the question is better stated: Which model is more congruent with biblical precedent? Herein lies the dilemma. A major reason that we continue to have disagreement in the area of ecclesiology is because no clear institutional model exists in the New Testament. George Eldon Ladd wrote, “The *ekklēsia* was not what it is today: an organized institution. It was a small, open fellowship of Jews within Judaism. . . . It is obvious that there is no uniform pattern of government in Acts.”<sup>2</sup> I agree with Ladd’s assessment. However, it is possible and beneficial to evaluate the Baptist and Presbyterian traditions by how well each incorporate certain New Testament principles that relate to the church. I believe a careful examination of the biblical witness reveals that Baptist polity conforms best to New Testament principles related to church organization and practice, but not to an explicit model. Furthermore, these principles have significant implications for creating the context in which the Gospel of Jesus Christ is most effectively proclaimed.

### **The Reformed and Baptist Traditions**

The Reformation of the sixteenth century challenged the hierarchical structure of authority of the Roman Catholic Church—a system of highly centralized organization that had a thousand years of tradition. This challenge was not easily made, and it did not happen without a significant spilling of blood. In the end European Christianity was no longer catholic.

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<sup>2</sup>George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 388-89.

Begrudgingly the Roman church and European authorities had to accept the reality of the new, multi-faceted face of Christianity. In short time these Protestants were discovering serious disagreements among themselves. Issues concerning the Lord's Supper, baptism, and church organization only headlined a long list of differences that began to emerge.

Two prominent streams of ecclesiology among Protestants that became dominant in this boiling cauldron of ideas were Presbyterianism and Congregationalism. The first is rooted in the Protestant church in Geneva led by John Calvin, which over time became specifically acknowledged as the Reformed tradition. Presbyterianism, as it was known in Britain and America, was further shaped by English Puritanism. The roots of Congregationalism are found in the broader movements of Anabaptism, English Separatism and English Puritanism, which all appear to have informed the Baptist tradition.

John Calvin introduced his *Articles concerning the Organization of the Church and Worship* to the ruling authorities of Geneva in 1537. Throughout the proposal, Calvin's emphasis was on his desire for the church in Geneva to follow the precepts of scripture in its organization and activity. He reiterated this in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* when he wrote, "He [Christ] alone should rule and reign in the church as well as having authority or pre-eminence in it, and this authority should be exercised and administered by his Word alone."<sup>3</sup>

According to Calvin, the Bible prescribed four offices for the government of the church. These included pastors, doctors, elders and deacons. In the *Institutes* Calvin references Ephesians 4:11 as a clear delineation of the governing positions within the church. This passage mentions apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers. Calvin contended that the first three of these offices were used at the beginning of Christ's kingdom, and he "now and again

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<sup>3</sup>John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, Library of Christian Classics, vol. 20 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), IV. III. 1

revives them as the need of the times demands.” The last two, pastors and teachers, he claims constitute “an ordinary office in the church.”<sup>4</sup> Teachers have the responsibility to give sound interpretation of scripture. Pastors have this duty as well, but also the responsibilities of discipline, administering the sacraments, and giving warnings and exhortations to the congregation.

Calvin asserted that the terms *episkopos* and *presbuteros* appear interchangeable in the New Testament. Bishop and elder, Calvin understood, were labels for “all who carry out the ministry of the Word.”<sup>5</sup> Within the broader title of bishop or elder are subcategories of pastor, teacher (doctor) and ruling elder. Pastors were the overseers and preachers of the congregation positioned at the top of the ecclesiastical hierarchy of Geneva. Doctors were men selected to teach doctrine. A Doctor of the church could be one selected to lecture in the Old or New Testament to adult men. However, a Doctor of the church could also be an instructor of children.

Calvin rejected the continuation of certain gifts mentioned in the New Testament, such as miracles, healing, and tongues.<sup>6</sup> However, in passages such as Romans 12:8 and 1 Corinthians 12:28, Calvin perceived evidence for his classification of governors and servants of the church. These two areas translate respectively into the positions of elders and deacons.

The governors of the church, or elders, are chosen from among the people and given charge with the pastors to rule the church with “jurisdiction over the correcting of faults.”<sup>7</sup> Elders were a group of men elected to serve as the moral watchdogs of the church. These were

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid., IV. III. 4.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>First Corinthians 12:28

<sup>7</sup>*Institutes*, IV. III. 8.

to be spiritual men whose primary job was “to keep an eye on everybody.” In Calvin’s church the elder’s role was distinctly linked to the church’s practice of discipline.

The servants of the church, or deacons, were of two kinds. The first relates to those “who give” and the second relates to those “who show mercy” of Romans 12:8. The first kind was given charge over benevolence in which goods or money was acquired and managed by the church for the poor and needy. In Geneva this duty included the management of the hospital of the city. The second kind of deacon was the one commissioned to go out to the homes and minister to the sick, poor, and needy.<sup>8</sup> These were the deacons who made house calls.

The primary concern for Calvin was order within the church. His application of the New Testament to church government was designed to create stability. In an age of disorder and uncertainty in the life of the church, Calvin sought a way in which to allow the people of God to manage effectively the affairs of the church. He wrote that “in the holy assembly, there is nothing in which order should be more diligently observed than in establishing government; for nowhere is there greater peril if anything be done irregular.”<sup>9</sup>

The 1647 Westminster Confession became the standard for the Reformed tradition. It contains a thorough treatment of the Presbyterian theological system. Concerning church polity the confession stresses two points. First, it validates the use of church censures, the primary role of a ruling elder, in matters of church discipline. Secondly, the confession affirms the use of synods and assemblies that can be called by civil or ecclesiastical authorities. These councils

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<sup>8</sup>These treasurer-like deacons were called procurators. Those who more directly ministered to needy people were called hospitallers.

<sup>9</sup>*Institutes*, IV. IV. 10.

work to edify the churches, settle controversies, and make rules concerning worship and government.<sup>10</sup>

The concept of congregational church polity is not unique to Baptists. However, the combination of a commitment to regenerate church membership, rejection of infant baptism in favor of believers' baptism by immersion, and a firm commitment to the separation of church and state, make up a unique ecclesiology. Baptists over the years have lived by the conviction that congregationalism is not only the best method of church government, but it is the New Testament model.

John Smyth's 1609 Short Confession of Faith in XX Articles possesses the congregational concept. Article thirteen states, "the church of Christ has power delegated to themselves of announcing the word, administering the sacraments, appointing ministers, disclaiming them, and also excommunicating; but the last appeal is to the brethren or body of the church."<sup>11</sup> In 1611 Thomas Helwys led a small group from the original group that had moved to Amsterdam under Smyth's leadership back to England. He had come to disagree with Smyth on some key issues. However, his Declaration of Faith demonstrates the same commitment to congregational polity. Helwys underscored the free nature of every congregation, stating "no church ought to challenge any prerogative over any other."<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, this confession claims that "the officers of every church or congregation are tied by office only to that particular congregation whereof they are chosen, and therefore they cannot challenge by office any authority in any other congregation whatsoever except they would have an Apostleship."<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>See Philip Schaff, ed., *The Creeds of Christendom*, vol. 3.

<sup>11</sup>William Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Valley Forge: Judson, 1959), 101.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, 120.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, 122.

Particular Baptist emerged more directly from English Separatism and held to the Calvinism of the Reformed tradition in contrast to the General Baptists who originated with Smyth and Helwys and evidenced significant influence from the Arminian Mennonites (Anabaptists). In spite of this soteriological difference, Particular Baptists like General Baptists maintained a congregational church polity. Both streams of Baptists embraced the free-church concept that no ecclesiastical pontiff, synod, or assembly should have any jurisdiction over a local church in doctrine or practice and that the church should be free from state interference. Although Baptists would organize associations of churches for support and consultation with local congregations, they never came to rule over the independent congregations in most cases.<sup>14</sup>

As Baptists emerged in the seventeenth century, they consistently adhered to the free-church concept, meaning that the church should exist outside the jurisdiction of the state government. They also maintained a commitment to local autonomy. Baptists also consistently recognized the validity of the universal and invisible church of the redeemed collected into local and visible congregations.

Concerning the number and kinds of officers in the church, the Baptist tradition has generally insisted on two. Article twenty of the General Baptist Declaration of Faith asserts, “That the officers of every church or congregation are either Elders, who by their office especially feed the flock concerning their souls . . . or Deacons, men and women who by their office relieve the necessities of the poor and impotent brethren concerning their bodies.”<sup>15</sup> However, it is not surprising that the Particular Baptists early on followed the Reformed ecclesiology concerning the various offices of the church. The 1644 London Confession lists

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<sup>14</sup>English General Baptists had the tendency to be more connected and allow more associational intrusion of the local church.

pastors, teachers, elders and deacons as the ordinary offices of the church. Some of the early American Baptist churches had pastors, teachers, elders and deacons. Over time, however, the function of the elder merged with that of the deacon and the distinction of non-preaching teachers vanished as well. By the time of the 1677 Second London Confession (also evidenced in the 1689 confession) the Administrative offices of the church had been reduced to “Bishops or Elders [interchangeable terms] and Deacons.”<sup>16</sup> In America, the Philadelphia and New Hampshire Confessions follow the Second London Confession exactly concerning the number of offices in the church.

Before 1820 it was not uncommon for some Baptist churches to utilize a plurality of eldership. These congregations viewed the elders as equal in their office but different in their duties. Some elders were charged with pastoral duties and some with administrative leadership of the church. However, even within congregations with lay elders, ultimate authority resided in the congregation corporately.<sup>17</sup> Charles Haddon Spurgeon’s Metropolitan Baptist Tabernacle employed the use of elders when most Baptist churches did not. In Spurgeon’s congregation the elders were charged with the duties of examining candidates for church membership, inquiring into absentee members, looking into matters for church discipline, caring for the sick, conducting prayer meetings and catechesis classes, and overseeing evangelistic efforts. However, these elders performed their duties in the context of congregational polity and were not ordained. In fact, Spurgeon rejected the practice of ordination altogether. He believed that the manner in which ordination was commonly practiced, with the participation of a council of properly

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<sup>15</sup>Lumpkin, 122-23.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 287.

<sup>17</sup>See Greg Wills’ essay “The Church: Baptists and Their Churches in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries” in *Polity: Biblical Arguments on How to Conduct Church Life*, ed. Mark Dever (Washington DC: Center of Church Reform, 2001).

ordained pastors from various churches, detracted from congregational authority and implied a kind of apostolic succession in which authority was passed from one minister to another instead of through the congregation.<sup>18</sup>

Southern Baptists began as a denomination in 1845. Since that time they have created and endorsed three editions of the *Baptist Faith and Message*. The original confession of 1925 was general and brief in its article on the church, but stated that the offices of the church were bishops, or elders (interchangeable terms), and deacons. The 1963 revision added the phrases “autonomous body” and “democratic process,” designating the offices of the church to be pastors and deacons. The only significant change in the 2000 revision in the article on the church was the addition of limiting the office of the pastor to men.

Baptists throughout the generations of their existence have also consistently held to a congregationalism conducted with democratic governance. The Second London Confession prescribed that ministers be selected by “the common suffrage of the church itself.”<sup>19</sup> Although the Second London Confession was patterned on the 1647 Westminster Confession, Baptists removed the chapters on church censures (ruling elders) and on synods and councils. Instead they emphasized the helpfulness of churches working in association for edification and advice, but not in such a way that an elite council or synod could exercise control over a local congregation. From their beginning Baptists have held some variation concerning the titles employed and number of offices used in the church, but have been steadfastly committed to the local church’s independence from state or synod control. And at least in theory Baptist have believed that local autonomy should be exercised through a democratic process.

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<sup>18</sup>Greg Wills, “The Ecclesiology of Charles H. Spurgeon: Unity, Orthodoxy, and Denominational Identity,” *Baptist History and Heritage* 34 (Sum-Fall 1999): 68-69.

<sup>19</sup>Lumpkin, 287.

### **Guiding Principles for Church Authority And Organization**

Instead of examining the typical proof texts from the Bible that Baptist and Presbyterians typically offer to support their tradition, I will submit candidly that I believe that the arguments from both positions tend to rest on implications and not explicit models easily observed. Therefore, I believe it is more helpful to proceed to a principle-based ecclesiology.<sup>20</sup> E. C. Dargan made an astute observation. He wrote, “Our first duty is frankly to consider the difficulties of the subject . . . It is very hard, if not impossible, to avoid carrying back to the New Testament the ideas of later times, according to the point of view of the investigator.”<sup>21</sup> If an explicit model is not evident in the New Testament, then possibly an acknowledgement of and adherence to key biblical principles concerning the church would be more beneficial and lead us to appreciate the better tradition for all the right reasons.

It is evident from scripture that the Baptist rejection of infant baptism is valid. It also clear that congregationalism (i.e. independency) is the New Testament pattern. There is no evidence of any kind of centralized system of organization that exercised any jurisdiction over the churches. However, to claim that pastors and deacons are the *only* valid ecclesiastical positions that can be used, and that democratic rule, with its modern connotation within the local congregation, is explicit in the New Testament is misguided. These arguments ultimately rest upon inferences but cannot conclusively be demonstrated from the New Testament itself. As evidenced in the Reformed tradition, some churchmen have inferred a different kind of church organization from various New Testament passages.

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<sup>20</sup>Baptists often refer to Acts 6:1-6 as proof for a democratic congregationalism. Presbyterians tend to appeal to 1 Timothy 5:17 for their validation of ruling elders.

<sup>21</sup>Edwin Charles Dargan, *Ecclesiology: A Study of the Churches* (Louisville: Charles T. Dearing, 1905), 70.

What is evident in the New Testament is the fact that the primitive church was dedicated to the teaching and leadership of the Apostles. It is also clear that various roles within the church were recognized, such as pastor, teacher, deacon, evangelist, prophet and so forth. In addition, other passages describe roles related to persons' spiritual gifts, resources, and abilities. It is these relationships that are emphasized in the New Testament as a whole rather than any particular form of organization. At this earliest point in the history of the church, it is anachronistic to speak of the church as an institution at all. Christianity was a movement but not yet institutionalized. A community of believers submitted themselves to the Apostles. Over time, institutionalization was inevitable. However, these became largely human constructs determined by many factors other than explicit biblical precedent. In fact, a study of church history indicates that sociological factors tend to contribute substantially to any Christian tradition's organization.<sup>22</sup> As the Reformed tradition remained closer to the mentality of the Middle Ages in its understanding of the relationship between the church and state, it developed a form of centralized church government that continued to maintain some control over individual congregations. Baptists embraced the sentiment of the free-church movement launched by the radical Anabaptists. Both sides claimed that their ecclesiology sprang simply from the application of the New Testament.

The current debate within Baptist life over proper church government should be refocused. Those with competing views should stop simply defending or advancing their opinions by stretching the credulity of their exegesis and application of scripture to the point of embarrassment. It would be better to operate from a different, albeit more open-minded perspective. One can identify principles contained in the New Testament that would guide

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<sup>22</sup>A critical study of Christian history reveals the fact that sociological factors in addition to religious concerns have always played a part in giving the particular shape to specific movements (e.g. superstition, politics,

churches to establish a system of government that is at least not adversarial to the New Testament witness. The approach would avoid a “cookie cutter” mandate in regards to the organization and administration of every Baptist church. Such an approach would charge Baptist pastors and congregations to be faithful to the important core principles of ecclesiology but would also grant them the freedom to be creative and even pragmatic in the details. The following are the principles.

### The Apostolic Principle

As evidenced in the New Testament, the first generation of Christians naturally looked to the leadership of the Apostles. Although Paul was not an original apostle, the Christian communities did come to recognize overwhelmingly his self-proclaimed apostleship as legitimate. After the apostles' deaths, their writings began to be regarded as sacred among Christians. Their gospels and letters were the next best thing to having them physically present. Their word was God's word. The primary reason a writing was eventually canonized as scripture was because of its believed authentic apostolic origin. Today, as Baptists boldly proclaim *sola scriptura*, they do so not merely as a rejection of the Roman Catholic tradition, which they deem erroneous. A fidelity to the final authority of the Bible is *the* way of continuing that recognized, God-ordained apostolic teaching and authority that so much characterized the commitment of the earliest Christians. When Baptists truly seek to order their churches corporately and live personally by God's Word alone, they are incorporating the principle of apostolic leadership.

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anti-clericalism, moral corruption, nationalism, enlightenment philosophy, etc.).

### The Principle of Orderliness

Secondly, the New Testament places significant emphasis on the importance of orderliness. The history of the church contained in Acts testifies to this fact. In that record the leadership of the Apostles provided this order. The apostle Paul consistently stressed the importance of order in worship and ministry to the first-century churches. This is demonstrated most conspicuously in 1 Corinthians. A church without proper order runs the greater risk of theological error and inappropriate conduct among its membership.

### The Whole Body Principle

Another important principle is the participation of the whole congregation in service. Passages such as Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12 may implicitly suggest roles within the church. Calvin interpreted some of these roles as descriptive of various offices. One may speculate over the continuance of all the roles, but what remains certain is that the church is pictured as a body in which each part has a service to contribute to the whole. In Romans 12:6, God commands every believer to exercise his or her gifts as part of the body.

### The Principle of Individual Competency and Responsibility

A fourth consideration is the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. This key idea of the Reformation era is a biblical principle that should inform ecclesiology. Each believer has the capacity to relate personally to God directly in prayer, worship, and study of the Bible. In addition, every Christian is personally responsible to God for his or her obedience and rendered service in the Kingdom's work through the church. Individually, believers are competent to come before God directly, and likewise they are individually accountable to God. But this

individualism is granted in the context of and subservient to the Christian community—the church, which proclaims the Gospel and protects its integrity.

### The Principle of Shared Leadership and Service

A final principle is found in the use and application of the title elder. The term *elder* is the most commonly used label in the New Testament in reference to a specific role within the organization of the church. It appears that New Testament congregations existed with a plurality of elders to lead them.<sup>23</sup> The dominant use of this term in the New Testament makes perfect sense when one considers the background of the writings and that the term *elder* was already an established position of honor and leadership among Jews. The Jewish meaning of the word was carried over to the New Testament church. The special use of the word lies in its connotation of experience, wisdom, maturity, and strength of judgment.<sup>24</sup> This reality should point the Baptist pastor of today to the idea of shared authority and responsibility within the church. This principle should direct him to avoid the all-to-familiar autocratic mentality in regards to the pastorate. In addition to local autonomy, the God-called pastor of a Baptist church should handle his calling with care and understand that, although he has a unique place of service, he still shares authority and responsibility with every member of the church in a work that is, above all, a spiritual work.

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<sup>23</sup>Gerald P. Cowen in *Who Rules the Church? Examining Congregational Leadership and Church Government* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2003) correctly points out that the historical context of the first-century church was vastly different from that of twenty-first century churches. The church today no longer has the unity of the first-century fellowship. Baptist churches (and others) all have their own properties and individual identities in any given town or city in the United States. He cites these differences for support for the present model of a single pastor-elder. According to Cowen, a multiplicity of elders does not work now primarily because of the lack of unity among churches and the fact that churches possess their own properties, which in turn has led to less unity. He believes, however, than even in the New Testament there tended to be one “senior” pastor-elder among the plurality of leadership. Although Cowen’s observations are well made, the principle of shared leadership still remains despite the different historical contexts. A true biblical principle transcends issues of cultural context.

<sup>24</sup>Dargan, 85.

### **Applying the Principles From Without and Within**

The ultimate commitment of a Baptist church ought to be to the Word of God. God revealed himself and his purpose through the person and work of Jesus Christ and established his church through the work of the Apostles. The first-century Christians understood that in order to be obedient to Christ, they had to heed the instruction or rebuke of the apostles of the Lord. When Baptists place the Bible at the center of authority, then they are applying themselves to the apostolic teaching above any man-made traditions or rules. Frankly, this is the greatest challenge for any evangelical church that claims *sola scriptura*, including Baptist churches.

The churches of Christ should possess order in their worship and work. This order rests greatly in the structure of its human leadership. This principle does not mandate any particular form of church organization. An episcopal, presbyterian, or congregational organization is capable of demonstrating orderliness. Furthermore, the church should encourage and empower every member to exercise his or her spiritual gifts in the areas of service and leadership. Again, each tradition can argue that within its given structure believers have opportunity to participate. The biblical principle of the priesthood of all believers disqualifies an episcopal form of church government. The idea of spiritual “middle men” is not congruent with this teaching of the New Testament. A presbyterian or congregational structure can account for this principle. However, a congregational ecclesiology best inculcates this principle, allowing the community of believers to discern freely the will of God for the ministry of the congregation by maintaining complete independence.

These principles are less applicable to the internal order of a local congregation. Whether a church should include only pastors and deacons, such as the vast majority of Baptist churches throughout history, or pastors, deacons, and ruling elders, such as a Presbyterian church lies

beyond the explicitly clear teaching of scripture. The New Testament, although mentioning all these labels, offers no neat organizational system. Arguments of both traditions rest on inferences drawn from passages that mention these designations. As has been noted, some Baptist congregations, such as Spurgeon's church, did employ a special office in addition to pastor and deacon called elder. However, these elders were never the ruling type and did not undermine congregational polity.

Another key element in the debate over local church organization concerns the democratic principle. Does the New Testament teach that a local church is to employ a democratic method for its governance? Americans readily assume that independency of local congregations necessitates democratic rule from within. However, this is a conditioned attitude inseparable from Americanism which emerged in the context of the Enlightenment. R. Stanton Norman has clearly articulated that the bias within the Baptist tradition toward an individualistic, democratic principle is primarily Enlightenment thought. When church members begin to downplay the integral nature of prayer, Spirit-led consensus, and obedience to the Bible under the leadership of God-called servant-leaders, congregationalism becomes less Biblical and more American (i.e. Enlightenment).<sup>25</sup>

The word *democracy* itself imports the overriding connotation of the simple majority rule mentality. In America, this word became a nationalistic and sacred term that naturally found fertile soil in churches employing a congregational polity. The concept of government that exists by the consent of the people and for the good of the people resonated with congregational churches. Over time a certain amount of corruption of biblical congregationalism took place. The fundamental understanding for the need for a democratic process shifted. Pre-Americanized

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<sup>25</sup>See chapter seven "A Distinctive Polity" in R. Stanton Norman, *More Than Just a Name: Preserving our Baptist Identity* (Nashville: Broadman, 2001).

Baptists understood that democratic polity was crucial for ensuring that the congregation had the freedom to elect responsibly and corporately their ministers and administer rightly the essential observances of the church (baptism, communion, and discipline). Later, this understanding was replaced with a new emphasis on the individual rights and privileges of the members within the congregation as the fundamental reason for a democratic process. This shift occurred subtly, naturally, and uncritically. Although Baptist confessions give ample evidence that, as independent congregations, Baptist churches have elected their own ministers, many older confessions made a point to stress the necessity of fasting and praying during the process by all its members. Only after such a commitment to genuine spiritual searching was a congregation to elect and then lay hands on (ordain) a pastor or deacon.<sup>26</sup> Although a Baptist congregation did ultimately vote to make important decisions for the whole, it was consensus that was sought after. Baptist churches have always been congregational with a democratic process, but they have not always been democracy run amuck. Greg Wills has observed among antebellum Baptist churches that, “In matters on which members differed, they felt it their duty to declare their views and their reasons for them. But they sought consensus. The minority typically yielded to the will of the majority, usually without complaint or bitterness.”<sup>27</sup>

Most Baptist churches perceive democratic polity as biblical, although few if any actually constitute a pure democracy. At best most Baptist churches are led by chosen representatives entrusted with varies degrees of decision-making power. Major decisions may include the consent of the whole congregation. However, in larger churches this consent is typically a mere formality. It is not unusual for long standing members of a Baptist church that has experienced

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<sup>26</sup>For example, see the 1611, *A Declaration of Faith*, article 21, the 1651 *Faith and Practice of Thirty Congregations*, article 73, the 1654 *The True Gospel Faith*, article 23, the 1656 *Somerset Confession*, article 31, and the 1678 *Orthodox Creed*, article 31.

significant growth to become uncomfortable and even put out with that growth because their individual voice no longer stands out as it once did. The earliest Baptist confessions urged that each person in a congregation be acquainted with all the members of the church, admonishing a congregation not to allow itself to become too large. This instruction was not for the protection of individual rights, but to maintain an environment conducive to proper fellowship, nurture, and discipline.<sup>28</sup> The polity of the mega-church would seem strange indeed to our Baptist forefathers and clearly counterproductive to a healthy congregationalism, not because it de-emphasizes individualism, but because it logistically removes the possibility for real theological and moral accountability and discipline.<sup>29</sup>

### **Considerations for the Future**

Looking backward can be helpful for clarifying issues in the present. Clarifying issues in the present helps chart a more faithful future. Baptist polity is not surprisingly a current hot topic within the Southern Baptist Convention. The problem is not primarily the fact that the present generation in their thirties and forties are overwhelmingly uninformed about Baptist distinctiveness, but that they perceive that concern about Baptist distinctives is odd. Baptists have succumbed in large numbers to the temptation to downplay Baptist identity. Certainly, part of this reality is because of the so-called marketing strategies employed by large “contemporary”

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<sup>27</sup>Wills, essay “The Church: Baptists and Their Churches in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries” 26.

<sup>28</sup>See Helwys’ *Declaration of Faith*, article 16.

<sup>29</sup>The combination of this distortion of biblical congregationalism by American democratization and the total loss of church discipline, which has effectively eliminated any concern for genuine regenerate church membership, is probably largely responsible for the current appeal of an elder ruled polity for some Baptist pastors. Elder rule may seem to offer a pastor a small group of truly spiritually-minded individuals, allowing him to circumvent the typically shallow, apathetic, and at times contentious Baptist congregation. This problem tends to be magnified in larger churches. In addition, large churches simply pose a logistical challenge to congregationalism. Some pastors probably believe that a body of ruling elders might be a better paradigm of authority in such a context. These observations would be interesting areas for further investigation.

churches and the smaller ones aspiring to be like them. However, another part can be attributed to the general lack of appreciation for the importance of a distinctly Baptist ecclesiology in the churches. Baptists have lost their appreciation for the significance of knowing why one chooses to be Baptist. In truth, most Baptists are Baptists not because they believe in the correctness of Baptist beliefs. The postmodern impulse has driven a mentality and spirituality that devalues distinctiveness, views it primarily as a hindrance to growth, and interprets it as socially repugnant. However, the time has come for more distinctiveness, not less. The temptation of young (and sometimes not-so-young) pastors is to buy into the idea that a weak identity is best for reaching a postmodern generation. The mission today is to save individuals who are drowning in a tumultuous sea of religious and moral relativism. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is distinctive. It is specific in what the problem is (sin), what a person must receive, believe, and do (repent of sin and have faith in Christ), and concerning the consequences of faith and unbelief (eternal life and hell).

A Baptist church that downplays its own identity will most likely find ways to downplay the more unpalatable aspects of the Gospel, such as sin, repentance, obedience, and hell. A distinct Baptist ecclesiology is important. A church that knows who it is and why, will be much more likely to ensure that the Gospel remains at the forefront of all its worship and ministry. R. Albert Mohler, Jr. identifies three pillars of Baptist identity. These are the integrity of the Gospel, the authority of the Bible, and the New Testament church (congregationalism).<sup>30</sup> I have attempted to demonstrate in this essay from history and the Bible that Baptist ecclesiology is the most faithful application of New Testament principles among the various traditions birthed from the period of the Reformation. Mohler correctly contends that “Baptist congregationalism is an

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<sup>30</sup>R. Albert Mohler, Jr. “Being Baptist Means Conviction,” in *Why I Am a Baptist*, eds. Tom J. Nettles and Russell D. Moore (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2001), 58-64.

exercise in bringing ourselves under the submission to the Word of God—not in exercising our own authority in the place of Scripture.”<sup>31</sup> Baptist ecclesiology did not grow from clear, biblical mandates and rules in regards to church organization; it emerged as older traditions were rejected because of their lack of congruency with scripture and as ecclesiological issues were brought into greater focus through the lens of scripture. In addition, Baptists rejected even their distant English Puritan cousins, the Presbyterians, because of their continued adherence to infant baptism and preference for non-congregational church polity. Although Baptists would continue to appreciate much and still hold much in common with Presbyterians, they found that their own true distinctiveness was in ecclesiological issues, and these issues mattered.

Inevitably, as traditions solidify they institutionalize. The New Testament does not evidence an explicit model for church organization. But institutionalization is inevitable as a movement becomes a tradition. However, the institution that is created in the tradition often goes beyond the principles upon which the movement was founded. Because of this dilemma of institutionalized Christianity, one should adopt a paradigm based upon the clear biblical principles that are evident. Biblical fidelity, shared leadership, congregational autonomy, and individual competency and responsibility should be the areas of major concern for a church. These principles safeguard the integrity of the Gospel and its proclamation better than any man-made institution. An unabashed commitment to the authority of scripture should preclude all other concerns. Baptists should sincerely seek to know what they should believe, what they should be doing, and what their churches should look like if they are in obedience to the Word of God. Godly servant-leaders who understand that church is not a one-man show should foster a spirit of true fellowship in the work of the Gospel. Each congregation should be free to follow directly the Lord’s leadership, without interference from the outside. Each church should

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<sup>31</sup>Ibid., 63.

embody the teaching that each voluntary member of a church is spiritually capable and responsible. A democratic process helps best facilitate these principles, but it must be a guarded democracy. In a Baptist church democracy should connote responsibility, not the selfish assertion of privilege and individual rights. The Baptist tradition of congregational church polity is superior to Presbyterianism, not because it is explicitly more biblical in its rejection of elder as a ministerial office, but because it encapsulates key biblical principles related to the church, most importantly local autonomy. In the end, the principles of congregationalism are more congruent with Scripture and tend to work better, although certainly not flawlessly since the participants themselves continue to be fallible sinners, and like every generation of Christians, subject to cultural whims.

Careful attention to a principled church polity is crucial for Baptists. At the heart of what we do is the integrity of the Gospel itself. Baptists have historically maintained that a properly ordered church is essential for the proclamation of the true Gospel. The problem today is that many Baptists do not believe this. But consider the importance of such ecclesiological matters. When we compromise the fundamentals of Baptist identity, we run the real risk of undermining the proclamation of the true Gospel. When the Bible is not upheld as the inerrant and authoritative Word of God, liberalism finds a foothold and will ultimately piece by piece dispense with the Gospel. When believers' baptism is not properly understood and applied in our churches, then young children are brought to the water too early and given a false sense of security through a religious work. When the practice of constructive church discipline with a view toward restoration disappears, then believers no longer hold each other theologically and morally accountable and the witness of the church suffers. When elder rule is substituted for congregation rule, then Baptists have charted a course toward abdicating their biblically charged

duty to be fully participating and responsible parts of the whole body of believers. A true Baptist ecclesiology safeguards these crucial teachings of scripture. I believe a rediscovery of these principles in current Baptist life will create a healthy environment for the proclamation of the Gospel and help solve our post-modern identity crisis.