

Ecclesiology: An Essential for Missionaries

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Introduction

Missionary work requires application of biblical principles of ecclesiology. A number of questions should be answered to have clarity about this topic. Who is a missionary? What does the word *missions* really mean? What biblical passage, if any, is appropriate for this topic? What general characteristic of the American context has caused problems in the application of biblical ecclesiology? What aspects of ecclesiology have been neglected by American evangelicals, including Southern Baptists? How can American evangelicals, particularly Southern Baptists, better utilize biblical principles of ecclesiology?

In one sense, every Christian is a missionary. In the technical sense, however, a missionary is long-term, cross-cultural worker who is obeying the Great Commission. As American neighborhoods have become more diverse in culture and race, many Christians have started thinking like overseas missionaries. They have noticed various cultural and racial groups in their sphere of influence. Too, they have learned key missionary principles necessary for strategizing to reach those groups effectively. General biblical principles (e.g., ecclesiological principles found in the New Testament) should be used everywhere, but one specific method will probably not fit every context.

To some people, the word *missions* can mean doing anything that is considered to be good, especially social ministry. The key emphasis of the New Testament is not on social ministry, but on the Great Commission. Whether serving as cross-cultural missionaries overseas or in America, Christians must view the Great Commission as providing their primary marching orders.

The Great Commission is the appropriate biblical passage for the topic of ecclesiology because it makes the need for a properly functioning church abundantly clear: “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”¹ To obey this command completely, missionaries must understand and emphasize the role of the local church in evangelism, baptism, and teaching.

Many Americans are quite individualistic in orientation. A healthy dose of individualism can be a good thing. Such individualists are willing to fight for freedom and can make important decisions without being unduly influenced by other people. On the other hand, to be overly individualistic can be harmful to the individual and the local church.

American Christians can inadvertently neglect the role of the group in evangelism, baptism, and teaching.² The neglect of the role of the group has led to a neglect of ecclesiology, which describes proper group function. An overly individualistic orientation can be problematic in the American context, and it can be even more problematic in group-oriented contexts abroad.

According to recent (June 28, 2016) LifeWay research, unchurched Americans “are happy to talk about religion and often think about the meaning of life,” but they “are mostly indifferent to organized religion.”³ This indifference to the group (i.e., organized religion) adversely affects evangelism and discipleship. Stefan Paas explained that individualization

“began in the 1960s” in Europe and that the “term marks the process through which individuals increasingly escape the grip of institutions and communities.”⁴

Paas used an analogy relevant to America today: “Many people treat the church like a restaurant. . . . A church that was once experienced as an obligation is increasingly considered to be one place among many to facilitate religious appetites.”⁵ Thus, overly individualistic Americans often view themselves as consumers of religious products produced by the paid ministers at local churches. Some Americans are looking for an authentic Christian community, but they are not finding it in churches where the members are viewed as consumers rather than as workers who have group-related responsibilities.

Raymond E. Carroll examined the writings (including the ecclesiological views) of J. L. Dagg, J. R. Graves, E. Y. Mullins, W. T. Conner, Herschel Hobbs, and Frank Stagg. Carroll concluded that individualism has been noticeable in the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) since its founding, but he also concluded that individualism has been “detectable in greater degrees” in the second era (1901-1945) of the SBC’s history.⁶ Interestingly, the SBC’s growth rate (percent change in local church membership) has steadily declined since 1950.⁷ In many American churches, including some SBC churches, the role of the group has been deemphasized in the areas of evangelism, baptism, and teaching. Good understanding and application of biblical ecclesiology will strengthen the role of the group in these areas.

The Role of the Group in Evangelism

The Greek participle translated as “go” is a participle of attendant circumstance.⁸ It has the same imperative force as “make disciples.” Thus, it calls for intentionality rather than merely waiting for opportunities to present themselves. Many American churches no longer have specific times set aside each week for members to gather and go in teams to evangelize non-Christians intentionally. Instead, a common attitude can be described as follows: “Christians should gather on Sunday mornings to get their spiritual batteries recharged as a group, but during the rest of the week they should function as individuals and take advantage of any opportunities for one-on-one evangelism that might appear.” Indeed, Christians should take advantage of unexpected opportunities for one-on-one evangelism, but they should also set aside time during a typical week to gather with their fellow church members to do intentional evangelism. In many cases, unexpected opportunities are missed because Christians focus their attention on other activities rather than being intentionally evangelistic.

Practical reasons exist for working as a group in evangelism. When an individual Christian does door-to-door evangelism or approaches an unknown person in a public place, a Christian can be subject to accusations and can be more vulnerable to physical attack than when with other Christians. Christians are wise to follow the New Testament examples of Jesus’ disciples working in pairs and of Paul working alongside Barnabas, Silas, and other Christians.

Church leaders, especially pastors, should set the example in evangelism. If a pastor does not set a good example, few members will evangelize. Pastors and missionaries wisely follow Paul’s admonition for Timothy to “do the work of an evangelist” (2 Tim. 4:5). Unfortunately, many pastors and missionaries have not been properly trained to evangelize. A cursory look at websites of accredited, evangelical seminaries in America reveals few professors of evangelism. Many seminaries do not require their students to evangelize while in seminary. Few seminary professors go with their students to evangelize on a regular basis. Obviously, a pastor or

missionary with little experience and training in evangelism will have great difficulty building an evangelistic church.

The biblical roles of the pastor and the missionary evangelist are key elements of ecclesiology (Eph. 4:11-12).⁹ Ephesians 4:12 clarifies that the Lord gave these roles “for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ.” If the pastor and the missionary are unable to equip Christians to evangelize, then they will be unable to build an evangelistic church. Christians who refuse to evangelize are stunted in their spiritual growth and are not being built up as individuals.

Small groups that meet for Bible study in a local church also have an important role to play in evangelism. For many years, Southern Baptists understood that the primary purposes of Sunday Schools are to reach and teach. They knew that inviting non-Christians to a small-group Bible study is a good way to evangelize non-Christians. Although doing evangelism outside the walls of church buildings is essential, Christians can more easily do immediate follow-up with new converts whom they already know. Baptism and teaching naturally follow when people surrender their lives to Christ in repentance and faith in the context of a Sunday School class or other small group. Unfortunately, many SBC churches no longer emphasize the evangelistic function of Sunday School.

In small-group gatherings, leaders are responsible for sound teaching and evangelism. Pastors, nominating committees, and overseas missionaries should follow Paul’s instructions to Timothy: “The things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, entrust these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also” (2 Tim. 2:2). Selection and training of leaders are important. Leaders, especially Sunday School teachers, should not be new converts, and they should be carefully examined before being placed into a position of leadership. Pastors and nominating committees have learned the hard way that leaving a leadership position vacant is far better than filling the position with an unsuitable person.

Pastors should model sound exegesis and also evangelism in their sermons. At the end of each Sunday morning sermon, pastors should take about five minutes to explain thoroughly the plan of salvation. This procedure is necessary for three reasons: (1) Non-Christians will likely be present to hear the sermon, and a divine appointment may ensue if the plan of salvation is thoroughly explained; (2) Christians will memorize the plan of salvation when they hear it every Sunday morning, and they will be better prepared to share it with other people; (3) Sunday School teachers will learn how to transition to the plan of salvation in their lessons by seeing the pastor do it on a regular basis in his sermons. This procedure is homiletically sound. The pastor should be able to transition from any sermon topic to the plan of salvation. These same reasons apply to overseas missionaries who should model sharing the plan of salvation in their preaching and small-group teaching assignments.

Long-term church planting missionaries have to decide when evangelistic Bible studies are ready to become local churches. Sound ecclesiology is crucial in these decisions. Unfortunately, some missiologists have advocated using new converts as leaders in areas where few, if any, mature Christians exist. Some of them have argued that Ephesus was a well-established church and that the prohibition on new converts serving as pastors only applies to such churches (1 Tim. 3:6).¹⁰ They argue that there were only new converts on Crete, and thus Paul did not place the same prohibition on the Cretans (Titus 1:5-9).¹¹ Their argument for using new converts as pastors has been thoroughly refuted.¹² Under no circumstances should new converts serve as pastors.

Certainly, new converts can and should be trained quickly to share the plan of salvation. In some cases, however, a mature Christian is needed to deal with special situations. For example, some heretical groups can trick a new convert into thinking that these cults are Christian groups. David Sills explained, “Missionaries report that evangelicals in China are losing ten thousand house churches every year to cults because their church leaders have no theological training. They cannot teach or defend what orthodox Christianity holds to be true.”¹³

If a new convert encounters a cult member, the new convert may need help from a well-trained pastor or other mature Christian who will recognize the theological errors of the cult. The new convert may think the cult member is a Christian and is not in need of evangelism. Paul explained the theological vulnerability of new converts when he said that “we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming” (Eph. 4:14). In contrast, a pastor should be “holding fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, so that he will be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict” (Titus 1:9).

Similar to the situation overseas, decision counselors in American churches should be mature Christians so they can discern whether a person who wants to join the church “by letter” from another SBC church is really a Christian. If churches are serious about having regenerate church membership, then such a screening process is essential. Decision counselors cannot assume that all people who were members of other churches are Christians. This screening process is of course also warranted for those people who want to join the church “by statement.” If decision counselors determine that the person who desires to join by letter or statement is not a Christian, they tactfully can share the plan of salvation during the same counseling session or refer the person to the pastor or other members who have expertise dealing with special cases.

Another relevant group context is the evangelistic campaign. Extensive preparation by local churches is necessary for successful evangelistic campaigns. Church members make lists of prospects, pray for them in groups as well as in individual contexts, build or renew loving relationships with them, and eventually invite them to hear evangelistic preaching. Unfortunately, many churches no longer utilize evangelistic campaigns such as revival meetings.

Overseas, missionaries have successfully worked with national Christians to organize evangelistic campaigns in local churches. Such campaigns have produced much fruit, but sometimes are very difficult in contexts where there is little if any freedom of religion.

The Role of the Group in Baptizing

Baptism is a local church ordinance, and, thus, has a group aspect. A local church is defined in the SBC’s statement of faith as a group of baptized believers. The Baptist Faith and Message states that baptism “is prerequisite to the privileges of church membership and to the Lord’s Supper.”¹⁴ Baptism is one of the first steps of obedience after a person becomes a Christian. The refusal of an able-bodied believer to be immersed according to Scripture is sinful. In regard to the observance of the Lord’s Supper, the sinful refusal to be baptized has implications for a church’s policy choice of open, close, or closed communion. Baptism is not a requirement for eternal life. It is, however, an ordinance that is important enough to be included in the Great Commission.

Baptism is rich with Christian symbolism. The Baptist Faith and Message mentions the symbolism of Christ’s death, burial, and resurrection. It also references the symbolism of the believer’s “death to sin, the burial of the old life, and the resurrection to walk in newness of life

in Christ Jesus.”¹⁵ Baptism identifies Christians as Trinitarians. It implies the eternal security of the believer. Christ experienced death, burial, and resurrection. Similarly, the believer experiences spiritual death, burial, and resurrection.¹⁶ Baptism thus presents important Christian doctrines, and it indeed is a public profession of faith that is presented as a witness to the world.

Baptism should be connected to a local church. Consider the case of Philip and the baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26-39). Philip was chosen as one of seven officers in the Jerusalem church (Acts 6:5), and he was later described as “Philip the evangelist” (Acts 21:8). The decision about who can administer baptism is not an individual decision; rather, it is a decision that should be made by the local church.

John Hammett commented, “There is no theological reason why someone must be ordained to administer the ordinances, but it does seem prudent and orderly. At the same time, we view the ordinances as entrusted to the church, not to the church’s leaders. Therefore, the church can designate whomever it wishes to administer the ordinances, whether that person is ordained or not.”¹⁷ Biblical ecclesiology ensures that the role of the group will not be ignored in baptism.

The Role of the Group in Teaching

The Greek words translated as “baptizing” and “teaching” in Matthew 28:19-20 are participles of means.¹⁸ They indicate the way in which disciples are made. “Make disciples” in Matthew 28:19 means more than “make converts.” If “make disciples” were to mean “make converts,” then the verse would be advocating baptismal regeneration. “Teaching them to observe all that I commanded you” in verse 20 refutes the baptismal regeneration interpretation of verse 19. New converts are not made by teaching them to observe all that Jesus commanded. New converts obviously have not yet had that much teaching. “Make disciples” refers to the entire process of making converts, baptizing them, and thoroughly teaching them.

The word *all* in “teaching them to observe all” (verse 20) should not be regarded as hyperbole. If interpreters regard it as hyperbole, then to be consistent they must also regard “all authority” in verse 18 and “all the nations” in verse 19 as hyperbole, which clearly would be a misinterpretation of the text.

Local churches are the primary contexts for discipleship, and they should provide systematic training in all that Jesus commanded His disciples to observe. Overseas missionaries must do more than provide oral cultures with the so-called “oral Bible,” which may consist of 50 to 100 stories from the Bible. Rather, they must eventually provide the entire Bible to oral groups and do as much literacy training as necessary, because “all Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness” (2 Tim 3:16). Oral groups also need to be taught all that Jesus commanded.

Another incorrect interpretation of verse 20 is to say that “teaching them to observe all that I commanded you” simply means to hand new converts a Bible and tell them to read it and obey (observe) all of it. This approach emphasizes an extreme form of individualism, but it ignores the role of the local church in teaching. No continuous teaching is involved in this erroneous approach. The new convert is only told what to do one time. Pastors must be able to teach (1 Tim. 3:2). This pastoral qualification would be unnecessary if continuous teaching were unnecessary.

Many churches have failed to integrate reaching and teaching. If they successfully evangelize non-Christians, they may not do what is necessary to teach new converts immediately

and continuously in small and large groups. Successful discipleship and assimilation of new converts into local churches requires that their lifestyles change to reflect the biblical norms that are exemplified in the lives of mature Christians in the local churches. People become Christians when they surrender their lives to Christ in repentance and faith. As they learn about biblical standards of conduct, new converts will experience a time of intense struggle as their commitment plays out in various lifestyle changes in the discipleship process. Mature Christians must help new converts in this process.

Besides teaching, the group context provides accountability. If a church does not discipline seriously unrepentant church members in the manner prescribed by Jesus (Matt. 18:15-17), then it is not a New Testament church. Such discipline should be applied lovingly with the goal of restoring the errant member. Paul described a member of the church at Corinth who had experienced punishment which was inflicted by the majority, but he urged the church “to reaffirm your love for him” (2 Cor. 2:6-8). The final stage of church discipline (Matt. 18:17) cannot be applied unless the group is involved. Correct ecclesiology in this area is essential.

Unfortunately, many Americans judge churches as successful or unsuccessful based solely on quantitative measures. Megachurches are viewed generally as successful because of their large numbers. The fallacy of this quantitative-only view of success was revealed in 2007 when megachurch pastor Bill Hybels admitted Willow Creek Community Church’s failure in this regard:

We made a mistake. What we should have done when people crossed the line of faith and become Christians, we should have started telling people and teaching people that they have to take responsibility to become “self feeders.” We should have gotten people, taught people, how to read their Bible between services, how to do the spiritual practices much more aggressively on their own.¹⁹

Small and medium-size churches can also be guilty of the quantitative-only view. Granted, spiritual growth can be difficult to measure, but measurement is indeed possible. Scripture provides markers for doing so. For example, Hebrews 5:12-14 distinguishes between immature and mature believers. The spiritual infants had been in the initial stage of growth too long; their growth was stunted. They were still not teaching, but needed to be taught elementary principles. They were consuming milk rather than solid food, and were not becoming “accustomed to the word of righteousness.” In contrast, mature Christians “because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil.” Similarly, Paul mentioned “infants in Christ” at Corinth who were “not yet able to receive” solid food, who were “fleshly,” and who were characterized by “jealousy and strife” (1 Cor. 3:1-3). With so many immature Christians in churches, church conflicts can occur frequently.

Proper ecclesiology can assist churches to deal effectively with conflict by means of church discipline and democratic procedures. The Baptist Faith and Message mentions that “each congregation operates under the Lordship of Christ through democratic processes.”²⁰ This wording strongly implies that each member should have a voice in major decisions. The congregation may delegate some decisions, but neither one person nor a subgroup of members should make every decision affecting the church.

A church covenant is also an important matter of ecclesiology. Church members need to know what their responsibilities are. When church members understand their responsibilities and commit themselves to carry them out, church membership has real meaning. Hammett explained the importance of covenants: “Furthermore, one of the major purposes for the use of church

covenants is precisely to safeguard regenerate church membership.”²¹ If a church practices open membership (i.e., anyone who attends the church is considered to be a member), then regenerate church membership cannot be safeguarded. Churches should carefully screen candidates for membership, and those candidates should commit themselves to the Christian conduct called for in the covenant. For legal and practical reasons, candidates for membership should also be informed about the disciplinary policy of the church.

Church covenants provide an accountability factor in the discipleship process for church members. All churches should have covenants, preferably written covenants.²² The Baptist Faith and Message mentions the word *covenant* when it defines a New Testament church: “A New Testament church of the Lord Jesus Christ is an autonomous local congregation of baptized believers, associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the gospel.”²³ Covenants and confessions of faith should be utilized overseas, as well. Without them, a tendency to drift in terms of personal conduct and theological orthodoxy has been apparent.

Conclusion

Christians are to be good stewards of their churches. They should “contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all handed down to the saints” (Jude 3). False teachers can creep into churches, and must be dealt with appropriately. Biblical ecclesiology is essential in this process. The group, the local church, is an indispensable accountability factor and encouragement for individual Christians.

Today’s Christians should make sure that they are “not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near” (Heb. 10:25). The assembly, the local church, should not be viewed as a Sunday morning place of entertainment. Instead, it should be seen as the community necessary for carrying out God’s marching orders, His Great Commission, by effectively evangelizing, baptizing, and teaching.

¹Matthew 28:19-20, NASB. All Scripture quoted in this article is from the New American Standard Bible, 1995, unless otherwise noted.

²Regarding American culture, Duane Elmer said that “the individual reigns supreme.” See Elmer, *Cross-Cultural Connections* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2002), 135.

³Bob Smietana, “Research: Unchurched Will Talk About Faith, Not Interested in Going to Church,” accessed June 29 2016, <http://lifewayresearch.com/2016/06/28/unchurched-will-talk-about-faith-not-interested-in-going-to-church/>.

⁴Stefan Paas, “Missionary Ecclesiology in an Age of Individualization,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 48 (2013): 94.

⁵*Ibid.*, 95.

⁶Raymond E. Carroll, “Dimensions of Individualism in Southern Baptist Thought” (Th.D. diss., New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, 1995), 180.

⁷Ed Stetzer, “SBC 2011 Statistical Realities—Facts Are Our Friends But These Are Not Very Friendly Facts,” (June 13 2012), accessed June 29 2016, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2012/june/sbc-2011-statistical-realities--facts-are-our-friends-but.html>.

⁸For a discussion of this participle, see Daniel Wallace, *The Basics of New Testament Syntax* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 281. See also Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 641-642.

⁹Marvin Vincent indicated that the word *evangelist* in Ephesians 4:11 refers to “travelling missionaries.” See Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament*, vol. 3 (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1887), 389. Kenneth Wuest added, “*Evangelists are the travelling missionaries both in home and foreign lands.*” Kenneth S. Wuest, *Wuest’s Word Studies from the Greek New Testament: For the English Reader* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), 100-101. Charles Hodge also commented on the evangelists: “They were properly missionaries sent to preach the Gospel where it had not been previously known.” Hodge, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1856), 225. Herschel Hobbs said, “Evangelists seem to have been local or district missionaries whose duty it was to develop the work around the centers established by the apostles.” Hobbs, *Fundamentals of Our Faith* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1960), 132. John Gill commented on the evangelists in Ephesians 4:11: “These were not fixed and stated ministers in any one place, as the following officers be, but were sent here and there as the apostles thought fit.” Gill, *Romans to Revelation*, vol. VI in Gill’s Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 440.

¹⁰See David Garrison, *Church Planting Movements: How God Is Redeeming a Lost World* (Midlothian, VA: WIGTake Resources, 2004), 187-188.

¹¹See Steve Smith, *T4T: A Discipleship ReRevolution* (Monument, CO: WIGTake Resources, 2011), 265-272.

¹²See Scott Robertson, “Neophyte Pastors: Can Titus 1 Be Used to Justify Placing New Converts in the Office of Pastor?” *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 57, no. 1 (Fall 2014): 77-86.

¹³M. David Sills, *Reaching and Teaching: A Call to Great Commission Obedience* (Chicago: Moody, 2010), 44. M. David Sills, *Reaching and Teaching: A Call to Great Commission Obedience* (Chicago: Moody, 2010), 44.

¹⁴*Baptist Faith and Message* (2000), articles 6 and 7.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, article 7.

¹⁶See Charles H. Spurgeon, “Baptism—A Burial,” sermon number 1627, delivered October 30, 1881, accessed July 2, 2016, <http://www.spurgeon.org/sermons/1627.php>.

¹⁷John Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches: A Contemporary Ecclesiology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2005), 260-261.

¹⁸See Wallace, *The Basics of New Testament Syntax* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 281.

¹⁹Bill Hybels, “Willow Creek Repents? Why the Most Influential Church in America Now Says ‘We Made a Mistake,’” *Leadership Journal* (October 2007), accessed July 4, 2016, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/le/2007/october-online-only/willow-creek-repents.html>.

²⁰*Baptist Faith and Message* (2000), article 6.

²¹Hammett, 117.

²²R. Stanton Norman says, “Whether a church is a new work or an existing, well-established congregation, each Baptist church should have a covenant. Church covenants are usually written, and each person must agree to the covenant as a condition of membership in a local congregation.” Norman, *The Baptist Way: Distinctives of a Baptist Church* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2005), 118.

²³*Baptist Faith and Message* (2000), article 6.