Theology for Ministry

That in all things He might have the preeminence.

Truth is Immortal

Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary

Issues in Church Polity

Volume 1

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Theology for Ministry is an annual publication of Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary of Memphis, Tennessee. The journal is intended to be an aid from theologians and professionals for laypersons, seminary students, and vocational ministers in the application of theological and biblical studies to issues that impact local ministry.

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A note about the cover design: The scriptural reference to Colossians 1:18 continues to be the abiding biblical reminder of the purpose of Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary. The slogan "truth is immortal" originates from the sixteenth-century Anabaptist Balthasar Hubmaier. He would often close his correspondence and writings with this saying.
THEOLOGY FOR MINISTRY

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INTRODUCTION FROM THE EDITOR

Daryl C. Cornett
Associate Professor of Church History,
Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary

Solomon wrote in Ecclesiastes, “be warned: the writing of many books is endless, and excessive devotion to books is wearying to the body” (NASB). Some may apply this adage to theological journals. Why another journal? There are many quality evangelical journals available today in the traditional hard copy format, with an ever-increasing online selection as well. However, Theology for Ministry hopes specifically to target a readership that other publications may not. One can visualize the intent of this journal as three strands of purpose intertwined into a complementary unity. The first of these strands relates to the mission of Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary, which is to provide doctrinal and practical training for students called of God into vocational ministry. Although the seminary’s purpose is fulfilled primarily in the classroom instruction and field training of seminary students, a theological publication augments that purpose. It provides another tool through which faithful theological instruction can be disseminated.

The second strand of purpose involves a commitment to the local church. Theology for Ministry is targeted for those who are in the trenches of the ministry of the church. The goal is to address important issues impacting the gospel ministry with helpful research, analysis, application, and commentary firmly rooted in sound theological and biblical commitments. Helping to nurture an appreciation for the importance of proper theology for faithful ministry is a passionate goal of this journal.

Finally, the third strand that completes this three-fold purpose encompasses practicality and tradition. There are many good academic journals in which professors of theology write carefully researched articles for colleagues about issues that the average pastor or lay person has neither the time nor patience to endure. Many times these journals, that are extremely helpful in academia, have little appeal or application to those whose daily focus is ministry in the local church. Theology for Ministry is intended to supply helpful articles written by professionals to busy pastors, students, and lay leaders who teach in the church. The topics selected will be subjects that intersect the ministry of churches. Furthermore, Theology
for Ministry will bear distinctly the Baptist tradition. Primarily the authorship will be Baptist, although not necessarily exclusively, and the readership will primarily be assumed to be Baptist, although hopefully not exclusively. With these distinct characteristics and goals as our desired intention, we hope that you will welcome *Theology for Ministry* to your regular reading as a helpful and encouraging tool for service to our Lord Jesus Christ.

This issue is devoted to matters that concern either our understanding of the nature of the church itself or practices related to church life. One may become a follower of Christ individually, but that commitment to Christ is fulfilled through participation and service in His church. Therefore, topics related to definition, polity, and worship of the church are vital issues. The essays in this volume are a sampling of where the rubber hits the road in doing church.

In the editorial section, Hershael York reflects on the recent decisions by the International Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention related to the issue of baptism. The insistence of the board that a missionary candidate's baptism must take place in a church that practices believer's baptism by immersion and holds to the doctrine of the security of the believer has been met with some opposition. York argues that this policy is congruent with the historic Baptist understanding and the teaching of the New Testament.

Gerald Cowen in “Congregationalism and Its Limits” explores the biblical principles that can guide us in understanding how churches ought to be governed. Of particular interest is his discussion of the tension between historic Baptist congregationalism and an elder rule system.

In “Patterns of Leadership in Emerging Churches” John Hammett identifies three distinct kinds of leadership models that are currently present among emerging churches. According to Hammett, this diverse movement tends to defy an easy description. Nevertheless, even with all the postmodern emphasis that rejects convention, Hammett argues that all emerging churches still necessarily possess some kind of observable leadership structure.

Earl Waggoner explores a growing trend among American churchgoers in “Here's the Church, Here's the People, Where's the Steeple? A Movement Toward a House Church Ecclesiology.” Using three biblical images of the church, Waggoner argues that house churches should be considered legitimate churches, being both biblically solid and theologically sound.
The fundamental task of defining the church is the subject of Jimmy Millikin's article. In “The Nature of the Church: Local or Universal?” Millikin contends that a study of the word ekklesia and its use in the New Testament overwhelmingly supports the local position and does not include the idea of a universal spiritual body.

In “Reinvigorating Baptist Practice of the Ordinances” Ray Van Neste explores common attitudes toward and practices of baptism and the Lord's Supper in Baptist life. He asserts that baptism's importance and symbol is woefully underappreciated in the average Baptist church and that the Lord's Supper tends to be seriously neglected. However, Neste offers helpful suggestions for revitalizing the practices of the ordinances in our Baptist churches.

Timothy Seal tackles the always sensitive subject of church discipline in his article, “Church Discipline: Recovering the Lost Treasure.” In this work, Seal explains the biblical foundations for church discipline, why its practice is crucial to the health of churches and important to individuals, and when and how churches should properly administer it.

Many consider the church planting movement to be significant today. J. D. Payne addresses the importance of a proper ecclesiology in the process of planting new churches. In “Ecclesiology: The Most Critical Issue in Church Planting Today” Payne identifies what he labels paternalistic and pragmatic ecclesiologies, which fall short of the concepts of church founded on the biblical witness. He encourages church planters not to fall prey to the whims of culture, but employ a biblical ecclesiology for building a sure foundation.

In the section called “From the Pastor's Study” Steve Gaines, pastor of Bellevue Baptist Church, offers his thoughts on worship. In his article “Worthy of Worship” Gaines identifies and explains biblical rationale of worship, its major components, and the results of authentic worship.

Lastly, in the section called “Voices from the Past” we have reprinted a chapter from Edwin Charles Dargan's book Ecclesiology: A Study of the Churches, published in 1905. Dargan was professor of homiletics and ecclesiological history at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary from 1892 to 1907. He was also a pastor of churches in Virginia, Georgia and California. In addition, he served as president of the Southern Baptist Convention from 1911 to 1913. Other significant works by Dargan include his two-volume The History of Preaching and John Broadus's A Treatise on the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons, which he edited for publication.
IN AGREEMENT: PRESENT INTERNATIONAL MISSION BOARD POLICY AND HISTORIC BAPTIST PRACTICE

Hershael York
Associate Dean: Ministry and Proclamation
Victor and Louise Lester Professor of Christian Preaching
Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

The International Mission Board’s policy on baptism dated November 2005 represents a historic Baptist understanding and, more importantly, the scriptural teaching regarding this primary of the two church ordinances. Since the policy clarified by the Board is neither innovative nor more restrictive than the Bible itself, Southern Baptists should find it completely unremarkable.

The newly adopted IMB policy simply codifies that our denominational missionaries should themselves have the baptism that they administer. The policy requires that, from this point forward, missionaries who are appointed by the IMB should have been immersed after salvation either by a Baptist church or one that practices believer’s baptism by immersion and apart from any sacramental view. The controversial part of the policy, however, is the board’s insistence that the administering church should also believe in eternal security. Four key presuppositions derived from Scripture and consistent with historic Baptist ecclesiology inform and shape the IMB policy. First, that the only biblical mode for baptism is immersion. Second, that the only proper candidate for immersion is a regenerate believer in Jesus Christ. Third, that the act is purely symbolic and distinct from salvation itself and has no saving merit. Fourth, that baptism is a church ordinance and therefore the only proper administrator of it is a local New Testament church that holds to a proper view of salvation. In all candor, the controversy that has erupted over this policy is nothing less than stunning and probably reflects decades of neglect of Baptist ecclesiology. Few pastors today seem to have a historical or a biblical understanding of this ordinance, perhaps because Southern Baptist seminaries have not required ecclesiology and failed to teach it. This policy is one that would not have raised a question fifty years ago, and certainly not when the Southern Baptist Convention was founded.
The first two points do not seem to be in dispute, but deserve some attention nonetheless. Baptists have always insisted that baptism means “immersion.” Though the act is purely symbolic, the symbol itself is given by God Himself. Believers have no latitude to change the mode. Immersion clearly pictures burial and resurrection, unlike sprinkling or pouring. Furthermore, the Greek word *baptizo* unquestionably means to immerse. The linguistic, historic, and even archaeological evidence for baptism by immersion is overwhelming. To deny baptism by immersion is to cease being Baptist.

Neither have Baptists had serious disagreement that the proper candidate for baptism is one who has believed in the Lord Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, repenting of sin and exercising faith in Him. On this basis Baptists have emphatically and categorically denied infant baptism and have insisted on rebaptizing anyone who truly comes to saving faith in Christ at some point subsequent to a prior baptism. If a church member responds to the preaching of the gospel and confesses that she has never been born again but now gladly receives Christ into her heart, any Baptist pastor would surely counsel her that she needs to be baptized properly now as a believer. Her prior baptism would be a meaningless ritual or, worse yet, a lie, because she portrayed a truth that she did not believe.

The third point on which the IMB policy is based relates to the intention and purpose of that baptism. Southern Baptists have always understood the Bible to teach that baptism is not a part of salvation, but subsequent to it. When Alexander Campbell began to teach otherwise in the early 19th century, Baptist churches either stood against baptismal regeneration as heresy or else they dropped the Baptist name and became a part of a new denomination. Since that time, Baptists have not and do not have any serious disagreement on this point. Southern Baptist churches teach that baptism is purely symbolic in nature and not essential to salvation as are repentance and faith. Understanding it as a symbolic ordinance, however, does not suggest that baptism is optional. Jesus both modeled and commanded baptism for His followers and we dare not allow our symbolic understanding of baptism to translate into deemphasizing or denigrating its importance.

All three versions of the *Baptist Faith and Message* (1925, 1963, and 2000) express baptism as a symbolic act for a believer. If that is, by definition, a characteristic of a Baptist church, why would the denominational mission organization not require its missionaries not only to hold that position, but to have been baptized in precise-
ly that manner? It seems confusing, contradictory, and just plain wrong to send missionaries to baptize with that understanding and in that way if they were themselves baptized in a church that understands baptism as a part of salvation.

Closely connected with the third point is the fourth—that baptism is a church ordinance. To whom did Christ give the authority to baptize? Did He authorize His followers individually, a denomination collectively, or the institution of His church? Baptists have long insisted that baptism is a church ordinance. The 1925 statement stated, “[Baptism] is prerequisite to the privileges of a church relation and to the Lord’s Supper, in which the members of the church, by the use of bread and wine, commemorate the dying love of Christ.” Note particularly the emphasis on the relation to the local church. The 1963 statement clarified it further, stating “Being a church ordinance, it is prerequisite to the privileges of church membership and to the Lord’s Supper.” The 2000 statement keeps that exact language, acknowledging that baptism is a church ordinance. Of course this begs the question, “What is a New Testament church?” Can we call a congregation a true New Testament church if it denies that salvation is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone? Can a crowd of well-intentioned worshippers really be a church if they add works to the atoning sacrifice of the Lord Jesus by teaching that baptism is essential for salvation? Can a cadre of Christians really be a church if they do not observe the ordinances properly or deny that we are kept by the power of God unto the day of redemption? Baptists have so carefully defined the church, the ordinances, and soteriology that we have historically denied that such are true New Testament churches. We do not insist on the name “Baptist” on the sign in the front yard, but we insist that the church be marked by New Testament doctrine, specifically as it relates to the ordinances and to salvation, including the eternal security of the blood-bought believer. We cannot have a settled peace that such churches have the authority to baptize since they do not hold to the teaching of the New Testament. A church’s authority, of course, derives not from its denomination, but from its doctrine. The IMB recognized this by defining those doctrinal parameters in a way completely consistent with every Baptist Faith and Message. Any denomination sending missionaries would be within its rights and responsibility to make certain that every candidate representing its churches has been baptized in a way consistent with that denomination’s view on baptism. The greater
worry is what underlies the strong objections to this policy. Are they raised because we now deny what Southern Baptists have long held? Do we now understand our founders to be provincial and not as enlightened as we? Or are the objections because we have fallen prey to the age and find it uncomfortable to set doctrinal parameters in general?

Some object at this point that the individual’s understanding and appreciation of baptism matters, not the church that administered it. In other words, some say that even if a person was baptized by immersion in a church that taught baptismal regeneration, so long as the candidate himself did not believe that his baptism was part of his salvation, we should consider it valid. This argument has neither scriptural merit nor historical precedent, of course. It merely extricates church leaders, pastors, and denominational boards from uncomfortable duties, and we therefore find it extremely convenient. In fact, we wouldn’t apply that criterion in any other arena of life. A policeman doesn’t normally let a violator of the law go free because that person believed he was doing the right thing. A patient doesn’t get better if the doctor administers the wrong medicine because the patient believed that it is helpful.

We believe that New Testament baptism must conform to the New Testament pattern which is done only by a church that practices believer’s baptism by immersion alone, does not view baptism as sacramental or regenerative, and a church that embraces the doctrine of the security of the believer. If these are not the parameters, then what would they be? Should the IMB accept the immersion of a person who was immersed as a true believer, but by the Mormon Church? And if the proper authority is not essential, then what makes immersion indispensable? After all, once we make the candidate’s conviction and understanding of what baptism meant the most important element, can we insist on any other parameters? After all, what makes the mode more essential than the purpose behind the mode? What makes the candidate’s understanding more significant than the administering church? Acts 19 describes Paul’s arrival in Ephesus and discovery of certain disciples who were committed to the little they knew, but Paul knew it wasn’t enough. He asked them a simple question that went right to the heart of the matter: “Unto what were you baptized?” Pastors seldom ask that question of people today. Thankfully, the IMB is asking that question of its candidates. Were you baptized unto faith in Christ? Were
you baptized with a view toward eternal life that cannot be lost once graciously given by God? Were you baptized unto the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ? Were you baptized unto a new way of life in Christ? After asking the question Paul discovered that those Ephesian disciples weren’t even born again, and they trusted Christ and were baptized properly. But his question wasn’t, “Are you saved?” His question was about their baptism. Their view of baptism revealed a much deeper spiritual commitment, and so will ours.

NOTES

1 The substance of this editorial was originally written at the request of some members of the IMB Board of Trustees and was used to inform the position paper that the IMB posted on its website at http://www.imb.org/core/story.asp?storyID=3840. The author relates this because some who read the IMB position paper first might think that the author plagiarized much of this material rather than supplied it to the IMB.

2 In a letter from John A. Broadus to James P. Boyce, 15 July 1876, Broadus denied that paedobaptist congregations are true churches but are instead “societies.” Similarly, Spencer’s History of the Kentucky Baptists records many discussions about the validity of baptism. In 1871, for instance, the Russells Creek Association resolved “That the Association does not consider any person baptized, unless he has been immersed in water, in the name of the Trinity, by the authority of a regularly organized Baptist church”, 203.
“Church polity is a subject which has been the source of much debate since the Reformation. In recent years it has risen again as a divisive issue. There are some scholars, including some evangelicals, who argue that the New Testament does not teach any particular church order.”¹ Gordon Fee argues that since the New Testament letters are not theological treatises, but were documents to specific churches or persons and dealing with first-century problems; therefore Christians today should not feel any obligation to follow what they teach about church government.² Fortunately, most evangelicals do not agree with this conclusion, but also reject Fee’s application of hermeneutics on this point.³ While the New Testament does not give us a manual on church government, there are some guidelines and not a few examples concerning how churches should be governed.

THE SCRIPTURAL BASIS FOR CONGREGATIONAL RULE

The congregational form of church government is based on the conviction that the ultimate authority for governing the church rests in the members jointly. The authority comes from Christ, the Head of the body, and the entire body administers the church according to His directions as given in Scripture. Congregationalism also means that each local church is an autonomous unit with no hierarchy over it except Christ. E. C. Dargan concludes from his study of the New Testament that the local church of the New Testament appears as a self-governing unit. He states, “There is no trace whatever of any organization beyond the local church.”⁴ In a congregational church responsibilities may be delegated to any member of the church, but every member, including pastors and deacons, has the same vote. The democratic structure of congregational government is supported by several principles and practices in the New Testament.
Church Discipline

The first principle in the New Testament supporting congregational rule is the fact that the church as a whole is to take part in church discipline. Jesus Himself said in the matter of a "brother who sins against you," there are three steps that one should take: First, go to the offending brother and discuss the matter privately. If he does not listen to you, next take one or two brothers with you as witnesses in order to verify what has been said and done. If he still refuses to hear you, the final step, according to Jesus, is to "tell it to the church." If he refuses to hear the church, then he is to be excluded from the body. Now the church refers to the "assembly." It is a matter for the entire church.

John Calvin interpreted "church" in this context as referring to the Jewish synagogue since the church did not exist at the time Jesus spoke. It is clear, however, that by the time Matthew wrote the church did exist, and he would have had to make a distinction between church and synagogue. Others take the position that the "church" could refer to the congregation represented by the elders. The vast majority of Bible commentators, however, agree that "church" in this context refers to a local congregation of believers.

Another example is found in 1 Corinthians 5 where Paul instructs the church on how to deal with a case of gross sexual immorality. In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, along with Paul's spirit, and "with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ," they were to "deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh" (vv. 4-5). This action was to take place "when you are gathered together." The "you" in this case is the "church of God which is at Corinth," the ones to whom the letter is addressed (1:2). This is apparently something that cannot be delegated to a pastor or pastors, or to any other representative group. Because of the serious nature of the case, the entire congregation needs to be involved.

Further proof that the entire congregation had been involved in the discipline of this man is found in 2 Corinthians 2:5-11. Here Paul tells them that the punishment they had given the offender was sufficient and they needed to "forgive and comfort" him. It is significant that Paul indicates that this punishment was given out by the "majority" of the church. Whether this was something voted by the church is another issue; however, it is clear that the congregation was the body that enforced church discipline, not a representative group. Pastors, elders and deacons are not even mentioned in any of these passages.
The Priesthood of All Believers

Another New Testament principle which supports congregational rule is the priesthood of all believers. There are several New Testament passages which teach this doctrine. First is 1 Peter 2:5 which says, “You also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.” Verse nine adds, “But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, his own special people.” In the Old Testament, priests were required to represent the people before God. The New Testament makes it clear that this is no longer the case. There is only one mediator, the Great High Priest, who lives to make intercession for us. Since every believer has access to this High Priest and has been cleansed by His blood, every believer is told to “draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith,... having boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus” (Heb. 10:19, 22).

In this respect all believers are equal before Him; no priest is required to represent them because atonement has been made once and for all. The pastor has the duty of praying for the saints, but all other believers are commanded to pray for one another also (1 Thess. 5:17; Phil. 4:6). In Colossians 4:2-3, Paul asks the believers to pray for him.

All believers have the indwelling Holy Spirit, and therefore, they are all capable of understanding God’s Word. Jesus said, “When He, the Spirit of Truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth” (John 16:13). No distinction is made between them. All believers are charged with the responsibility of carrying out Christ’s command to evangelize and disciple the world (Matthew 28:19-20). Since then all are to be engaged in the work of the ministry, all should have a part in deciding the direction of the ministry.

Spiritual Gifts

The fact that every believer is endowed with at least one spiritual gift further undergirds the importance of congregational rule. Paul speaks of this in 1 Corinthians 12: 4-6. There are diversities of gifts, ministries, and activities, but the same spirit, the same Lord, and “it is the same God who works all (things) in all” (12:6). Not only does each believer have a gift, but that gift is for the benefit of the whole congregation (v. 7). Each believer is an integral part of the one body (v. 12) and has received the same Spirit (v. 13).
Because all have received gifts, then all bear responsibility in the ministry of the church.

The illustration of the church as a body emphasizes the necessity of every member making his or her contribution to the ministry of the church as a whole (vv. 21-27). If every gift is necessary for the effectiveness of the body and its ministry, then the differing gifts of each member may give that person insight into the ministry which others do not have. All should be taken into account. No one member can exist apart from the rest, and no one is more godly because of the particular gift he has or does not have. Since all are an integral part of the body, should not all who exercise the gifts have a voice in the ministry?

**Election of Officers**

There are several examples in the New Testament of congregational involvement in the election of officers and representatives. Beginning in Acts 1:15-26, a few days before the church officially began at Pentecost, Peter spoke to the 120 disciples who were gathered in the upper room and asked them to nominate qualified candidates to replace Judas. The 120 “proposed two: Joseph called Barsabas... and Matthias” (v. 23). They prayed and asked God to show them which of the two He had chosen. The entire group took part in the choosing of Matthias.

The same process was followed in the selecting of the first seven deacons. The Apostles “summoned the multitude of the disciples” for this task (Acts 6:1-6). The Apostles laid out the qualifications necessary for the office and the “brethren” were charged to “seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom” (v. 3). Luke says that this “saying pleased the whole multitude, and they chose” the seven (v. 5). This clearly involved all of the Jerusalem church at that time, which is remarkable because by this time the numbers of the male believers was about five thousand. With the women and children the number could well have been 20,000 believers. This was what would be called today a mega-church, but the entire congregation still chose its officers.

The whole purpose for giving qualifications for pastor-elders and deacons is so the church could choose qualified men for these positions. Some may argue against congregational rule on the basis of Acts 14:23 where Paul and Barnabas “appointed elders in every
church,” and Titus 1:5 where Paul tells Titus to “appoint elders in every city.” However, the process for these appointments (some would call these ordinations) is not described. It is not likely that Paul and his associates installed pastors in all these churches without the input of the local believers. It was not Paul’s practice to command in such matters. For example, he says to Philemon, “Though I might be very bold in Christ to command you what is fitting, yet for love’s sake I rather appeal to you” (vv. 8-9). Since every time the process is given in detail, the congregation gave its consent, it is reasonable to assume that Paul and the others followed the same process.

A different case of congregational involvement is in the appointing and sending of Paul and Barnabas as missionaries. Acts 13:2-3 says, “As they ministered to the Lord and fasted, the Holy Spirit said, “Now separate to me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them. Then, having fasted and prayed, and laid hands on them, they sent them away.” The question which must be asked is, what is the antecedent of “they” in these verses? Does it refer to the five prophets and teachers only or to the whole congregation? Remember that two of the five, Paul and Barnabas were being sent, so if the message went to five only, then only three would have sent them out, and these three were probably not all pastor-elders. There is a disagreement among commentators concerning whether only Simeon, Lucius, and Manaen laid hands on Paul and Barnabas or whether the whole congregation participated. While this is an important question, it is not the main issue for our consideration here. The question is whether the entire congregation was involved in the decision to send out these missionaries.

There are two points which support the case of the whole church. Before sending these two out, they “fasted” and “prayed.” It is not said how long this took, but fasting implies some lapse of time. It is not likely they could have fasted long without the other believers being aware of it. Also the precedents of the choosing of Matthias and the seven include the participation of the congregation. In addition to this, there is their report at the end of the first missionary journey. They returned to Antioch to the church which had “commended them to the grace of God” (14:26). When they arrived they “gathered the church together” and “reported all that God hath done with them” (v. 27). They reported to the entire church because it was the entire church that commissioned them.
Other examples of congregational choice of representatives include these. When a dispute over the salvation of the Gentiles arose (Acts 15), “they determined” that “certain others of them” would go to Jerusalem with Paul and Barnabas to discuss the matter with the Apostles and pastor-elders there. It is obvious that Paul and Barnabas did not choose the representatives. The implication is that the “church” chose them because verse three adds that they were “sent on their way by the church.” At the end of the conference at Jerusalem it was decided by the leaders with the “whole church” in agreement to send Judas and Silas with Paul and Barnabas to deliver the letter from James regarding their conclusion.

Another example is found in 1 Corinthians 16:3. Paul was ready to take the offering from the Gentile churches for the poor saints in Jerusalem. He gave instructions to the church to choose men to deliver the offering. Paul says, “Whomever you approve by your letters I will send to bear your gift to Jerusalem.” It was their responsibility to choose their own representatives.

Judging Personal Disputes

The fact that saints (ordinary believers) will judge the world (1 Corinthians 6:2) and angels as well (v. 3) supports the contention that all ordinary saints should be involved in the governance of the church. In this passage apparently some brothers had been taking one another to court. Paul argues that since saints will judge the world, certainly they have the ability to judge issues pertaining to this life. There is a debate about the second half of verse four concerning whether it should be translated as a question or as a command. To make it a question does not fit with the previous argument in verses 1-3. He is not questioning why the church is appointing the least esteemed members of the church to settle disputes as many translations suggest. That was not the problem. The problem was taking these disputes before unbelievers in the civil courts. It seems rather obvious from the context that the verb kathizete should be translated as an imperative. If saints are qualified to judge the world and angels, why not let them judge these smaller matters. Paul suggests, “Appoint (seat as judges) those who are least esteemed in the church.” There is no need to take these matters to someone outside the church, you may entrust the lowest among you to decide. Gould does not believe that Paul really means to pick the least member to judge. He is simply reducing their
actions to absurdity. Certainly they can find a wise brother among them to judge the matter. What this demonstrates is the ability of any believer to exercise wise judgment under the leadership of the Holy Spirit.

One final example of congregational involvement in the decision making process is found in Acts 21:22. At the end of the third missionary journey, Paul decided to go up to Jerusalem. When he had met with James and the pastor-elders (v. 18), he was told about a rumor that had circulated that Paul was teaching the Diaspora Jews to forsake the law of Moses and the customs of the Jews. Because of the problem caused by this rumor, they decided, “The assembly must meet.” The church was called together to hear the matter. The details of the discussion are not given, but it is important to note that James and the pastors did not take it upon themselves to make a decision without the consent and knowledge of the congregation.

PROBLEMS WITH ELDER RULE

While the evidence presented does not in the final analysis prove congregational rule, it does demonstrate that there is more evidence for the congregational approach to church government than any other form. Proponents for elder rule, for example, usually base their case on three points.

First is 1 Timothy 5:17. John Calvin interpreted the verse as referring to two different kinds of elders: “Those who rule well” and “those who labor in the word and doctrine.” This interpretation is problematic for several reasons. First, the verse shows a contrast between two kinds of elders (pastors), but not the one Calvin proposed. The two kinds are those who rule well and those who do not. It is between those who “labor” (“work hard,” kopiao) at teaching and doctrine and those who do not.

In the second place, the phrase “worthy of double honor” probably is intended to mean “double pay.” The context is clear on this point. The following verse says, “The laborer is worthy of his wages,” and the previous verses are about financial support for the widows. In Acts 7:16 the word time is translated a “sum of money.” Eight other times it is translated “price” in the King James Version (Matt. 27:6, 9; Acts 4:34; 5:2, 3; 19:19; 1 Cor. 6:20; and 7:23). The importance of the meaning of the word is this: Under Calvin’s interpretation, the ruling elder is a layman. As Henry Weston points out, “If the single text, now quoted in support of this view (1 Tim. 5:17)
be obeyed, then those who consider that it refers to lay-elders ought to give them double the salary given to the bishops.”

Perhaps the greatest obstacle to Calvin’s understanding of 1 Timothy 5:17 is the fact that there appear to be only two offices in the New Testament Church, pastor-bishop-elders and deacons. And in the case of pastor-bishop-elder, there is only one set of qualifications. That the titles pastor, elder, and bishop refer to the same office is clear from their use in the same passage to designate the same work. In Acts 20:17 Paul calls for the “elders” of the church. In verse 28 he tells the elders to “take heed to the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers (bishops), to shepherd (pastor) the church of God.” In Titus 1:5 Paul tells Titus to appoint “elders (presbuteroi) in every city.” Two verses later in the middle of the elder’s qualifications, he says, “For a “bishop” (episcopus) must be blameless.” This same qualification for bishops is given in 1 Timothy 3:2 as well. 1 Peter 5:1-2 also uses all three terms together. Peter addresses the elders in verse one and says to them, “Shepherd (pastor) the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers (bishops). There is little room for doubt on this point. Most scholars agree with J.B. Lightfoot, who concluded: “It is a fact now generally recognized by theologians of all shades of opinion, that in the language of the New Testament the same officer in the church is called indifferently “bishop” (episcopus) and “elder” or “presbyter” (presbyteros).” Robert Raymond sums it up, “Beyond dispute, for Paul the elder was an overseer and the overseer was an elder.”

The fact that there is only one set of qualifications for the office of elder in the New Testament suggests that there is only one kind of elder. All are to be teachers, and all are to be leaders (rulers). Nowhere in the New Testament is there given any direction to the church to appoint two different types of elders. The terms “teaching elder” and “ruling elder” first originated with John Calvin. The duties of “ruling elders” are not described anywhere in the New Testament. It should also be remembered that John Calvin had a state church in Geneva. Many of his parishioners were unregenerate; therefore, he could not have a church with congregational rule. The “ruling elders” then became representatives for the congregation since it could not be trusted to take part in the governance of the church.

The second point which is often used to support elder rule is that there were multiple elders in New Testament churches.
However, this point has often been misused. The fact that there was more than one elder does not mean that the congregation had no responsibility to govern. Neither does it mean that because there were more than one elder that there were two different kinds of elders. Neither of these conclusions necessarily follows from the evidence. Where there were multiple elders, they were all teaching elders or most would call them today—pastors. They had multiple pastors.

In the New Testament there are no directions given concerning the number of elder-pastors a church should have. It seems that there are a growing number of scholars who are taking a more careful look at the New Testament church and how it was organized. Daniel Akin writes, “It is virtually certain that churches initially met in homes. At first they would meet in a single home, but as the church grew and multiplied it was necessary to move into additional houses. This, of course, required multiplication of leadership as well.”15 Historically, it is known that at the beginning there were no “church” buildings. Paul and the other early Christians continued to attend the synagogue on the Sabbath. They also “continued daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house” (Acts 2:46). Acts 5:42 also says, “Daily in the temple, and in every house, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ.” In Acts 20:20 Paul says that he had taught them “publicly and from house to house.” When Peter was miraculously released from prison, he went to the house of Mary, where many had gathered to pray (Acts 12:12).

While this does not prove that these were house-churches, it is reasonable to assume that many of them were. Other evidence supports this conclusion. In Romans 16:5 Paul speaks of Priscilla and Aquilla and “the church that meets in their house.” They are mentioned again in 1 Corinthians 16:19 “with the church that is in their house.” Colossians 4:15 says, “Greet the brethren who are in Laodicea, and Nymphas and the church that is in his house.” Philemon 2 says, “To the beloved Apphia, and Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house.” It is also quite possible that when Paul talks about false teachers subverting “whole households,” he is referring to entire house churches. The same may be the case in 2 Timothy 3:6 where false teachers are said to “creep into houses and make captives of gullible women.”

Gordon Fee describes the scene like this, “Corporate life in the church in Ephesus was not experienced in a large Sunday gathering
in a single sanctuary but in many house churches, each with its own elder(s).”16 Carson comes to the same conclusion on the organization of the New Testament church:

Plurality of elders, if not mandated, appears to have been common, and perhaps the norm. On the other hand, only “church” (ἐκκλησία in the singular) is used for the congregation of all believers in one city, never “churches”; one reads of churches in Galatia, but of the church in Antioch or Jerusalem or Ephesus. Thus it is possible, though not certain, that a single elder may have exercised authority in relation to one house group—a house group that in some cases constituted part of the citywide church—so that the individual elder would nevertheless be one of many in that citywide “church taken as a whole.”17

In the Jerusalem church the number of elders (pastors) is not given, nor is it given in any church except Antioch where there were five prophets and teachers. Acts does record, that in Jerusalem at that time there were about 5000 male (ἀνδρὸν) believers (4:4). Counting women and children, there may have been as many as 20,000 believers. If there were as many as 100 people meeting in each house group there would have been two hundred of these “house churches.” If there were fifty in each group, it would have necessitated four hundred house churches. No wonder the Jewish leaders were “greatly disturbed” (4:12), and were concerned “that it spreads no further among the people” (4:17).

As one can see, it would take many pastors for each house church to have just one. The church at Antioch is an example. No one knows the exact number of converts there, but it was probably a sizeable group. As a result of Barnabas’ ministry there, Acts 11:24 says “a great many people were added to the Lord.” After he had brought Saul there to help, “They assembled with the church and taught a great many people” (11:26). Perhaps they had to circulate among the house churches. In any case it is not a certain conclusion that every church, as we know them (many churches in the same town or city as opposed to only one church in any city in the New Testament) had multiple elders. There is no way of knowing.

The third line of argument for elder rule is that the New Testament elder is a continuation at the Old Testament office of elder. Daniel Akin sums up the work of the Old Testament elder in five points:
First, the elders represent the entire people or a community in religious or political activity (Exod. 12:21; Lev. 4:5; 1 Sam. 8:4; 2 Sam. 5:3). Second, the elders are associated with the leader, or accompany him when he exercises his authority (Exod. 3:18). Third, the elders serve as a governing body (Ezra 5:5; 6:7, 14). Fourth, the elders sometimes serve as a part of the royal council (2 Sam. 17:4, 15). Finally, the elders are a judicial body (Deut. 19:12; 21:3; 22:15).

There are some similarities with New Testament elders, but there are also some important differences.

In contrast to the Old Testament elders, New Testament elders were not representatives of the people who answered to one leader, such as Moses (Ex. 3:10). During the exile these elders became an aristocracy. Heredity and nobility determined membership as an elder. In the synagogue there were two officers that presided. There was the ruler of the synagogue who directed the service but was not the teacher. Also, there was the attendant who looked after the furniture and the scrolls. There were elders in the synagogue who had special seats of honor, but were not responsible for the worship. The New Testament elders, in contrast to these, are responsible for both ruling and teaching. Miller concludes his study on New Testament elders with this statement: “Nothing but the name is borrowed.”

New Testament eldership bears no resemblance to the elder in the Jewish tradition. One must conclude that the biblical basis for elder rule is weak at best. Pastor (elder) led congregational rule seems to be the New Testament pattern.

**THE LIMITS OF CONGREGATIONALISM**

At the beginning it was put forth that the ultimate human authority for governing the church rests in the members jointly. What are the limits of this authority? The first of these is the “headship of Christ.” The church does not have the right to make its own decisions without consulting the Lord first. Paul says, “And He is the head of the body, the church” (Col. 1:18). The church must remember that “all things were created by Him and for Him” (Col. 1:17). The Father has appointed Him “heir of all things” (Heb. 1:2). The church does not exist to its own will, but His will. Do Christians individually and churches collectively have a problem with that? Indeed, they do. That is why there are so many admonitions in Scripture such as, “I... beseech you to walk worthy of the
calling with which you were called” (Eph. 4:1); and, “If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above....Set your mind on things above” (Col. 3:1-2). Do churches ever get out of God's will? Yes they do. Just like individuals do, churches sometimes agree to disobey God.

Believers all have the indwelling Holy Spirit and all have the right as priests to come into the presence of God at any time. Yet these believer-priests are also like sheep who need a shepherd. That is why God has given to the church pastor-teachers (Eph. 4:11). Garrett writes about “The Congregation-Led Church.” The New Testament supports congregational polity, but not congregational leadership of the church. In this kind of church the pastor has no right to lead, he is like a chaplain who ministers, but does not lead. This is not the picture of the New Testament pastor-elder-bishop. In fact, the very title “bishop” indicates that he is an “overseer.” The overseer has authority from his Lord to see that the job is done.

The second limitation on the congregation is that they recognize the leadership of the pastor. While the New Testament pattern involves congregational involvement in the affairs of the church, it also teaches that there should be God-called, God-appointed leaders who direct the congregation. For example, in Acts 1:15ff it was Peter who stood up and said Judas should be replaced. He gave the scriptural qualifications and the church followed his lead. It was the Twelve disciples who brought before the church the need for deacons to be elected. Again, they set forth the qualifications, and the church followed their lead. James, the brother of Jesus, was the one who proposed the solution to the controversy at the Jerusalem Conference (Acts 15). His solution “pleased the apostles and elders, with the whole church” (v. 22). In his letter James says, “It seemed good to us, being assembled with one accord, to send chosen men to you” (v. 25). It was also James who called an “assembly” and suggested a way that the rumors against Paul by the Judaizers might be stopped (Acts 2:20ff).

It is true that congregations do not always follow godly pastors. That is one of the risks of congregational polity. That is why Scripture gives this admonition: “We urge you, brethren, to recognize those who labor among you, and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love for their work’s sake” (1 Thess. 5:12-13).

Hebrews 13 also addresses this same issue. Verse seven says, “Remember those who have the rule over you, who have spoken
the word of God to you, whose faith follow.” This is undoubtedly speaking of the pastors (elders). Notice that the same ones who rule are the ones who also teach and preach the Word. There is not a division of labor here. Verse 17 adds, “Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account.” Verse 24 mentions those who “rule over you, and all the saints.” The pastor is to be the spiritual leader, to be the “overseer,” but “not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock” (1 Peter 5:2-3). The picture here is that of strong pastoral leadership combined with congregational involvement.

What qualifies the pastor to lead? What does he have that others do not have? First, he must have the gift of teaching and enough ability in leadership to “rule his own family well” (1 Tim. 3:2-4). On the other hand, he does not have all the gifts or he would be a “body” by himself. He must depend on other members who have gifts he does not have. In fact, others may have the gift of teaching; it is not limited to pastors (elders), and others may have gifts in leadership and administration, but there is one thing that sets the pastor (elder) apart from others in the church; he is called by God to do that work. Great ability is not what qualifies him; it is the call of God upon his life. Commenting on Acts 20:28, “The Holy Spirit has made you overseers,” James White says, “The Spirit gifts and calls men to that ministry….God may use means to effectuate that call, but the call always remains divine and therefore worthy of respect.”

Some have suggested that another limit to congregational polity is the size of the church. Garrett says, “No one seems to be asking whether a megachurch can practice any form of congregational polity.” Os Guinness charges megachurches with capitulating to modernity. One thing is certain. The larger a church grows the more decisions have to be delegated, but as Garrett points out:

Congregational polity admits of different structures such as the pastor and deacons structure, the pastor-deacons-committee/structure, and the pastor-deacons-church council structure. In every case, however, the units within the structure are subject to the final authority of the congregation.

One needs to remember that the Jerusalem Church in Acts 4ff was a megachurch by any definition and they still involved the total
congregation in decision making. No matter how large the congre-
gation the total church is to be involved in matters of discipline,
choosing of leaders and representatives, and other major decisions.
All of this should be under the leadership of the pastor(s) of the
church. This is the New Testament pattern.

CONCLUSION

The New Testament church operation is to be a cooperative
effort between the pastor (elder) and the congregation. He is to lead
and oversee the work, but it is his duty to keep the congregation
involved and bring the people along with him by appealing to the
Word of God.

The greatest problem that challenges the effectiveness of con-
gregational rule today is lack of church discipline. If people who are
living in open disobedience to God, who have “forsaken the assem-
bling of themselves” with the brethren, and who have ceased to
give support of any kind to the work of God are allowed to remain
members in good standing and are allowed to vote in church deci-
sions, congregational rule will not work. When there is a controver-
sy or a major decision to be made such as expanding the facilities
to reach more people, in many cases those who are out-of-fellow-
ship with God show up to vote on the wrong side of the issue. The
solution to the problem is not to abandon congregation polity but
to purify the congregation by discipline so that it works as it
should. Congregational polity is the New Testament model and
therefore it is the Baptist model. Garrett is correct when he says,
“Although congregational polity among Baptist has developed
diverse internal or structural patterns, to be Baptist has been to
affirm and practice congregational polity.”

NOTES

1 Edward Schweizer, Church Order in the New Testament, trans. Frank
2 Gordon Fee, “Reflections on Church Order in the Pastoral Epistles,
with Further Reflections on the Hermeneutics of Ad Hoc Documents,”
3 See George W. Knight, III, “Church Government,” Written for Our
Instruction: The Sufficiency of Scripture for All of Life, ed. Joseph A. Pipa, Jr.
p. 89.
7 For a list of commentaries which represent the different positions, see Garrett, pp. 164-5.
9 Gould, p. 51.
15 Ibid, pp. 64-65.
16 Fee, p.144-5
18 Akin, p. 41.
21 Garrett, p. 157 ff.
23 Garrett, p. 191.
25 Garrett, p. 158.
26 Ibid., p. 184.
The emerging church movement has become one of the hottest topics of discussion in contemporary Christianity, with numerous books and articles in recent years joining the ongoing conversation which is conducted mainly on Internet websites and blogs.\(^1\) Being a multinational, multidimensional, and increasingly diverse movement, the emerging church defies easy description, but one consistent element seems to be a concern to relate to postmodern culture. That makes leadership a problematic issue for emerging churches, for, as Dan Kimball notes, “most growing up in our emerging culture are fairly critical of anything that looks like ‘organized religion,’” and thus are somewhat suspicious of leadership.\(^2\) In fact, a number of early emerging churches “experimented with the idea of leaderless groups” as a response to “the postmodern critique of modern forms of control.”\(^3\) But nearly all emerging churches have seen some form of leadership as inevitable and necessary. What type or pattern or form that leadership should take is a matter of some difference.

The purpose of this essay is to examine three specific patterns of leadership utilized in some emerging churches. While it is hoped that these three patterns are representative of a significant number of emerging churches, the diversity and rapidly changing nature of the movement makes an exhaustive cataloging of patterns impossible. However, these three patterns do roughly correspond with a categorization of emerging churches suggested by Ed Stetzer: “some are taking the same Gospel in the historic form of church but seeking to make it understandable to emerging culture; some are taking the same Gospel but questioning and reconstructing much of the form of church; some are questioning and revising the Gospel and the church.”\(^4\) He calls these categories the Relevants, the Reconstructionists, and the Revisionists.

While categorization itself is objected to by many in postmodern culture as simply a disguised attempt to exert control over others, most in the emerging church have found Stetzer’s categories
accurate and helpful. An exception may be the study by Eddie Gibbs and Ryan Bolger, who seem to operate with a more narrow definition of emerging church, seeing the term as applying properly only to those making somewhat radical changes in church structure and practice, including leadership. In fact, they specifically exclude a number of those who fit within the Relevants category as being too similar to existing churches to fit the category of emerging church. In this article, we will adopt a broader definition that recognizes a common concern shared by all those who are part of the emerging church movement, but sees different approaches to addressing that concern.

**PATTERN 1: TRADITIONAL LEADERSHIP**

The first pattern of leadership we will examine comes from a church that would be categorized in the classification used above as one of the Relevants. In terms of church leadership, those in this category are much like traditional evangelical churches; their changes are more often in the areas of worship, music, and contextual communication of the gospel. The example we will consider comes from Mark Driscoll and the Mars Hill Church in Seattle, Washington. Driscoll has also founded the Acts 29 Network, which has planted over a hundred churches in eight nations. While his leadership pattern is not the norm in emerging churches, he does share many of the concerns of those in the emerging church and may be fairly placed within the “Relevants” branch of the emerging church. He describes his book, *The Radical Reformission*, as “a contribution toward the furtherance of the emerging church in the emerging culture,” and calls for “a gospel and a church that are faithful both to the scriptural texts and the cultural contexts of America.” The bulk of his book is devoted to helping pastors see how to relate to the emerging culture in a way that is both evangelistically fruitful and biblically faithful. However, unlike some in the emerging church, Driscoll sees areas where the church must oppose trends in contemporary culture in order to be biblically faithful. He concedes that the demons of modernity did need to be cast out of the church, but he also sees new demons of postmodernism that also need to be avoided. Two of these postmodern demons relate directly to the topic of leadership.

The first Driscoll calls “the photocopy heresy” which involves “the silly notion that everyone is equal” and leads to “confusion over gender issues” and “a peculiar commitment to making sure
that everyone's voice is equally heard and everyone's input is equally considered, whether or not it is foolish." He specifically critiques churches who “replace a preaching monologue from a recognized leader to a spiritual dialogue among a group of peers who refuse to acknowledge any leader in authority over them,” comparing them to patients who shoot their doctor and then diagnose and prescribe remedies for each other, all in the name of equality. He recognizes that the church is called to “work among cultures that despise hierarchy,” but affirms nonetheless differing roles and responsibilities for wives and husbands as well as church leaders and church members “because the governments of home and church belong to God and not the culture.”

Driscoll terms the second postmodern demon related to leadership “the hyphenated Christian,” specifically, the postmodern-Christian. Driscoll’s concern here is that a commitment to being postmodern is incompatible with a commitment to being Christian, because certain aspects of postmodernism are antithetical to Christianity. He sees this as especially so in terms of power and authority. Postmodern thought is suspicious of truth claims because such claims involve matters of authority and power; postmodern thought devalues authoritative truth claims to merely personal perspectives and opinions to remove or reduce their claims to be authoritative. Driscoll believes this attitude leads to a rejection of “any form of officially responsible leadership,” and to the demand “that ministry be facilitated rather than led.”

Driscoll challenges these two postmodern demons with a pattern of leadership that does not hesitate to see leaders as those who do far more than merely facilitate; they actively lead. The Mars Hill Church web site offers this statement on church leaders: “The elders (pastors) of Mars Hill are appointed by God to shepherd and lead the flock of Mars Hill. It is our desire to lead this Church through this culture in a way pleasing to the Lord. Leading is not always easy or pleasurable, but as God continues to work through the elders by washing his children with His word the Lord is presenting [to] himself a radiant Church.” Clearly, this church’s leaders lead. Moreover, while it is not explicitly stated, there is a clear implication that, in terms of gender, Driscoll views pastoral leadership in a complementarian manner; that is, while Driscoll would no doubt affirm that male and female are equal in nature and value, he seems to see differing roles for men and women in the home and church, with governing roles assigned to men. This is a sharp con-
Contrast to the egalitarian view of gender roles, which is assumed to be the proper view by the overwhelming majority of emerging churches.\textsuperscript{12}

Nothing in this pattern seems particularly innovative; it is, rather, traditional and represents what many evangelicals would see as a biblical pattern of church leadership. Indeed, it seems to see Scripture as leading to a pattern of leadership that is contrary to postmodern culture at a number of points. Based on his interpretation of biblical teaching, Driscoll chooses to challenge rather than adapt to postmodern culture on this issue. While this pattern is not characteristic of emerging churches as a whole, it is one that would find acceptance among a significant number of those in at least one branch of the emerging church (those Stetzer calls the Relevants).

\section*{Pattern 2: The A.P.E.P.T. Fivefold Ministry}

A distinctively different pattern of leadership has been developed that may properly be associated with the second category of the emerging church suggested by Stetzer, those he calls Reconstructionists. Mark Driscoll says, "Reconstructionist leaders look to such people as . . . Australians Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch."\textsuperscript{13} While Peter Wagner and many in the charismatic and Pentecostal community have shared some of their perspective, Frost and Hirsch have been the most influential advocates in emerging church circles of what is called "the fivefold ministry," which goes by the acrostic APEPT, standing for apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers, taken from Eph. 4:11. They do not see these as five offices, but five roles or functions that must be "operating within the leadership of a local congregation" and embraced by the congregation as a whole within its corporate life.\textsuperscript{14} They apply the APEPT model to both the nature and structure of the whole church's ministry and to the nature/structure of the church's leadership. That is, while all are not called to be apostles or evangelists, the community as a whole is called to be apostolic, prophetic, evangelistic, pastoral, and didactic, and those five functions should be especially seen in the church's leadership. They believe all five functions are essential to the growth of the body in maturity and mission, and that all members of the body are gifted and called to minister in some way in one of those five areas. But, in addition, some are gifted and called "to be an APEPT leader to the rest of the APEPT body."\textsuperscript{15} These five functions are described as:
Apostolic function, usually conducted translocally, pioneers new missional works and oversees their development. Prophetic function discerns the spiritual realities in a given situation and communicates them in a timely and appropriate way to further the mission of God’s people. Evangelistic function communicates the gospel in such a way that people respond in faith and discipleship. Pastoral function shepherds the people of God by leading, nurturing, protecting, and caring for them. Teaching function communicates the revealed wisdom of God so that the people of God learn how to obey all that Christ has commanded them.16

Hirsch and Frost anticipate some of the objections against their proposal and make some good points in defense. While they accept some unique aspects in the ministry of the twelve Apostles of Christ, they argue that nothing in the text of Ephesians 4 indicates that the roles of apostle, prophet, and evangelist are temporary or that only the roles of pastor and teacher are normative. They point out that Ephesians is a general Epistle, not addressed to one specific congregation, but giving teaching for churches in general.17 The idea of widespread participation in the five functions finds support in the biblical idea of the priesthood of all believers, is reflected in the dozens of “one another” commands in the New Testament, and resonates well with postmodern culture. In fact, Baptists, as congregationalists and champions of the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers, could possibly adopt elements of the fivefold ministry as a model for the ministry of the church as a whole. However, its viability as a pattern for leadership is weakened by the fact that Frost and Hirsch do not connect it with other texts, especially in Acts and the Pastoral Epistles, that give more comprehensive and explicit directions on church leadership that qualify the application of Ephesians 4:11. To put it simply, Ephesians 4:11 is not sufficient alone to give us all we need to construct a biblical pattern of church leadership. Yet the APEPT model proposed by Frost and Hirsch is being promulgated through the Forge Mission Training Network in Australia and is championed as well by house church advocate Wolfgang Simson, who has been influential in the European house church movement.18 It seems likely to be a significant pattern of leadership in some segments of the emerging church movement for the foreseeable future.
The third pattern of leadership to be examined is probably the one practiced by most emerging churches. In fact, Eddie Gibbs and Ryan Bolger, from their extensive research of emerging churches, list this type of leadership as one of the nine identifying characteristics of emerging churches: “Emerging churches (1) identify with the life of Jesus, (2) transform the secular realm, and (3) live highly communal lives. Because of these three activities, they (4) welcome the stranger, (5) serve with generosity, (6) participate as producers, (7) create as created beings, (8) lead as a body, and (9) take part in spiritual activities.” While their research did not include Australia and thus omits the APEPT model described by Frost and Hirsch, and explicitly excludes churches like Mark Driscoll’s as too traditional, they do represent the thinking of many in the third branch of the emerging church, the Revisionists.

This pattern of leadership could be described in a number of ways: open, consensual, facilitative, relational, and servant are some of the terms often used. There is a strong opposition to any form of authoritarian or hierarchical leadership, which is seen as stifling creativity and freedom, and destructive of community. The phrase chosen for the heading here, “Leadership by the Body,” highlights the connection of this pattern of leadership to the importance of community for these churches. Community is one of the most common core values of emerging churches; many extend the communal aspect to leadership. One example of how that idea is fleshed out is found in Solomon’s Porch, an emerging church in Minneapolis, and the leadership pattern of its pastor, Doug Pagitt.

One of the clearest places where the intentionally communal nature of Pagitt’s leadership is seen is in his sermon preparation, which occurs through a Tuesday evening Bible discussion. Pagitt says of this group,

The Bible discussion group differs from a traditional Bible study. We aren’t just getting together to read and extract from the Bible and deepen our own understanding. Rather, this group is like a microcosm of our community, standing in for others as we enter into the passage. In many ways this group sets the form and feel and content for what will happen on Sunday night during our worship gathering. Together we explore the questions and issues so that when the same passage is presented to our larger group, it will be clear that it
has been wrestled with not just by the theologian who gives the sermon (me) but by “regular” people as well.20

He calls this discussion group his “primary time of preparation for the following Sunday’s sermon” and likes the idea that the sermon is “more than just my thoughts and research on a passage.”21

The communal nature of leadership carries over into what happens at the Sunday evening worship gatherings, which Pagitt sees as “a time when people contribute to the creation of a setting in which we are transformed, not a setting in which we come to be serviced by professionals or qualified volunteers.”22 Members participate by reading Scripture, singing and playing music, sharing of stories, partaking of communion, and responding to the sermon, which has already been shaped by the previous Tuesday evening discussion. Pagitt says, “On most occasions the sermon is followed by a time of open discussion where I ask for comments, interpretations, and thoughts of significance from our community. During these few minutes not only are brilliant observations made, but people are also reminded that we are called to listen to one another and be taught by each other and not only by the pastor.”23

There are a number of strengths and weaknesses with this pattern of leadership. On the positive side, the Baptist adherence to congregational government supports the idea that the ultimate human authority in the church is that exercised by the members of the community. Moreover, the idea of mutual ministry is supported by the doctrine of the priesthood of the believer, which in turn is supported by the many “one another” commands of the New Testament, such as “teach and admonish one another” (Col. 3:16). Moreover, Pagitt’s behavior evidences a winsome humility that is commanded of all who follow Christ and is especially welcome in leaders (1 Pet. 5:1-5).

Negatively, however, there are a number of biblical/theological weaknesses as well as practical difficulties in this pattern. To follow the pattern of leadership by the body, one must ignore biblical teaching on leadership that assigns a certain measure of authority to leaders in the body. Certainly, leaders are commanded to exercise their authority with humility, to serve those they lead, to listen to the counsel of others, and, for Baptists, to serve ultimately under the governance of the congregation. At the same time, there are commands given to members of churches to obey their leaders and submit to their authority (Heb. 13:17; 1 Cor. 16:16; 1 Thess. 5:12-13), while leaders are to manage, take care of, direct the affairs of,
and shepherd the church (1 Tim. 3:5; 5:17; 1 Pet. 5:2). One of the major ways they exercise their authority is in teaching, for the leader is responsible to “encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it” (Titus 1:9). One of the requisite gifts for a leader is the ability to teach (1 Tim. 3:2), for the pastor is to be a teacher. He may not be the only teacher, and there are many contexts where discussion and mutual teaching is appropriate (such as small groups or Sunday School classes). But the responsibility of pastors to teach their congregations is not a relic of modernity that may be safely discarded in postmodernity, but rather has been a staple of Christian practice for 2,000 years.

Moreover, the New Testament makes a distinction between leaders and members, for leaders must meet certain criteria or qualifications. It is not that leaders are called to a higher standard; all believers are called to Christlikeness, and that is essentially what the qualifications reflect. But leaders must have made enough progress toward Christlikeness so that they can serve as examples to the church (1 Pet. 5:3). Whereas Mars Hill specifically cites the key texts (1 Tim. 3:1-7; Titus 1:6-9) in giving their definition of an elder, neither these texts nor the issue of qualifications for leaders is discussed by Pagitt; the only qualification mentioned in the discussion of leaders by Gibbs and Bolger is “the primary qualification” of being one who is “actively learning how to live in the kingdom of God as an apprentice of Jesus.”24 This oversight of qualifications for leaders is perhaps the most surprising omission in the discussion of leadership by the body. In view of the multiple and explicit discussions of qualifications in Scripture, it suggests that this leadership pattern is not developed from reflection on biblical teaching.

In addition to biblical/theological problems, there are also practical difficulties encountered in practicing leadership by the body. One is the simple inevitability of leadership. As Gibbs and Bolger acknowledge, “Whenever a group of people meets together for any length of time, someone will emerge as a leader.”25 Despite attempts in emerging churches to keep leadership open, people tend to spot and identify leaders and look to them for leadership. An interesting feature of Pagitt’s book is the inclusion of excerpts from journals kept by a number of members of Solomon’s Porch. Some of their comments reflect their perception that Pagitt is indeed the leader of Solomon’s Porch. Two members commented on a Sunday when Pagitt was absent. One said, “Church without Doug is a lot like
when Valerie left on that old sitcom Valerie’s Family. Once Shelly Duncan took off, the show became The Hogan Family and went straight downhill. Doug is our Valerie.” Another commented, “The worship gathering on Sunday was very unusual because Doug was gone. . . . It was great to hear so many different people’s expressions, but I definitely missed having a message.”26 It would seem that the people of Solomon’s Porch miss the pastor’s leadership when he is gone, perhaps more than he would like them to.

Also, leadership by the body increases in difficulty as churches grow. Most emerging churches are quite small, with a surprising number existing as house churches or cell churches. Some choose to stay small intentionally to preserve community; others remain small due to a lack of evangelistic effectiveness.27 Solomon’s Porch, for example, has about seventy-five adult members.28 Emerging churches that do grow find it difficult to maintain open leadership or to involve everyone in decision making and tend to move toward some sort of representative leadership.

CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

There are three main observations that may be drawn from the three patterns examined in this essay. The first is that, on leadership and a host of other issues, the emerging church is extremely diverse, and becoming increasingly so. We have utilized in this paper the categorization of Relevants, Reconstructionists, and Revisionists, but even that may not adequately reflect the complexity. All three of the patterns of leadership discussed in this essay come from individuals who would, rightly or wrongly, be associated by many with the emerging church, and who share what they see as central concerns of the emerging church; yet they differ sharply on a wide range of issues. The result is that whenever one speaks of the emerging church, it is also necessary to specify which emerging churches are in view in that discussion.

A second observation is that there are important lessons that can be gleaned for all churches from these patterns. It is important to be reminded of biblical teaching on mutual ministry and congregational involvement, and it is valuable to be warned and aware of the strong antipathy to authoritarian, controlling leadership that is evident in postmodern culture. Cultural sensitivities cannot over-rule biblical revelation, but in this instance, Scripture too endorses servant leadership rather than dominating leadership. Cultural relevance demands carefulness in avoiding sinful arrogance and world-
ly styles of leadership; biblical faithfulness demands equal carefulness in recognizing the rightful authority and importance of scripturally qualified and properly functioning leaders.

A third observation is that these patterns reflect strikingly different approaches or methodologies. Driscoll is one of the few in the emerging church that recognizes the distorting influence postmodern culture can have on how churches do leadership, and everything else. His book engages postmodern culture in a sympathetic way, but submits it to a scriptural scrutiny, leading to a pattern of leadership that takes a frankly counter-cultural direction. Pagitt’s approach seems to be much more culture-friendly in the area of leadership, but raises questions about how fully Scripture is being utilized to evaluate culture. Pagitt makes the curious statement, “we try to treat the Bible as the sort of best friend to whom one gives the benefit of the doubt.”

But Scripture seems to regard itself as more: a light, a rock, a judge, a sanctifier. As was noted above, there is little discussion of Scripture in the description of the third pattern, either by Pagitt or in the book by Gibbs and Bolger. It raises the question of how fully biblical teaching has been considered in the development of their pattern of leadership. The second pattern, the APEPT model, takes its starting point and acronym from Scripture, and relates helpfully to culture, but elevates a single verse to undue proportions. Frost and Hirsch manifest a careful attention to theology throughout most of their discussion of the emerging church, but in the area of leadership, they seem to become surprisingly focused on one verse. Their approach fails to take into account all of the biblical teaching on leadership.

Of these three, I naturally gravitate toward the first pattern, the one closest to my own background and experience. However, I also think this pattern is also the one most explicitly developed in response to Scripture, though well aware of culture. The emerging church movement has done a service to traditional churches by exposing the numerous points at which traditional churches have accommodated modern culture at the expense of biblical revelation. Today some in the emerging church run a similar danger of being overly enamored of and accommodating to postmodern culture. Alan Wolfe says, concerning the relationship of evangelical Christianity to American culture over the past fifty years, “In every aspect of the religious life, American faith has met American culture-and American culture has triumphed.” His words serve as a
warning to all churches, but especially to churches seeking to respond to culture: cultural accommodation must always be preceded and accompanied by biblical and theological critique. This article has highlighted some of the leadership patterns in emerging churches in the hopes of contributing to the development of such a critique.

NOTES

1 For some of the key books and web sites relating to the emerging church, see Alan Streett, “A Selective Bibliography of the Emergent Church Movement,” Criswell Theological Review n.s. 3, no. 2 (Spring 2006): 95-99.


5 Gibbs and Bolger, 30. Within this group, they place Chris Seay, Mark Driscoll, and Erwin McManus, though all three have been widely associated with the emerging church movement.


7 Ibid., 172, 173.

8 Ibid., 173. What Driscoll describes bears a strong resemblance to the third pattern examined in this article.

9 Ibid., 174.

10 Ibid., 176.

11 “Who We Are > Elders,” found at http://lite.marshillchurch.org/site/who_we_are/elders/, accessed on 4/18/2006.

12 Gibbs and Bolger, 11, note that they were “deeply impressed” by the fact that [v]irtually all these communities support women at all levels of ministry.”


15 Frost and Hirsch, 172.
16 Ibid., 169. Italics in original.
17 Ibid., 166-168.
19 Gibbs and Bolger, 45.
20 Doug Pagitt, Church Re-Imagined: The Spiritual Formation of People in Communities of Faith (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 115.
21 Ibid., 119.
22 Ibid., 63.
23 Ibid., 77.
24 Gibbs and Bolger, 215.
25 Ibid., 199.
26 Pagitt, 62, 60.
27 Driscoll, “A Pastoral Perspective,” 89-90, notes that all three branches of the emerging church, Relevants, Reconstructionists, and Revisionists, are criticized for a lack of significant conversion growth. Rick Warren says, “We're still looking for a single 'emerging church' model that is actually winning large numbers of unbelievers.” Rick Warren, private email correspondence, 12/7/2005. Mars Hill Church may be an exception, since it has grown from 150 to 3,000 in ten years, according to the church's website (http://www.marshillchurch.org/home.html, accessed 1/13/2006).
29 Pagitt, 168.
30 For more on this, see John S. Hammett, “An Ecclesiological Assessment of the Emerging Church,” Criswell Theological Review, n.s. 3, no. 2 (Spring 2006): 29-49.
“HERE’S THE CHURCH, HERE’S THE PEOPLE, WHERE’S THE STEEPLE?” A MOVEMENT TOWARD A HOUSE CHURCH ECCLESIOLOGY

Earl Waggoner
Associate Professor of Theology and Church History
Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary/Rocky Mountain Campus

Some of us remember the little children’s game to which the title refers. With hands folded inward and fingers pointed down the player begins the litany, “Here’s the church, here’s the steeple…” Index fingers pop up to create a steeple, and thumbs become doors. “Open the doors, and there’s the people!” The folded hands open, revealing the intertwined finger “people” in the handcrafted church building. Great fun for a first grader!

Though my forty-six-year-old fingers are not quite as nimble as they were in my youth, a fresh playing of the game taught me something about perceptions regarding the Christian church. Many, if not most, folks think that a building is prerequisite and representative of a real gathering of believers in Jesus Christ; a set building or structure most represents the church. One must certainly have people to do church, but the steeple and its building validate the gathering, at least according to the game.

This essay addresses a topic which rises up against such an “edifice complex” perception of the church.¹ The matter at hand is the discussion of the actual essence of the church. If it is not a building, then what is it? What are the ideas at the very heart of the notion that there is something unique about a gathering of believers in Jesus? And the particular point of departure with the children’s game is this: What is the essence of the church for a gathering of believers in a steeple-less house? The purpose of this paper is to think ecclesiologically about house churches.

An essential approach to ecclesiology will be taken here. This is over against a purely functional approach. The latter defines the church primarily by what it does and how it is organized.² Though issues of organization, polity, purpose, and mission are critically and biblically important for any fully orbled ecclesial identity, they are not the starting point here. Rather, the foundation of this article is theological reflection upon the very essence of the church. An
assumption is that only after thorough reflection on the church's essence can a proper understanding of its functions be developed. Without at least some understanding of the church's basic identity, its functions can become dysfunctional. Further, a primarily functional approach to considering the Christian church can minimize its essential uniqueness—the presence and power of God. A purely functional, organizational, even missional argument elevates any moderately successful religious organization to the same status as that of the Christian church; Mormons are highly and successfully functional as well as missional. This study is undertaken with the notions that the essential divine dynamic is the Christian distinctive of the church, and it can be seen most clearly through theological reflection.

This is true especially regarding the house church movement. By design, much of the house church literature does not exhibit a high degree of theological reflection. Rather, it is practical and pragmatic. It focuses on defending the movement's biblical legitimacy as well as educating its practitioners on proper deployment and methodology. Although this is needed instruction for the burgeoning movement, there is a difference between such a biblical apologetic and theological reflection. Whereas the former attempts to establish direct linkage between Scripture and current practice, the latter weaves theological issues, insights, and broader questions into the tapestry of the house church conversation. Again, theological reflection precedes the biblical defense of house church by asking the fundamental question: What is church? The hope which seasons this essay is that theological reflection on the essence of the Christian church, then applied to the house church paradigm, will contribute context, perspective, and theological depth to the house church conversation.

THE HOUSE CHURCH MOVEMENT: A BRIEF INTRODUCTION

“There's No Pulpit Like Home” is the title of a recent magazine article on house churches. This article is significant because it appeared in Time magazine. It raises the question of why a significant number of evangelicals are “abandoning megachurches for minichurches—in their own living rooms.” Factors such as economic and social benefits, as well as general dissatisfaction with larger churches, seem to answer that question. As Tim Fox, one of
the house church leaders (and student at our seminary campus) is quoted, “We have some people who come from regular churches, and were a little disenfranchised. And people who joined because of friendships, and people who are kind of hurting, kind of searching. My age group and younger are seeking spiritual things that they have not found elsewhere.”

The concept of house church is not new. Its most dramatic, contemporary manifestation was discovered in Communist China. The current American and European versions date back to the 1950s. Earlier examples include the Pietistic revivals of Philip Spener (17th century) and the Wesleys (18th century). But the most important historical era of the house church is that of the New Testament.

In fact, one of the appeals of the movement is for the recovery of the New Testament way of doing church. Indeed, the early, pre-Constantinian church met almost exclusively in homes. Early Christian gatherings occurred in some public places, such as synagogues and the Temple courts in Jerusalem. However, the primary place of Christian meeting for worship and fellowship was in individual homes. Beginning with the pentecostal upper room, presumably in someone’s home, early Christians ate, worshiped, prayed, studied, and otherwise gathered together in their homes.

Perhaps the primary motive behind a return to New Testament ways is the recovery of community. Many people experience spiritual and social disenfranchisement. A small, intimate, family atmosphere—and at church, no less!—is appealing as the perfect venue to restore vital relationships with God and other persons.

Rad Zdero provides a helpful and comprehensive definition. “[House churches] are fully functioning churches in themselves, with the freedom to partake in the Lord’s Supper, baptize, marry, bury, exercise discipline, and chart their own course. They are volunteer-led and meet in house-sized groups for participatory and interactive mentoring and outreach, as well as food and fun.”

Autonomy is a major value for house church members. Their gatherings are not to be confused with any other type of church-based home group, their primary distinguishing mark being that they are “fully functioning churches in themselves.” “The house church in itself is the church in its fullest and most holistic sense,” administering ordinances, determining their own organization, and ministering to one another.
Though mutual ministry encompasses marrying and burying, it extends much further beyond these functions. Worship, interactive accountability, as well as food and fun, can involve each member effectively when the group consists of no more than twelve to fifteen people. As Tony and Felicity Dale write, “Church is kingdom people living in community. Community is not necessarily living together under one roof, but living with the type of relationship that fosters an active involvement in the needs of the world around us.”

The danger of becoming a “pious club” is inherent in such a tight, close-knit, committed group. The fight to maintain an outward focus is realized in various ways, from organizational structure to an intentional outreach and discipleship focus to house church networks.

The social benefits of house churches are augmented by financial ones. Specifically, church building costs, heavy debt, multiple staff salaries, and the myriad of financial challenges of building-based churches are non-existent. Other benefits include a greater level of church excitement and more spiritual conversions.

House churches are specifically volunteer led; there are no ordained leaders. The result of this organizational move is not only to diminish any hint of a ministerial hierarchy, but also to recognize the value of ministerial giftedness in each and every church member. Thus, a plurality of leaders is assumed.

This is not to imply that house churches do not employ organizational schemes. Options include everything from a fivefold leadership structure to simply spiritual fathers and mothers who nurture the congregation. The qualifications for leadership are found in biblical models (Eph. 4:11-13 or 1 Tim. 3) and Jesus’ servant example.

**TOWARD A HOUSE CHURCH ECCLESIOLOGY**

Ecclesiology, or the doctrine of the church, is a surprisingly difficult doctrine to navigate. The difficulty originates with the fact that the Bible presents no clear, comprehensive, perpetual plan for how church is supposed to happen. Certain biblical principles for doing church and discovering its nature exist, and fruitful images of the church can be found particularly in the New Testament. But no single, overriding authoritative pattern for church organization can be found in the New Testament. The result of this relative
ambiguity regarding the church is two-fold. First, literally hundreds of different denominations exist within the Christianity, most of which claim to be the authorized New Testament version of church. Second, these traditions have produced a consequent multiplicity of theological approaches to ecclesiology. As James William McClendon writes, “More than anywhere, in this part of Christian teaching, multiple paths appear, while weighty consequences lie in wait down each path.”

The approach of this study is to take seriously what Scripture does communicate about the church and to construct a framework in anticipation of the “weighty consequences” ahead. After a brief consideration of the word Εκκλησία, attention will be paid to three different biblical metaphors or images of the church. They are the church as the people of God, body of Christ, and temple of the Holy Spirit. These images were chosen in order to grasp most concisely and comprehensively certain biblical and theological essentials pertinent to a house church ecclesiology.

**Εκκλησία**

The Greek work Εκκλησία is translated “church.” Relative agreement exists among theologians regarding its general meaning of “assembly.” However, certain nuances in the word’s usage are important to note. First, a purposive element is implied in Εκκλησία. Though the word refers in the New Testament to both a Christian gathering and a civic one, each assembly was not haphazardly or casually gathered. There is purpose to the gathering. Second, Εκκλησία references to the church are used in multiple contexts. They include the congregation of Israel (Acts 7:38), a generic Christian church (1 Cor. 12:28), or even the church universal (Rom. 16:23). However, the absolute majority of New Testament uses of Εκκλησία point to the local church, usually a group of believers in a given city. Third, the references to local churches never imply that those bodies of believers were “only a part or component of the whole church.” The believers assembled and identified as Εκκλησία were the entire church, full and free, in that given city or location (Rom. 12:5). Fourth, in the New Testament Εκκλησία never refers to a building. The content of the word is always the people whom God has redeemed (2 Cor. 6:16).
The People of God

The Apostle Paul utilizes this image twice. One usage is given to the Corinthian church, within the larger context of arguing for believers not to marry unbelievers: “I will live in them and move among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people” (2 Cor. 6:16). The other usage was directed to the Roman church, as a declaration that Gentiles have been included in God’s people: “I will call them “my people” who are not my people” (Rom. 9:25). The Apostle Peter employs this image too, identifying Christians as “a people belonging to God.” “Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God” (1 Pet. 2:9-10).

All three references hearken back to Old Testament language and contexts. Thus, wrapped in the image of “people of God” is a linkage between Israel, the Old Testament people of God, and Christians, God’s people by virtue of the new covenant. A linkage indeed exists between the people of the old and new covenants. In the Old Testament Israel is continually identified as the people of God. God called them, owned them, and claimed them for His own. More than a mere title, “people of God” points to relationship; Israel was related to God as children are to their father. He confirmed that fact by giving them certain rights, obligations, blessings, and privileges. The linkage between the two peoples of God, Israel and the church, validates the latter as God’s new covenant people.

The two components of this image, “people” and “God”, each carries its own theological significance. Making references to the church as “people”, the writers point back to the reality of the meaning of ekklesia. The church is not a building, physical structure, or even, at its heart, an organization or institution. It is people. The church is, “. . . not a house made of stones and earth . . . It is the holy assembly of those who live in righteousness.” This description by the early church father Hippolytus (ca. 170-236) still rings true.

Regarding the divine component in the image, God is more than a modifier and definer of a special people. God has acted to create them individually and corporately. Thus, this image points to the reality of God’s sovereign, ongoing work in establishing and maintaining the church. He called Israel from among the nations, initiating the relationship that made them His. Even so, He’s called the church to be “a chosen people” and “a holy nation” (1 Pet. 2:9-10). The church is no mere human invention, institution, or a social club. “It is God’s assembly.” Without God’s integral involvement no church can exist.
Built upon this idea of God initiating and maintaining the church, that the church is His people, is the attendant idea of reciprocity. Given that God has called and blessed the church and continues to maintain it, John Hammett writes, “the church’s first concern must be to please God.” The church must do so in every aspect of its life, whether in worship, mission, ministry, or polity. The church cannot exist as the people of God if it does not seek His will and direction.

Another idea imbedded within this image is the eschatological nature of the church. As God’s people, the church looks forward to God’s continued work. They exist in a sense of “biblical expectation,” reckoning that “God has only begun to do what God will do.” Biblically, this idea is found in multiple examples, such as the following: Jesus telling His disciples to observe the Lord’s Supper in anticipation of the eventual celebration with Him in heaven (Mt. 26:29), and the writer of Hebrews commanding believers to gather in worship “all the more as you see the Day approaching” (Heb. 10:25, emphasis added).

The implications of living in this “already/not yet” condition give the church proper perspective. The church’s external relationships (e.g., the limits, extent, and purposes of social engagement) are shaped by that forward look, as is the church’s “alien” yet hopeful self-perception (1 Pet. 2:11). Also, as McClendon notes, an eschatological ecclesiology demands some degree of change, even fluidity, in the church. “The church must change, for God is on the move, and the end is not yet.” McClendon does not advocate change for change’s sake. He makes the valid point, though, that in response to changing culture, God’s dynamic nature, and His working toward as yet unfulfilled Kingdom goals, the church cannot help but change if it is to remain the people of the living God.

The people-of-God image touches several ecclesial issues for house churches. Obviously, participants in a house church, or any church for that matter, seek the ecclesial validity of their group as implied in the image; a gathering of people cannot be a church without some connection to God. To identify a group as “people of God” is to place it in the lineage of “God’s great purpose of calling to Himself a people,” a lineage drawn from Old Testament Israel through the early New Testament church to legitimate Christian believers gathered right now. This means that a proper house church ecclesiology must affirm that connectedness with
God, His historical and contemporary people, as well as His already/not yet work.

While community is a major value for house churches, the ecclesial value of community is grounded in connectedness with God. He must be at the center of the gathering, His presence evident not only as the focal point of worship but in the changed lives of redeemed members as they seek to obey Him.

Perhaps the greatest challenge to house churches becoming fully the people of God will be found in their connectedness to the people of God. The biblical usage of *ekklesia* points predominately toward the local, complete, stand-alone church. And yet a broader understanding of the people of God also must be held, particularly when the absence of that broader understanding can undermine the strength of a given local church. Since house churches are an appealing alternative for many people disgruntled with traditional ways of doing church, many of these folks seek to cut all ties with past and most present expressions of the Christian church. This temptation must be avoided for it is rooted not in a desire to affirm the legitimacy of the local church but to strike against other Christian gatherings in pride and anger. To disengage with the historical and present people of God is to disqualify one’s group from claiming that title. Counteractive measures may include networking as well as approaching house church as a calling from God rather than an escape from ecclesial oppression.

As a self-proclaimed fresh example of God’s ongoing work, house churches grasp easily the anticipatory nature of church. They are a “mini-movement” of God, on the leading edge of “Revolution” within God’s Kingdom. However, on the ultimate horizon of Kingdom work is the reality that God will use other tools and methods to accomplish His purposes. This is a reality of eschatological ecclesiology. Even as house church leaders decry the lack of acceptance from traditional church leaders, so they must guard against the same attitude once God begins to use something else to accomplish His revolutionary, reforming work. House churches will not forever be the new thing.

**The Body of Christ**

This biblical image is used exclusively by the Apostle Paul. It is found in four of his epistles and occurs in various forms: “the body of Christ” (1 Cor. 12:27, Eph. 4:12), “one body in Christ” (Rom. 12:5), “his body” (Eph. 1:23, 5:23, 5:30, Col. 1:24), “the body”
(Eph. 4:16, Col. 1:18, 2:19), “the one body” (1 Cor. 12:13), and “one body” (Eph. 2:16, 4:4). Elements of the body are also mentioned: “members” (1 Cor. 12:12, 12:27, Rom. 12:5, Eph. 5:30) and Christ as its head (Eph. 1:22, 5:23, Col. 1:18).46

The axis about which this image turns is drawn between the points of unity and authority. Unity is conveyed by the anatomical understanding of the organic oneness of a human body.47 Humans are thought of as single units, comprised of various body parts, but single, whole people nonetheless. In fact, the presence of those multiple members within one body is critical to understanding the image of unity; physical unity is achieved and not hindered by the diversity of its members (1 Cor. 12:1-31). The human body cannot exist apart from its members. And certainly the members cannot exist apart from their relation to each other.

Miroslav Volf writes that this image points directly to relationship issues involving both salvation and the church. It speaks to “an inward and personal communion in the Holy Spirit between Christ and Christians (1 Cor. 6:17),” as well as the relationships between Christ and the church ( Eph. 5:22-33) and among Christians (Rom. 12:4-8). The message of the image is that Christ dwells personally and singularly in all Christians. That individual “personal interiority” of Jesus Christ thus becomes the commonly experienced, unifying factor among the gathered church members. Thus, because the one Christ dwells in each Christian, the Apostle Paul could write, “you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28). The church is a communion of persons, mutually dependent on Christ and each other.48

The other axis point for this image is authority. By identifying Jesus Christ as the head of the body, the Apostle Paul declared that the church’s ultimate authority is Christ. Even as the head is the physical nerve center for the entire body, so is Christ for the church.49 Furthermore, Christ is not optional for the church; the body without the head cannot exist.50

The theological implications for this image surround the idea of relationships. The Corinthian context to which the Apostle Paul wrote dealt with ministry. The “body of Christ” imagery was used to help them see not only their unity in Christ, but also the value of and responsibility for one another. The individual, spiritual giftedness given to each of the Corinthian Christians was given to be used for the body, not wasted as individual trophies, bringing glory to the gifted one and not the Giver (1 Cor. 12:24-25).51
The unifying relationship among church members is their individual and, consequently, collective one with Christ. A primary aspect of that relationship is Jesus' ultimate authority (addressed above). Yet the body benefits also from promised growth via its relationship to the head.\textsuperscript{52}

Christ's presence as essential to the church is at the heart of a particular understanding of the church's essence. Following the path of many theologians since Ignatius, Miroslav Volf grounds this ecclesiological perspective on Mt. 18:20: "For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them."\textsuperscript{53} According to this trajectory of thought, the irreducible, minimum content of the church is a gathering of believers confessing the name of Jesus. In such a context, with these requirements met, the Spirit of Christ "is present in its ecclesially constitutive activity. . ."\textsuperscript{54}

For Volf, confession is much more than the empty recital of some creedal or confessional statement. It involves accepting, appropriating, and affirming the entire story of Jesus Christ—past, present, and future. From this stance flow the following important, far-reaching, and defining implications: the membership is regenerate, affirming Jesus as both Savior and Lord; the Bible is at the heart of belief and practice; and the membership is committed to discipleship, allowing their lives "to be determined by Jesus."\textsuperscript{55}

Such a confession is made in the assembly of believers, an assembly wherein the constitutive Spirit of Christ is present. Given that "the presence of the Spirit of Christ cannot be directly ascertained," Volf put great emphasis on locating the church via its external actions. His contention is that external actions of the church reveal its identity and are an inseparable part of its ecclesiology. A proper set of external, ecclesially revealing actions, is comprised of "the word, the sacraments [ordinances], and the presence of the people."\textsuperscript{56}

The third of those actions points directly to congregational polity. Working from his Mt. 18:20 premise, and drawing heavily upon the traditions of both the Free Church and John Smyth (pastor of the first Baptist congregation), Volf maintains that "Christ's dominion is realized through the entire congregation."\textsuperscript{57} Again, if Christ is present with two or more gathered confessors of His name (Mt. 18:20), then there exists no need to corrupt that direct, Spirit-mediated presence with an artificial, human, religious hierarchy.\textsuperscript{58} How the gathered congregation organizes itself further (e.g., pastors, deacons, elders, bishops) is not as important as the central idea of
Christ's headship being best displayed through the entire, redeemed, obedient, gathered assembly.

The “body of Christ” imagery speaks loudly and affirmatively to a house church ecclesiology. Grounded specifically in relationships, this image encompasses exactly what house churches hope to achieve—a Christ-worshiping, ministering community.

Unity, as in the oneness of the body of Christ, is an ecclesially valid idea. The desire to recreate community flows not just from contemporary, cultural yearnings. It is grounded in the very identity of the church; community is not optional. Furthermore, unity in diversity affirms the house church value of a ministering membership. Again, two of the stated values of a house church are refusing to exalt “professional” ministers while affirming the ministry giftedness of each member.

Christ permeates every legitimate church. First, He is the ultimate authority in the gathered life of the church. House churches continue to recognize this via their emphasis on shared leadership. Maintaining congregational governance, while eschewing the organizational comfort of a well-developed bureaucracy, are acts of risky faith. But even a gathered two or three regenerate, obedient confessors of Jesus’ name can know His ruling presence.

Second, as ultimate authority Christ defines the leadership structure among the gathered believers. The chosen leaders are subject ultimately to Christ's authority. But also important is the fact that the Ultimate Authority exhibited a leadership style defined by service. Thus, local church leaders, as fellow members of the body of Christ, are submissive to Christ and servants to the gathered church.

Third, the gospel of Jesus Christ is the good news by which people come into the church. Outreach, particularly evangelistic outreach, must be a critical component of a house church. Mention has been made already of efforts by leaders to fight insularity and exclusivity. The outward focus of sharing the gospel is a powerful tool to that end.

Fourth, and most important, the body of Christ is so because He makes it so. At the very heart of the church's essence lies the confession of Jesus' name. The confessional implications are broad, centering on the good news of Jesus' story and covering not only right scriptural words, but also right belief, ethical action, and genuine worship. Again, the promise of Mt. 18:20 rings loudly: “where two or three come together in my name [even in a house church!], there am I with them.”
Even as Mt. 18:20 affirms the small size and venue choices of house churches, so it cuts against dogmatism regarding the same. Though house church leaders trumpet their recovery of the New Testament church model, biblical vagueness, social expediency, and historical reality affirm that there exists no single, authorized New Testament church model. Mt. 18:20 seems closer to a New Testament standard, setting forth its principles of a numerically bare minimum, at least two or three, plus no mention of any preferred venue. House church leaders will do well to affirm a multiplicity of church models, refusing to identify their model as God’s preferred choice.

The Temple of the Holy Spirit

This image is used several times by the Apostle Paul. In Eph. 2:19-22 the Apostle develops a full corporate “building” metaphor, identifying the apostles and prophets as the building’s foundation, Jesus as the Cornerstone, and believers as “being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit” (Eph. 2:22, emphasis added). The Apostle Peter utilized the same imagery in 1 Pet. 2:5: “. . . you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood. . . .”

In constructing an ecclesial framework of images some theologians would prefer not to recognize the Holy Spirit in typical Trinitarian fashion (i.e., as the third of three ecclesial images, per this study). Rather, they desire to consider the Holy Spirit as “the starting point of life in the body of Christ.” That approach is valid, because both of the previous images considered in this study assume the presence of the Holy Spirit. For example, by His living presence in individual Christians they are formed into the people of God. Also, the presence of Christ as head of His body and ground of its relationships is realized through the “ecclesially constituting” Holy Spirit of Christ. Thus, the most important idea within this image is that the Holy Spirit is the dynamic within everything ecclesial. Without His presence there could be no Christian church.

The presence of God the Holy Spirit makes the church a divine organism rather than a purely human institution. He is the power that enlivens the church. Though Jesus taught about the church, and His disciples were at its nucleus, not until the Spirit came upon those 120 believers, on the first Christian Pentecost, was the church actually born.
Though that Pentecostal event marked the church’s birth, it also marked the beginning of a new era for individual Christians. When the Holy Spirit descended on the upper room, He descended on individuals, fulfilling a promise Jesus had made to His disciples less than two months prior: He would be with them perpetually through the presence of the Holy Spirit (Jn. 14:16-18). And that promise extended to every believer in Christ from that Pentecostal moment to the eventual consummation of the ages.

This inner, personal, divine dynamic is not only the power behind individual rebirth, but behind corporate koinonia. This word for “fellowship” can refer to the believer’s fellowship with God (2 Cor. 13:14, 1 Jn. 1:3), but most often the reference is to believers’ fellowship, hence relationship, with one another.63

Informing and guiding koinonia is the ethical power given to individual believers, consequently the church, by the Holy Spirit. Reborn people live differently, according to “God’s rule.”64 Spirit-empowered ethical life is manifested not only among believers but between the church and the world. McClendon writes of “Spirit-gifted community practices” from which emerges the “vector of a community that lives between the times [of the New Testament world and the ultimate Kingdom age], adapting, adjusting, transforming, interpreting so that the church can be the church even as it helps the world to see itself as world.”

According to the Apostle Peter, one reason that believers are “being built into a spiritual house” is to “be a holy priesthood” (1 Pet. 2:5). This is the theological idea of the priesthood of the believers. At its heart are both vertical and horizontal relationships; believers are blessed with direct, “priestly” fellowship with God (the vertical relationship), yet they are responsible to minister as priests to each other (the horizontal). Therefore, this priesthood can only function and be effective in a corporate atmosphere, the atmosphere created by the Holy Spirit in the church.66

One other idea woven into this priesthood concept involves proper worship. A function of this new, redeemed “holy priesthood” is to “offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Pet. 2:5). Hammett writes that “spiritual” points to the quality and source of worship offered by this priesthood. It is “Spirit-empowered worship, prompted by the Spirit who indwells them and forms them into his temple.”67

What can the image of the “temple of the Holy Spirit” communicate to a house church ecclesiology? The dominant message is
that the Holy Spirit’s presence is the dynamic within believers and, consequently, the church.

By His power people are redeemed. A regenerate membership is critical to the essence of the church. Through individual believers the dynamic presence of God the Holy Spirit forms a true church. His “ecclesially constitutive” presence comes only via the Spirit-filled confessors of Jesus. Implied, then, is that a gathered house church cannot be a true church if the members are not Christians.

By the Spirit’s presence the church enjoys koinonia. House churches and their members can experience the genuine community they seek only in the power of the Spirit of God. This implies not just an atmosphere where the individual believer is accepted and loved, but one in which those same believers reach out to one another. True fellowship will only ever exist in an atmosphere of reciprocal, Spirit-empowered community.

The dynamic of the Spirit will be the only source of true, ethical response within the gathered church. Whether the house church is helping its “world to see itself as world;” recognizing and affirming its shared, servant leadership; or even being tempted to lash out at church structures which seem archaic, the ethic of God must rule. It can only as the membership approaches its tasks in the power of the Spirit.

Finally, only the Spirit of God can empower true ministry. Christians are priests, but only as they submit to God and respond to one another. True ministry in a house church, or any church of course, cannot flow from altruistic, community-building impulses. Rather, the Spirit of God alone can empower believers individually and corporately to minister truly to each other and their world.

CONCLUSION

The attempt here has been to answer briefly the question: What is church? The broader ecclesiological answer is based on three biblical images: the people of God, the body of Christ, and the temple of the Holy Spirit. All of these images are rich in theological meaning and provide a comprehensive framework for discussion of an ecclesiological approach to house church.

The chosen approach for this ecclesiological study has been essential rather than functional (i.e., to define the church based on its essence rather than its function). I hope that the reason why is now clear. It is my opinion that a proper assessment of house
church, whether from the perspective of a house church member or a denominational leader, must begin with essence rather than function. If the latter approach is taken, then reality can become blurred. On one hand, a functional ecclesiological approach renders house church valid because it is successful; house church made Time Magazine! On the other hand, that same approach can render it invalid, because its organizational structure is suspect.

So, what has this approach revealed about house church? Is it a valid ecclesial entity? According to the essence of church as I have defined it, yes, house church can be as legitimate as any church. It can be the people of God, called by Him as a gathered people even as Israel was called. The emphasis is on God's calling action, setting the group apart as His people. A house church can be the body of Christ. Even with two or three gathered, the confession of Jesus is the irreducible minimum for a proper, assembled, New Testament church. And a house church can be the temple of the Holy Spirit. Comprised of regenerate members, their lives filled with His presence, the church is empowered to worship, live an ethical and ministering life, and enjoy true koinonia.

I have addressed only minimally and sporadically the area of church organization and polity, where most contention seems to arise about house church. This has been intentional. Again, an essential approach focuses on the core of the church; what is it? But that approach also illuminates the fact that function and even mission are secondary to the content of the core. In other words, if the core of the house church concept is biblically solid and theologically sound, then so too will be its function and mission. Disagreement over secondary issues should not invalidate the solid and sound concept.

I do not presume to present the final word on house church ecclesiology. Rather, the attempt here has been simply to think ecclesiologically about house church. May the reflections, method, insights, and anything else in this work not only contribute to God's Kingdom work but also inspire other theologians to do better work than mine.


3 An exception to this reality is Hadaway, DuBose, & Wright.

4 A final qualification regards the use of certain terms. Though “house” is this work’s primary definer of “church,” it is considered synonymous with “simple” and “organic.” This melding of terms cuts against both advocates and critics of the simple church concept, but for the purposes of this paper the distinction need not be made.


6 Ibid., 46.

7 Ibid., 48.

8 Hadaway, DuBose, & Wright, 173.

9 See, for example, Acts 2:46, 5:12, 13:14, 14:1, & 17:1-2.


11 See, for example, Acts 2:46, 5:42, 8:3, 12:12, Rom. 16:3-5, Col. 4:15, Phil. 2.


13 Zdero, 4.

14 Ibid.

15 Simson, 94. Emphasis added.


17 Simson, 140.

18 For example, Simson’s model makes extensive use of “an apostolic network” of leaders who contribute to and are involved in multiple house churches. Shared leaders, therefore, keep members of individual churches aware of ministry needs among groups other than their own. Hadaway, DuBose, & Wright note, “The top priority [for a house church] must always be to bring in the lost.” 71. And see, Larry Kreider’s, House Church Networks: A church for a new generation (Ephrata, PA: House to House Publications, 2001), 104. Networks are comprised of like-minded congre-
gations coming together for intentional fellowship, accountability, and encouragement.

19 Simson, 197-205.
20 See, for example, Simson and Kreider, 11.
21 Millard Erickson, Christian Theology, 1094.
24 An example of ekklesia as a non-church assembly is Acts 19:32.
26 Ibid.
28 Grenz, 465.
29 Unless otherwise indicated all Scripture quotations are from the NIV.
30 Garrett, 468.
31 Ibid.
32 Examples include Ex. 19:5-6, Dt. 4:20, 7:6, Hos. 1:10, 2:23.
33 Hippolytus, Daniel 1.17.6-7, quoted in Grenz, 464.
36 McClendon, 344.
38 McClendon, 344. “The upshot is that, in a sense not true of other doctrines of the faith, Christian ecclesiology is provisional ecclesiology; it looks toward a fulfillment not yet achieved.”
As an example of this attitude, Simson articulates a palpable distaste for church as a “traditional institution only celebrating the past.” See Simson, 119. He goes on to decry democratic leadership, bureaucracy, or any single “dominating programme” [sic] or agenda, including Bible study or prayer, in a house church. See Simson, 141-8.

“We must ‘beware of authors who live in anger toward the established church. . . . The anger of man still can’t work the righteousness of God.’” Ralph Moore, House2House Magazine, March 2001, 20, in Kreider, 16.

Recognizing the need for a corrective to the attitude exhibited by Simson and others, Kreider warns that a house church must not be a disgruntled, ingrown, unwilling to submit group. See Kreider, 106.


Recognizing the need for a corrective to the attitude exhibited by Simson and others, Kreider warns that a house church must not be a disgruntled, ingrown, unwilling to submit group. See Kreider, 106.


The multiple references (primarily in Ephesians) to Christ as head are surrounded by language affirming His perpetual exaltation over all powers (Eph. 1:20-23), ultimately “head over everything for the church” (1:22).

Care should be given not to push the image too far. Physically speaking both a headless body and a body-less head cannot exist. Yet Christ, the head, exists even apart from the church.

This idea of mutual ministry is clear also in the Apostle's words to the Ephesians. The individual gifts were given “to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up (Eph. 4:12 - emphasis added)...”

See Eph. 4:16, Col. 2:19. The first reference brings together the idea of Christ as the source of the church's growth with that of the faithfulness of each member's ministry. The second simply notes God's sovereignty in the church growth process. See Hammett, 42.

For a partial list of theologians in the ecclesiological tradition of Mt. 18:20, see Volf, 135-6 plus n. 32.

Volf, 129. Emphasis is the author's.

Ibid., He also notes, “The church is the church of Jesus Christ . . . , or it is not a church at all.” Emphasis is the author's. Further, “In order to be a church, the people . . . attest that [Jesus] is the ‘determining ground’ of their lives; in him they have found freedom, orientation, and power.” 146-47.

Ibid., 129, 131.
57 Ibid., 132.
58 McClendon is helpful here, declaring that the church is “not a company of privates led by ordained captains . . . but a company of equals, equally gifted by God’s Spirit, equally responsible for the community-building whose accomplishment is the fullness of Christ.” McClendon, 369.

59 McClendon describes and affirms Lesslie Newbigin’s ecclesiological approach. McClendon, 343.
60 Volf, 129.

61 The temple component of the image is significant, too, in that it both provides linkage between Old and New Testaments as well as highlights the dwelling place of God.


63 Hammett notes that the New Testament contains over thirty commands “regarding how believers are to act toward one another,” the most predominant being the command to love one another. Hammett, 36.
64 McClendon, 362, 367.
65 Ibid., 367.

66 Hammett makes the correct distinction between a priesthood of the believers and an erroneous, individualistic priesthood of the believer. Hammett, 46.
67 Hammett, 45.
68 Volf, 129.
69 McClendon, 367.
THE NATURE OF THE CHURCH: LOCAL OR UNIVERSAL?

Jimmy A. Millikin
Professor of Theology
Dean, Masters and Associates Programs
Chair, Department of Theology
Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary

The doctrine of the church has not been historically considered an integral part of systematic theology. Very few of the older classic systematic theologies treat the subject as a distinct theological topic. Thomas Aquinas, who is still considered the chief representative of Roman Catholic theology, did not treat the doctrine of the church in his massive Summa Theologica. The classic reformed theology of Charles Hodge does not discuss the church as a distinct theological subject. The early Southern Baptist theologies of J. L. Dagg, J. P. Boyce, and E. Y. Mullins contain no separate discussion of the church. The absence of the church as a distinct theological topic in these and others caused Millard Erickson to remark in his Christian Theology that “at no point in the history of Christian thought has the doctrine of the church received the direct and complete attention which other doctrines have received.”

Even though Erickson's remarks included the point in history in which he wrote, things may be changing. Erickson himself devoted substantial space to the church. Herman Hoeksema, in his Reformed Dogmatics, includes ecclesiology as one of the six loci in his system of theology. James Leo Garrett included the church as one of his distinct theological topics, and observed that “today Christian theologians almost universally agree that the doctrine of the church is a proper and essential subdivision of systematic theology.”

The doctrine of the church has historically been of great importance to Baptists. It is, without doubt, the one doctrine on which what is known as “Baptist distinctives” centers. Unfortunately, it is a doctrine that has been the victim of much neglect in the average Baptist church and pulpit in recent years. Time was when doctrinal studies and preaching centered on what Baptists believe about the church. The reason for this sad neglect is a matter of opinion. Nevertheless, I will venture to offer my opinion. The doctrine of
the church has always been a controversial and divisive issue among Christians. Baptists have historically resisted the ecumenical movement promoted by the World Council of Churches, but there is a growing acceptance of an evangelical ecumenism. There is a consuming desire for unity in what is called the body of Christ, and the doctrine of the church is often seen as a peripheral doctrine that need not divide that body. Consequently, matters dealing with the doctrine of the church are either ignored altogether or redefined so as not to offend other evangelical groups.

Nearly every issue that properly falls under the doctrine of the church is fraught with disagreement and controversy: the nature of the church, the ordinances, the polity, the officers, and even its primary function or mission. This article deals with the issue of its nature. What is the church? That is the question addressed here.

**ALTERNATIVE VIEWS**

The primary issue concerning the nature of the church is whether the church is a universal body or simply a local assembly of believers. David Smith summed up the issue with the following questions:

Are the true church and the institutional church one and the same? Are there people in the visible church who are not a part of the invisible and greater body of Christ? And, in the same vein, are there some people who belong to the invisible church but have never been a part of a local community of believers?5

Generally, there are five basic views concerning this question.

**Universal Visible Body**

The Roman Catholic view, and as Smith observed, to some extent the Greek Orthodox and Anglican, is that the church is a visible and external institution organized hierarchically.6 The mystical body of Christ is identical with the institutional Roman church. The church is the continuation of the incarnation of Christ, the visible and material form of God on earth. Hans Küng, a Catholic theologian, though not a traditional and orthodox one, stated this position thusly:
A real church made up by real people cannot possibly be invisible. The believing Christian least of all can harbour any illusions about the fact that the Church he believes in is a real one and therefore visible. There is no place here for fantasies of the Platonic idea. The Christian's starting point . . . is a real Church.\(^7\)

**Universal Mystical Body**

At the other end of the spectrum is the view that the church is essentially a universal spiritual (invisible) body. Erickson designates this view as “the pietistic approach,” and Smith calls it “the individual commitment” view.\(^8\) This view usually places little importance to the visible local assembly of believers. Those who view the church in this manner consider membership in a local assembly of minimal importance. Those who are born again are already members of the spiritual body, the church, and identity with a visible local body is totally optional. Participation in a parachurch group, a nondenominational chapel, or involvement in some other Christian organization or work is the legitimate work of the church. Typically, those who embrace a strict dispensational theology as set forth in the unrevised Schofield Bible hold this view of the nature of the church.

**Universal Spiritual/Universal Visible**

Some non-Catholic theologians and denominations view the church as both a universal spiritual (invisible) body and a universal visible body. Most mainline denominations, for example, embrace the Apostles Creed, which states, “I believe in . . . the holy catholic church.” Catholic in this creed is lower case and is perceived to be both a universal invisible spiritual body and a universal visible body. The invisible spiritual church consists of all the redeemed from the time of Adam until the consummation of the ages. The universal visible church consists of all those throughout the world who profess faith in Christ. This universal visible church is made up of particular assemblies to which have been given the ministry and ordinances of Christ. This is the view of the church expressed in the Westminster Confession, the official creed of the Presbyterian and other Reformed churches. The Confession states:

I. The catholic or universal Church, which is invisible, consists of the whole number of the elect, that have been, are, or
shall be gathered into one, under Christ the head thereof; and is the spouse, the body, the fullness of Him that filleth all in all.

II. The visible Church, which is also catholic or universal under the gospel (not confined to one nation as before under the law), consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion, together with their children; and is the Kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ; the house and family of God, through which men are ordinarily saved and union with which is essential to their best growth and service.9

Adherents of this view often speak of the church in this universal sense with expressions as “The Asian Church,” “The Church in North America,” or even the “Worldwide Church.” They also often speak of the church in a denominational sense, such as The Presbyterian Church or The Methodist Church.

Universal Invisible/Local Visible

A widely held view of the meaning of “church” in the New Testament is that it refers both to a universal invisible spiritual body, and also to a local visible assembly of believers. This view is similar to the above view, except it limits the visible church to a local body with a distinct identity. Unlike the above view, the visible church does not include all professing believers. One automatically becomes a part of the universal church through the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit, and personal faith in Christ. However, one must personally unite with a local assembly of believers to be a part of the visible church. In other words, a person may be a part of the universal church and never join a local visible church. Likewise, a person may be a member of a local visible church and not be a part of the universal invisible church.

This view of the church is held by many Southern Baptists and other Baptist groups. The Baptist Faith and Message, the official statement of faith of the Southern Baptist Convention, included an acknowledgment of the universal use of “church” in the 1963 revision. It basically defines church as a local visible autonomous assembly, but added this statement: “The New Testament speaks also of the church as the body of Christ which includes all of the redeemed of all the ages.”10 The 2000 revision kept the universal statement with a slight expansion: “The New Testament speaks also of the church as the Body of Christ which includes all of the
redeemed of all the ages, believers from every tribe, and tongue, and people, and nation.”11 Although acknowledging the universal use of church in the New Testament, both versions support the view that the primary meaning of church in the New Testament is that of a local visible autonomous assembly of baptized believers in Jesus Christ. The statement of a universal church amounts to simply an addendum that seeks to accommodate those within the Baptist fold who sees some sort of a universal church, but it is not an essential factor in defining the New Testament church.

Local Visible Only

A view held among some Baptists is that the only church recognized in the New Testament is that of a local visible assembly of believers in Christ. This view may be said to be peculiar to Baptists and at one time in the history of Southern Baptists a widely held view, especially west of the Mississippi River. The first two confessions of faith officially used by Southern Baptists, The New Hampshire Confession (1833) and the 1925 Baptist Faith and Message, make no mention of the universal sense of the church. B. H. Carroll, the founder of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, was probably the ablest and most influential advocate of the local visible body only view among Southern Baptists. Carroll advocated that the only type of church that could be called a New Testament church was a local/visible church and rejected the theory of an “invisible church” as having no biblical basis. In two lectures on ecclesia he presented extensive arguments for his view, and gave detailed answers to all the arguments given in defense of the universal invisible sense of church in the New Testament.12

Carroll was not the only advocate of the local visible assembly view. Earlier than he, but also contemporary with him, the view was taught by J. M. Pendleton in his Christian doctrines: a Compendium of Theology (1878) and Distinctive Principles of Baptists (1882), two of the most widely used books on Christian doctrine by Southern Baptists in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century.13 Furthermore, most of the books on Baptist doctrine on a more popular level taught in Baptist churches all defined the church as a visible body of baptized believers in Christ. Almost without exception, the idea of a universal invisible church was absent in the study books. This view is often pejoratively called Landmarkism.
THE NATURE OF THE CHURCH AS SEEN IN THE
NEW TESTAMENT TERMINOLOGY

The proper starting point in determining the nature of the New Testament church is the term that is used in the New Testament for church. Word studies are often minimized in contemporary hermeneutics and theology, but it is important to emphasize that what revelation we have is preserved for us in words. Words have meanings and communicate meanings. Therefore, the tracing of the etymology, development, and usage of the New Testament word for church is important in determining the biblical nature of the church.

The Greek word translated “church” in our English Bibles is εκκλησία. “Church” is not really a translation but a substitution. The word is derived from the Greek κυριακόν, which means “belonging to the Lord.” This word was used originally to refer to the building in which Christians met. It is not within the purpose of this essay to go into the detail as to why the word was chosen to translate εκκλησία. Years ago, H. E. Dana provided a detailed plausible explanation as to how and why “church” came to be the word used in translate εκκλησία in the New Testament. This study will be limited to the meaning of εκκλησία, the Greek word for “church” in the New Testament.

Classical Greek Usage

By New Testament times, εκκλησία already had an established meaning and use in Greek culture. In classical use it meant an assembly. The noun is derived from the verb εκκαλεῖον, which is a combination of the verb καλεῖ, “to call or summon,” and the prepositional prefix ek, “out,” the resultant meaning being “called out.” In secular Greek it was commonly used to refer to an assembly of representative citizens of a Greek city called out to transact the business of the city. The Classical Greek Lexicon of Liddell and Scott define it as “an assembly of citizens regularly summoned: the legislative assembly.”

There were several characteristics of the Greek εκκλησία. Each Greek city εκκλησία was independent of other city εκκλησία. There was no wider national controlling body over the local assemblies. The εκκλησία was made up of members who met certain qualifications, that is, not every resident of a city was a member of the
ekklesia. The business of the ekklesia was conducted on democratic principles. I. Coenen summarized the procedure as follows:

Every citizen had the right to speak and to propose matters for discussion, but a proposition could only be dealt with if there was an expert opinion on the matter. . . . A decision was only valid if it won a certain number of votes. Authorization to participate, and the methods of summoning the assembly and of voting—by show of hands in Athens . . . by acclaim . . . by ballot sheets or stones . . . were strictly regulated, as was the control of the assembly, which originally lay with president of the Prytaneis and from the 4th cent. B. C. with a college of nine.\(^{16}\)

Taking into consideration the established usage of ekklesia in secular Greek, Dana drew the following conclusions concerning its bearing on the meaning of the idea of church in the New Testament: “(1) the assembly was local; (2) it was autonomous; (3) it presupposed definite qualifications; (4) it was conducted on democratic principles.”

**Septuagint Use**

It is the opinion of the majority of Christian scholars that the primary background for the New Testament use of ekklesia is the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament. This opinion should not be accepted uncritically, for the great majority of appearances of ekklesia are found in Paul’s writings, most of which, if not all, were addressed to Gentile audiences. While it is true that the Bible of Paul was probably the Septuagint, it is questionable as to how familiar the Septuagint was to Gentile Christians in general. They certainly would be familiar with the use of ekklesia in secular Greek.

The Greek ekklesia occurs about 100 times in the Septuagint translation of the canonical books of the Old Testament. It always translates the Hebrew qahal, or a word of the same root. Qahal means simply an assembly, a congregation, and is used to refer to many kinds of gatherings of people. Robert L. Saucy gave the following summary of the variety of assemblies identified by the word qahal:

It referred to assemblies gathered for evil counsel (Gen. 49:6; Ps. 26:5); for civic affairs (1 Kings 12:3; Prov. 5:14); for war
or invasion (Num. 22:4; Judg. 20:2); for a company of returning exiles (Jer. 31:8); or for a religious assembly to hear God's Word (Deut. 9:10); or worship Him in some way (2 Ch 20:5; Neh. 5:13). The word is also used for the congregation of Israel (Mic. 2:5; Num 16:3); but it is also used for angels (Ps. 89:5, ASV); and simply as an assembled multitude (Gen. 28:3; 36:11).

In every instance in which the Septuagint translates the Hebrew qahal with the Greek ekklesia, the context refers to some kind of assembled congregation. In other words, it is used in the Septuagint with the meaning already established in secular Greek, that is, a local assembly of people.

Many scholars hold that ekklesia in the Septuagint is used to refer to Israel as a whole, whether assembled or unassembled. In this view the word came to be used as sort of a technical term for Israel as the people of God in the Old Testament. Those who hold such a view advocate that this is the real background for the New Testament use of ekklesi, and by using the term the disciples saw themselves as the new people of God, the spiritual Israel of the Old Testament. Such was the view of the distinguished scholars, James H. Moulton and George Milligan, who, commenting on ekklesia, stated: “It is the Septuagint term for the community of Israel, whether assembled or not.”19 New Testament scholars and theologians have adopted this view without question, expressed by such renowned scholars as Moulton and Milligan.

The truth of the matter is that there is no evidence that the Hebrew qahal ever became a technical term for Israel as the people of God, and certainly not when it is translated with the Greek ekklesia. In a detailed study of the matter, John Y. Campbell concluded that the evidence is totally lacking for the widely “accepted view that in using the word ekklesia the early Christians were borrowing an Old Testament term in order to express their claim to be the people of God, the legitimate successor of the Israel of the Old Covenant.”20 Years before Campbell, B. H. Carroll, after an inductive study of every occurrence of ekklesia in the Septuagint, drew the same conclusion and stated rather emphatically: “in every instance of the 114 cited [including the Apocrypha] the word means a gathering together—an assembly.”21 Eduard Schweizer, the European theologian, came to the same conclusion. He stated:

The Septuagint uses the word “church” (ekklesia) over eighty
times. Apart from the wholly unimportant exceptions, it always means a specific assembly of the people where they gathered for a definite purpose and dispersed again when the business at hand was completed . . . Greek usage knows no other possibilities. The meaning is simply an assembly of the people as they come together at a public gathering to pass a resolution, or as they spontaneously congregated, for example, when there was a riot.  

The significance of this fact for the meaning of ekklesia in the New Testament is that the classical use and the Septuagint use brings us to the New Testament with only one established meaning of the term—a visible local assembly of people. The only added feature found in the Septuagint that may have formed some background for the New Testament use is that the writers used ekklesia to describe an assembly for the purpose of worshiping God and hearing His Word. As far as can be determined, ekklesia was never used in Greek society to refer to a religious group.

Since Greek literature outside the New Testament knew only one meaning for ekklesia, that of a visible assembled group, this would lead us to expect to find the word used in the New Testament in that sense, and that sense only. Of course, this fact alone does not prove that the New Testament writers did not use the word in another sense, for authors do have the liberty of using a word with an established meaning in a new sense. But as Fred Fisher observed, “it does establish a strong presupposition that it is true. It should take very convincing evidence to lead anyone to suppose that anything else is true.”

New Testament Usage

The word “church” is used to translate ekklesia 114 times in the New Testament. Five of these occurrences have no reference to the Christian church, leaving a total of 109 references to Christian assemblies. Of these 109 references the great majority, at least ninety, undisputedly refer to a local congregation of believers. Over fifty times “church” is used in the singular to refer to a specific church, as that of Thessalonica (1 Thess. 1:1; cf. 1 Cor. 1:2). The word is used in the plural to refer to a group of churches in a particular region (Gal. 1: 22; Rev. 1).

There are less than twenty uses of ekklesia where the idea of a local assembly is not clear, although these passages are not incon-
sistent with the local sense. Fisher identifies nineteen such passages which are not clearly local in their implication. He examined each of these passages to determine if they indeed have some other meaning than the established meaning found in Greek literature outside the New Testament. At the beginning of his investigation, Fisher set forth a very sound principle of interpreting the meaning of words:

A writer may, as we have said, depart from established meanings. However, if he does so and if he desires to be understood, he must make his new meaning clear by the context. To fail to do so leaves his readers in hopeless confusion. For the interpreter to insist that he has done so without such evidence would make it impossible to interpret any passage with certainty.25

Fisher examined each of the passages and concluded that there is no compelling evidence that they have any other meaning than that which was already established in extra-biblical literature and which would be understood by the Greek-speaking world of the first century.

The great majority of these passages, which are taken by some to refer to a universal spiritual body, may be explained by what is called the generic or institutional use of the word. It is not necessary to examine each of these passages to demonstrate this use. It is sufficient to refer to two well known and widely used passages to advocate the universal view. In Matthew 16:18 are found the well known words of Jesus: “Upon this rock I will build my church.” In Ephesians 5: Paul wrote: “Christ loved the church and gave himself for it.” It is widely claimed that such passages could not have a local sense. However, they are not inconsistent with the local sense if one understands the uses here as generic or institutional. For example, we may say that the strength of this nation is the home, the school, and the church. In so speaking we are not using the terms to refer to some universal ideal home, school, or church. We are using the words to refer to the institutions of the home, school, and church. When a concrete application of the words is made, it must be to a particular home, school, or church somewhere.

The Difference

Following the hermeneutical principle that only when the common meaning of a word will not make sense are we allowed to
assume it has a new meaning, the overwhelming evidence is that the common meaning of a local assembly is the New Testament use of the word *ēkklesia*. As Fred Fisher and others have demonstrated, the idea of a visible assembly makes sense in every contested passage. It, therefore, is not a prejudicial conclusion to state that the burden of proof lies upon those who want to see any new sense in its use.

But there is a difference in the Christian *ēkklesia* (assembly) from the secular Greek *ēkklesia* and the Jewish *ēkklesia*. That difference is defined by Paul in his first epistle to the Thessalonians. The very fact that he felt it necessary to distinguish the Christian assembly from other assemblies is further proof that his readers would understand the basic meaning of the term is that of a visible assembly. Because of the commonly understood meaning of *ēkklesia* as an assembly, Paul felt it necessary to add some qualifying phrases. He calls the Christian assemblies the “churches of God which . . . are in Christ Jesus” (1 Thess. 2:14). The “churches of God” distinguish the Christian assemblies from the secular Greek assemblies. A Christian assembly is not a mere town meeting, or just any kind of gathering of people. It is an assembly which has its origin in God, thus has a spiritual, not however, invisible, quality about it. It is further an assembly of God “which is in Christ Jesus.” This distinguishes it from the Jewish synagogue. It is an assembly made up of believers in Jesus Christ. Thus the difference in the Christian use of *ēkklesia* is not using it in a sense different from that of a local assembly, but it defining what kind of assembly and setting forth the qualifications for membership in that assembly.

THE NATURE OF THE CHURCH AS SEEN IN THE NEW TESTAMENT IMAGES

Based on the terminology alone, the overwhelming evidence is that the New Testament uses “church” in the sense of a local, visible assembly. However, many biblical scholars and theologians assert that the images used of the church in the New Testament indicate a broader use of the idea of the church. It is not in the scope of this essay to examine every image or metaphor for the church in the New Testament. This study will be limited to the two most significant and well-known images or metaphors—body and building.
Body

The body-head metaphor is Paul's favorite description of the church, and is perhaps the most well-known image from a popular standpoint. It is also the image that a great number of Bible students use to describe the church universal. Typical of such is Robert L. Saucy who wrote: “... the metaphor refers to the one universal church which is under the headship of Christ (Col. 1:18, 24; Eph. 1:23; 2:15).”27 However, there is little doubt that Paul clearly uses the metaphor to refer to the local church at Corinth. The most extensive discussion of the body metaphor in the New Testament is found in 1 Corinthians 12. As P. T. O'Brien noted, the use of “you” (humeis) at the conclusion of his extended comparison of the Corinthian congregation with the human body (v. 27) “makes it plain that this metaphor of the ‘body of Christ’ is predicated on the local congregation at Corinth.”28 O'Brien goes on to say that the metaphor is not used to describe the Corinthian assembly as “a part of the body of Christ,” nor even as “a body of Christ,” but as the body of Christ at Corinth.29

While some have insisted that Paul widens the metaphor to include a universal body in Ephesians (1:23; 2:16; 3:6; 4:4, 12, 16) and Colossians (1:18; 3:15), there is nothing inconsistent with the local idea in any of the passages in these books. In fact, the local sense is the only meaning that makes sense in Ephesians 4:12, in which Paul states that Christ has established various offices to equip the saints for the edifying of the body. In what sense have offices been established in a mystical universal body?

In using the image of the local church as the body of Christ, there are implied a number of important truths concerning the nature of each local assembly. First, a church is a living organism and not simply an organization. A church does have an organizational structure, but its essence is not in that structure. The fact that it is a living organism implies that only those who have been made alive spiritually should make up the membership of the assembly. That is, the membership is to be a regenerated membership.

A second truth derived from the image of the body is that a church is absolutely dependent upon Jesus as its head. The full metaphor is the body/head metaphor. Jesus is both the organic head and the ruling head of the church. As the organic head a church is
absolutely dependent upon Jesus for its life, health and vitality. A church is absolutely dependent upon Jesus for its guidance, protection and authority.

Thirdly, as the body of Christ, a church consists of many different kinds of members who are interdependent on each other. As the body of Christ, the members are to maintain a unity in diversity. This is the particular truth that the Apostle Paul impresses upon the Corinthian assembly in 1 Cor. 12:12-27. Each member is important, and together they have mutual duties and responsibilities which must be carried out for the good of the whole body.

Finally, as the body of Christ, the church is Christ’s instrument by which He carries on His work on earth. Just as the human body is the instrument which carries out the thoughts and intents of the mind, so the church is the organ by which Christ, the Head, carries out His designs. This fact itself suggests the idea of a visible assembly, rather than a mystical body which has no tangible identity.

Building

The second most significant image of the church is that of a building. In 1 Cor. 3:9, Paul used two figures of speech to refer to the Corinthian church—a building and a field. Later on in the passage he identified the kind of building he had in mind—a temple (1 Cor. 3:16-17). In three other passages Paul uses the image of a temple (1 Cor. 6:19; 2 Cor. 6:16; Eph. 2:21), although the 1 Cor. 6:19 passage is a reference to the individual Christian rather than to the corporate assembly at Corinth. Even though Peter does not use the word “temple,” his description of believers “as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house, an holy priesthood...” (1 Pet. 2:5), certainly has a temple in mind.

It is quite certain that Paul uses the image of a temple in First and Second Corinthians to refer to the local assembly at Corinth. The references in Ephesians and First Peter could be interpreted in a broader sense to refer to all believers whether assembled or not, but there is nothing inconsistent with applying both passages to local assemblies.

The image of a temple adds several new truths concerning the nature of the local church. The nature of the church, as determined by the terminology, is a local assembly of people, and Paul clearly used the metaphor of a building to describe a local church. However, the fact that the building is identified as a temple sets the church apart from all other assemblies. The Jewish temple was a
holy building, that is, it was different from all other buildings. So the church is a holy assembly, distinct, set apart, different from all other assemblies.

Furthermore, the image of a temple conveys the idea that the church is the dwelling place of God. As God inhabited the Jewish temple, so God inhabits the corporate assemblies of local churches. This is a truth, I think, largely lost in much contemporary Baptist thinking. We have so emphasized the individualistic nature of the Christian life that we have lost sight of the corporate nature of the church. The personal indwelling of the Holy Spirit in each believer is a precious truth. However, it is just as important to see the New Testament truth that the corporate assembly is the dwelling place of God. It is for this reason that Paul warns of the danger of defiling the church (1 Cor. 3:16-17).

CONCLUSION

The focus of this study has been on whether the meaning of the church in the New Testament is a local assembly, or a universal spiritual body, or both. If one bases his conclusion solely on the term for church (ekklesia), the conclusion is unavoidable that the meaning is that of a local visible assembly. The term for church is never used to refer to a mystical universal invisible body which has no visibility, no organizational structure, never meets, and cannot observe the ordinances and carry out the commission that Christ gave to the church. Such a view seems to be based more on the Greek philosophy of Platonism, and perhaps the theological presuppositions of Reformed theology, than on sound biblical exegesis. Even if one could demonstrate that there are passages in which the word “church” can have no other meaning than that of a universal community of believers, he must concede that the idea is not primary but secondary. In other words, that concept of the church has no present practically.

So then, what is the definition of a church from the perspective of clear New Testament teaching? I propose the following: First, a New Testament church is a local visible assembly of people. It had regular meetings (1 Cor. 5:4; 11:19). It had prescribed officers (1 Tim. 3:1-13). It observed tangible ordinances (1 Cor. 11:23-30), and disciplined its members (Matt. 18:15-17; 1 Cor. 5:4).

Second, a New Testament church is a local visible assembly made up of qualified members. It is not just any kind of assembly. It is a holy assembly. It is an assembly which has its origin in the
call of God and consists of people who have believed in Jesus Christ as Lord (1 Thess. 2:14). Furthermore, the church consists of people who have been regenerated and indwelt by the Spirit of God (1 Cor. 3:16; Eph. 2:21-22). It is an assembly of people who have openly identified with Christ its head through baptism (Acts 2:41).

Thirdly, a New Testament church is a local visible assembly formed for a distinct purpose. That purpose is to be the visible organ through which Christ does His work presently in the world. The ultimate purpose is to glorify God through its assembly for worship and then through carrying out his commission of bringing the gospel to the world.

In short, a New Testament church is a visible body of baptized believers in Christ who meet regularly for worship, observance of the ordinances, and carrying out the commission of Christ.

NOTES

2 Ibid., 1035-1152.
3 Herman Hoeksema, Reformed Dogmatics (Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1968), 563-726.
6 Ibid., 335
7 Cited by Smith, 335.
8 Erickson, 1055; Smith, 334.
Cited by Dana, 25.


Dana, 24.


Carroll, 33.


Fisher, 19.

Three are references to a secular Greek assembly (Acts 19:32, 39, 41), and two are used in the Septuagint sense of the congregation of Israel (Acts 7:38; Heb. 2:12).

Fisher, 24.

Paul S. Minear, in his widely acclaimed work, Images of the Church in the New Testament (Louisville, KY: The Westminster John Knox Press, 2004) identifies ninety-six images. With due respect to this esteemed scholar, the great majority of these have nothing to do whatsoever with the church.

Saucy, 25.


Ibid.
By common agreement the ordinances have fallen on hard times in Baptist churches. It seems most of us have seen people come into the church, see the table prepared for communion, and moan that the service will be long today. Probably the two primary emotional responses to the ordinances are confusion and apathy—what do they really mean and why do we bother? In this situation, controversy over these practices is almost welcome because at least people are talking and thinking about these important items again. After all, these were not dreamed up in Nashville, or even Westminster, Geneva, Wittenberg or Rome. These were given to us by Christ Himself. We would do well then to think carefully about how we can properly obey our Lord in this area.

My aim in this article is to address this situation particularly in Baptist churches. I will, therefore, assume some basic Baptist positions in order to move ahead to my two main objectives: to consider briefly why we have come to this situation and then more fully to provide some thoughts and suggestions on improving our practice. I will seek to do this by advancing two main arguments, one for each ordinance.

**NEGLECT OF THE ORDINANCES**

Why have we come to the place that so many Christians do not “feel” the value of the ordinances? Most know that the Bible tells us to do these things, but they are not gripped by the value and importance of them. Why is this? Surely there are various reasons but I want to briefly suggest four reasons which I think are central to the problem.
Resistance to Ritual

We have bought our culture’s line that ritual is bad. We typically do not have the ability to see the value and beauty of traditional practices. Instead we tend to think that spontaneity and change are always best. But we should examine critically this assumption. Why do we assume that having a regular pattern to our worship is necessarily bad and that “changing things up” is necessarily good? Probably part of the reason is that generations before us failed to think through for themselves, and thus to teach to us, why we did what we did. As a result we may have seen empty tradition and ritual. However, we must not let a bad example turn us away from the real thing. As you search the Scriptures you find that God is quite favorable toward tradition and ritual—properly done. Paul warns us not to let our man-made traditions obscure Scripture, but Scripture itself gives us some rituals, particularly baptism and communion.1 We must seek to recover the value of community traditions, things done regularly with rich meaning. This is what the two ordinances are supposed to be—visible reminders or portrayals of the gospel.

Underappreciated Symbolism

This leads to a second and related point. Our culture has largely lost its ability to appreciate symbolism. In short, we have lost our poetry and as a result have little appreciation for the symbolic. As people are realizing this, many try all sorts of ways to integrate the use of the symbolic and dramatic into our worship all the while missing that Christ Himself has instituted for us two symbolic practices which are dramatic portrayals of the gospel.

Our general failure to appreciate symbols is seen in the language used when baptism or communion is described as a “mere” symbol. “Mere”? Why “mere”? These are not “mere”, but Christ-ordained, holy, precious symbols which portray for us the gospel.

We have had a serious downgrade in substantive biblical teaching in the church. The ordinances, precisely because they are symbols were never intended to exist apart from the word—Word and Sacraments.2 In a day when biblical teaching is at a low in the church, there should be no surprise that the ordinances are not prized. Without strong, intentional biblical teaching confusion sets in and people are unable to appreciate what they do not understand.
Our entertainment driven worship services cause us to view baptism and communion as things which take up too much time and get in the way of our show. They do not make for good television. This is why communion particularly has often been bumped to evening services, and increasingly ignored all together. Too often events commanded by Christ are viewed merely as impediments to things desired by us. Now we turn to some thoughts about solutions.

**BAPTISM: WHAT IS IT AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?**

In our efforts to argue against those who make too much of baptism, we may have undercut ourselves. Probably more of our people know more about what baptism does not mean than what it does mean. So, we need to return to the New Testament and notice the importance attributed to baptism. We need not revisit verses referring to the command to baptize. That is unquestioned. What we need to revisit are verses which underscore the importance of baptism, because oddly enough for Baptists it is these verses which disturb us. Such passages include the following: Acts 2:38: “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” Acts 22:16: “And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name” (Paul relating what Ananias said to him). Mark 16:15-16: “And he said to them, ‘Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned’.” Other passages could be mentioned (e.g. Gal. 3:26-27; 1 Pet. 3:21), but these will suffice.

Too often we have viewed these verses simply as passages to be explained away, items for debate with our Church of Christ neighbors. However, we must not only explain what the verses do not mean; we must also explain what they do mean. We do right in arguing that the act of baptism cannot earn salvation, but why do the Apostles give baptism such a prominent place in the gospel call?

**A Demonstration of Belief**

It is important first to note that the typical apostolic call for response to the gospel is “Repent and believe.” With that in mind we can note that “be baptized” in Acts 2:38 replaces “believe.”
Why is that? Because baptism is the public demonstration of this belief, it is in essence a shorthand for “believe.” So also, then, in Acts 22:16, Ananias calls on Paul to get up and show he believes by being baptized. In Mark 16, baptism is listed along with belief to stress the public profession of this faith.\(^4\) Thus, baptism is the public profession of faith.\(^5\) Paul also mentions internal belief and external confession in Romans 10:9-10: “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.” The “confessing with our mouth” here, I believe, is intended to refer to baptism. When Paul calls on Timothy in 1 Tim 6:12 to hold fast remembering his good confession in the presence of many witnesses, he almost certainly is referring to Timothy’s baptism.\(^6\) Baptism is the God-ordained way of declaring to the watching world that you are a follower of Christ. It is Christ’s “brand” by which He marks His flock. It is the “mark” of Christ. What then are the implications of this?

An Immediate Witness to Belief

Baptism should follow immediately after conversion, or as soon as possible.\(^7\) We should not wait weeks. Note the pattern in Acts (2:41; 8:12, 36-38; 9:17-19; 10:48; 16:15; 16:31-34). People are always baptized right after they come to faith. The church would not be sure of someone’s conversion if they were not willing to take baptism. It is the “profession of the mouth.” This is why in the New Testament there is not such a category as an “unbaptized believer.” The fact that we do have this category has led to various problems.

Thus, one reason baptism is less appreciated today is that we have replaced it with our own man-made ordinance—walking the aisle. Now, a public invitation is not in itself wrong, but too often this invitation is equated with making one’s faith “public.” In other words, people are urged to “step out and come forward” as the way to profess their faith. “Walking the aisle” is equated with one’s “public profession.”\(^8\) This is wrong and unhealthy. In a “come-forward invitation” we must call for people to come in order to talk with someone further about the gospel and receive help. The coming forward is in no way organically tied to coming to faith. No biblical support can be given for arguing otherwise. The New Testament does call for a public profession but the God-ordained
means for doing this is baptism. When we provide an intermediate substitute we vitiate baptism leaving people wondering what the point is. If someone has been converted and wants to let the world know they are a Christian, let them be baptized!

Having argued this position for sometime, I recently was pleased to find an affirming quote from Wayne Ward, a professor at Southern Seminary writing in the Review and Expositor in 1968:

Public confession of Jesus as Savior and Lord should be closely connected with the act of baptism. The tendency in many churches, especially Southern Baptist, has been to substitute “walking down the aisle” for the New Testament sign of baptism. The typical understanding is that one becomes a Christian by walking down the church aisle and telling the pastor that he is trusting Jesus as his personal Savior. This is a public act of confession, and it is perfectly proper to call for this kind of response to the proclamation of the gospel. However, it is most unfortunate when the baptism is considered a secondary adjunct, often delayed unnecessarily, and interpreted as “just something we do” because Christ commanded it. Of course, we do baptize because Christ commanded it, but it does have meaning. It should be emphasized as the divinely ordained, scriptural way in which a believer in Jesus Christ declares his death to the old sinful nature and his resurrection to walk in a new life with his Lord.

Exactly! Indeed, I was very interested to find that a student in Hersey Davis’ (A. T. Robertson’s lead student) New Testament class at Southern Seminary in 1939 took down this quote from the lecture: “baptism was the divinely appointed means by which men declared their repentance for sin and commitment to the New Order, the Kingdom of God . . . .” Thus, we must maintain the place of baptism as the public profession of faith. B. H. Carroll made a similar point identifying baptism as the public profession of faith and calling for it to be done quickly. He wrote:

Our baptism is a profession or declaration, public and visible, of our faith in Jesus, as the Sent of the Father and the Anointed of the Spirit, to be our Prophet, Priest, and King . . . . And as we should speedily and candidly profess what we honestly and heartily believe, we are not surprised to find baptism so closely associated in time with the faith which it
professes. In apostolic days there was nothing like the modern interval between them.\textsuperscript{12}

So, upon someone’s credible profession of faith we should baptize them quickly. There should be as little temporal separation between conversion and baptism as possible. Some in the desire to make sure the profession is credible have required new believers to go through a long series of instruction before baptism. This practice emerges fairly early in the history of the church. However, all that should be required is that an individual understand the basic gospel and profess faith in the finished work of Christ. Upon such a profession we are to baptize them. Some may say, “But what if we then baptize and welcome into membership people who in fact were not converted?” That indeed is a problem, but that is what church discipline is for. Note the account of the great ingathering of Samaritans in Acts 7. Simon professes faith and is baptized. Later he shows that he has not truly been converted when he seeks to buy the Holy Spirit. Peter rebukes him, telling him he has not truly been converted. Sure, we should be circumspect. But if it is clear that as best we can tell an individual does trust Christ, then we should baptize them, teach them, and if necessary discipline them. Is this not the pattern of the Great Commission—baptize, then teach? Again Wayne Ward aptly wrote: “The idea of postponing baptism for a time, in order to check up on the personal habits and the Christian growth of the believer is a dangerous distortion of the meaning of baptism. Baptism is not the sign of Christian maturity. It is the sign of Christian \textit{beginning}.”

This close connection temporally between conversion and baptism is part of the basis for the requirement for one to be baptized before partaking in communion. Only believers are to partake of communion, and the NT again has no concept of an unbaptized believer. To be a believer is to be baptized. If one refuses baptism, then he should not be admitted to the Lord’s Table. However, we create trouble when we delay baptisms. We end up with new believers who have professed faith, whom the church has acknowledged as believers, but they are kept from the Lord’s Table for weeks or even months while they await baptism. We should not be barring true believers from the Lord’s Table by delaying baptism. This problem is easily settled by acting more quickly with baptism.\textsuperscript{14}
COMMUNION

As with baptism, having often heard it argued strenuously that communion does not mean ‘that much’, our people have reasonably asked, “Why do it?” I asked this question as a college student and in my first year in seminary without receiving much in answer. In fact, I served in a church where we went for about a year without celebrating communion. No one seemed to really miss it, and it seemed the leadership found it unimportant. The best answer I could find as why to celebrate communion came from a friend who shared my quandary. He said, “Because Jesus told us to.” This is helpful and crucial and can help us at least go on in faith. However, surely there is more that can allow us to go on in faith with some understanding.

For this article I will argue from the memorial perspective since that appears primary in the Scripture. By “spiritual presence” I do not mean that there is a mystical power in the Supper. Rather I am affirming what is stated in the Baptist Confession of 1689, when it states: “the body and blood of Christ being then not corporally or carnally, but spiritually present to the faith of believers in that ordinance” (30.7). Millard Erickson wisely and winsomely notes: “Out of a zeal to avoid the conception that Jesus is present in some sort of magical way, certain Baptists among others have sometimes gone to such extremes as to give the impression that the one place where Jesus most assuredly is not to be found is the Lord’s Supper. This is what one Baptist leader termed ‘the doctrine of the real absence’ of Jesus Christ.” Scripture is clear that communion points us back to the cross and forward to Christ’s return (1 Cor. 11:26). Isn’t this important? What could be more central to the church? These were the two driving truths for the early church, though sadly in the church today both are often conspicuous in their absence. For this reason alone we should see the importance of the Lord’s Table.

The Centrality of Communion

Again, let us turn to some key passages in the New Testament to see the value placed on communion. I will highlight some texts which show the centrality of the Lord’s Supper to Christian worship in the early church.

First, Acts 2:42, following the great ingathering of Pentecost, describes the activity of the church: “And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread
and the prayers.” The four activities listed here are not four separate things but the four elements which characterized a Christian gathering. One of the key things the early church “devoted” itself to was the “breaking of bread,” i.e. the Lord’s Supper. The wording suggests that each of these activities occurred when they gathered. Perhaps the most striking reference to the frequency of the Lord’s Supper occurs in Acts 20:7: “On the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, Paul talked with them, intending to depart on the next day, and he prolonged his speech until midnight.”

Paul, on his way to Jerusalem had stopped at Troas. Here, “on the first day of the week” he meets with the local church, and Luke directly states that the purpose of their gathering was “to break bread,” in other words, to celebrate the Lord’s Supper! Marshall writes: “The breaking of bread is the term used especially in Acts for the celebration of the Lord’s Supper (2:42; cf. 1 Cor. 10:16), and this passage is of particular interest in providing the first allusion to the Christian custom of meeting on the first day of the week for the purpose.” This passage need not mean the Lord’s Supper was the only purpose of their gathering, but it certainly is one prominent purpose and the one emphasized here. These early Christians meet weekly to celebrate the Lord’s Supper.

Of course, the longest discussion of the practice of the Lord’s Supper is in 1 Corinthians. Many issues can be raised here, but simply the fact that abuse of the Lord’s Supper was such a problem in Corinth strongly suggests the Supper was held frequently. Could it have been such a problem if it only occurred quarterly? Is this the sense which arises from the passage? Notice the wording of 11:20: “When you come together, it is not the Lord’s supper that you eat.”

It is widely agreed that the terminology “come together” here is used as a technical term for gathering as the church. This wording suggests that when they gather they do eat a meal which they intend to be the Lord’s Supper. Though they are abusing the Supper, their practice (which is not considered odd by Paul) is to celebrate each time they gather. Even the wording in 11:25, “As often as you drink,” which is often used to suggest frequency is unimportant, in context actually suggests a frequent celebration of the Lord’s Supper. Commenting on this verse, Gordon Fee notes, “This addition in particular implies a frequently repeated action, suggesting
that from the beginning the Last Supper was for Christians not an annual Christian Passover, but a regularly repeated meal in ‘honor of the Lord,’ hence the Lord’s Supper.”

A Case for More Frequency

From these passages a clear pattern emerges of a weekly celebration of communion in the New Testament. I am not here arguing that weekly celebration is a direct biblical command so that if we fail to do this we sin. I am arguing that this is the pattern in the New Testament and therefore would be the best practice. In our man-centered age where so many services are shamefully devoid of any meaningful reference to the cross, could we not benefit from a move to a regular use of the Christ-ordained means for reminding us of the cross? In a day when we are so captivated by the allures of this age and seemingly interested merely in Our Best Life Now, do we not need regularly the Christ-ordained means of reminding us of the Lord’s return and the wedding feast of the Lamb? Might not the Bride be more pure if regularly reminded of the coming wedding?

Questions will quickly arise on how to do this. Some doubt that this can be done well. My church does this and has for about three years. Many of the Baptist churches in Scotland do this, and the practice flourishes.

A typical argument against this idea is, “If we do this so often it will become less meaningful.” At first this has the appearance of wisdom; but with just a little pondering the illusion fades. Do we apply this reasoning to other means of grace? Are we worried about praying too frequently? Reading the Bible too much? Shall we be safe and make biblical preaching less frequent? Well, perhaps some are using this reasoning! These practices become rote not because of frequency but because of laziness of mind and heart on our behalf and the lack of robust biblical proclamation alongside the ordinance.

In our church we always celebrate communion at the close and climax of the service. If the word is rightly preached, then no matter the text, the gospel is expounded. Communion is then a fitting response. It gives us a way to respond to the Word - a biblical way, without creating something from our own minds. Having heard the Word preached, we come again to the table, confessing again our need of a savior, our faith in this Christ, and our intention by His
grace to live out His commands, including the portion just preached. Rather than an altar call it is a table call, allowing each of us, in a sense, to rededicate ourselves each week.23

If that day the Word has been particularly convicting and we have seen our sin exposed, then with communion we are tangibly reminded again that atonement has been made for our sins. The pastoral value of this is too rarely considered. It is deeply meaningful, having been rebuked and humbled and perhaps being tempted with despair by a condemning conscience to see again the physical reminders of Christ's body broken and His blood spilled for us. We are not simply told again of His sacrifice, but we are reminded visibly, tangibly that for the repentant Christ has decisively dealt with our sin. Often a misunderstanding of 1 Cor. 11:27-32 has kept us from making much of this aspect of the supper.24 The Supper is not for those who have it all sorted out. In fact, it is for sinners only. By taking the elements we confess we are sinners in need of a Savior, and we confess again that we take Christ, with His work at the cross, as our Savior. Among the many benefits of this practice is that it keeps us from even sounding legalistic and after the rebuke of sin allows us to close on the note of sins forgiven.

If that day the Word has been especially encouraging, then communion roots that encouragement in the work of Christ. Why is it that we can have any encouragement, hope, or peace? It is because Christ's body was broken and His blood spilled for us. Our hope is tangibly rooted in the work of Christ.

Furthermore, this use of communion at the close of the service is powerfully evangelistic. An unbeliever sitting in the service will have heard the gospel expounded and will have been called to repent and believe. The elements will have been explained with a call to repent and believe but a warning that if you do not repent and believe the elements are not for you. Then the elements of Christ come to him, and he is forced to encounter the symbols of Christ's body and blood. Week after week he is confronted with the work of Christ. The symbol of the broken body of Christ will be passed by him and he must say, “I refuse to trust in this Christ!” And again comes the symbol of Christ's poured out blood and again the unbeliever must say, “This is not for me, I will not receive!” I think it is more powerfully and properly evangelistic than many other things that we do, as well as deeply edifying to believers who at the close of each time are reminded, this is what has been done for me. Weekly celebration was the practice of Charles Spurgeon.
years ago, and he defended it against the charge that frequency would dilute intensity:

So with the Lord’s Supper. My witness is, and I think I speak the mind of many of God’s people now present, that coming as some of us do, weekly, to the Lord’s table, we do not find the breaking of bread to have lost its significance—it is always fresh to us. I have often remarked on Lord’s-day evening, whatever the subject may have been, whether Sinai has thundered over our heads, or the plaintive notes of Calvary have pierced our hearts, it always seems equally appropriate to come to the breaking of bread. Shame on the Christian church that she should put it off to once a month, and mar the first day of the week by depriving it of its glory in the meeting together for fellowship and breaking of bread, and showing forth of the death of Christ till he come. They who once know the sweetness of each Lord’s-day celebrating his Supper, will not be content, I am sure, to put it off to less frequent seasons. Beloved, when the Holy Ghost is with us, ordinances are wells to the Christian, wells of rich comfort and of near communion.25

Amen! May the Lord stir up faithful, fervent practice of His ordinances in His Church that the Church might be renewed, the gospel proclaimed and souls won.

NOTES

1 Paul warns against the encroachment of human traditions in Col. 2:8, as does Jesus in Matt 15:1-9. However, Paul calls for obedience to God-given, apostolic tradition (1 Cor. 11:2; 2 Thess. 2:15) and calls for discipline against those who disregard apostolic tradition (2 Thess. 3:6).

2 I use the term “sacrament” here in a Protestant sense (as did B. H. Carroll, A. H. Strong, etc.) without intending Catholic overtones.

3 I know this passage is not in the best mss, but for arguments sake I address it here. It at least represents an early understanding of the gospel call.

4 This also makes sense in Gal. 3:26-27 where baptism and faith are used in close parallel.

5 Cf. also John Hammett, Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2005), 266-67.


We ought to listen carefully to the language that is used in some of our invitations. We appeal for people to come to the ‘altar’ to find God there. What are we doing with altars anyway in the New Covenant? We use sacramental language about our invitations in a way which is unorthodox and embarrassing. We need to return to the apostolic wording and simply call upon people to repent and believe.

Where have we found the authority to supplant Christ’s ordinances and create new ones? People who claim to be cessationists in regards to spiritual gifts, apparently feel that it is permissible to continue creating ordinances!


Recent controversies have arisen over the IMB trustees’ statements on what constitutes a valid baptism. They require the immersion of a believer, which fits well with what has been argued here. They also disallow baptisms which were done with the idea that the baptism itself secured salvation. I have not dealt with that issue here but that does make sense since it changes the meaning of baptism. However, controversy has arisen over the assertion that a baptism is invalidated if the administering church does not hold to eternal security. Many have argued that Baptists historically have not connected in such a way the doctrine of eternal security and the validity of baptism. Debate continues, with this being the key point of contention. The argument, given here, that baptism is the profession of faith in Christ not a statement of allegiance to any denomination or final statement of one’s positions on various points of doctrine, may have some bearing on the conversation.

Millard Erickson, Christian Theology (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 1123


Acts, 325.


Fee, *1 Corinthians*, 555.

Though Hammett does not argue for weekly communion, he does conclude with this statement: “For most of Christian history, the Eucharist or Lord’s Supper has been the central act of Christian worship” (*Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches*, 294). If it is “the central act” of our worship, should we not do it each Lord’s Day?

Two practices which are less helpful ought to be addressed briefly here though they do not fit in the flow of the main article. First, it is very clear from Paul’s discussion that this is a corporate event. We lose the point if our practice is anything less than corporate. Therefore, I do not think the practice is helpful where everyone waits until they are ready and then they go and get it individually. We are to take it together, mindful of the body all at once. Also, some, in the desire to emphasize the place of families, have each father go and get the elements to serve his own family. I affirm wholeheartedly the importance of the family and the role of the father. I like the Puritan idea of each father serving as the pastor of his family. However, when we gather together as the church we are the church, and the whole point of the discussion of communion in First Corinthians is not to allow divisions. We must celebrate communion together.

Far too often people think that they should not partake of communion if they are struggling with sin. In this case we have turned this amazing reminder of grace into an ogre of legalism. The warning in 1 Cor 11 is against partaking in an unworthy manner, referring to the unrepentant self-centeredness of the Corinthians ignoring other members of the body. No one is worthy. That is the point. In the supper we are reminded again that Christ died for sinners like us. The requirement is that we come in faith and repentance. Too often, having stripped the Supper of any positive meaning we are left only with the threat of divine judgment if we do it incorrectly. Judgment is real, but so is the truth of grace for the repentant. No wonder many do not want to have communion more frequently.

Marlin Jeschke, in his book Discipling in the Church, purported that the parable of the lost sheep, lost coin, and the prodigal son were, “in their original setting . . . a defense of Jesus’ outreach to sinners excommunicated from the synagogue.” In justifying his position, he observed that the parable of the lost sheep precedes Jesus’ teaching on church discipline in Matthew 18. Summarizing, Jeschke argued that the “parables reflected the restoration of excommunicated people,” rather than a missionary or evangelistic situation.

Whether or not one agrees with Jeschke’s interpretation regarding the parables, one fact is clear: Jesus stresses that recovering sinners is of great value to Him, whether lost sinners or straying saints. The continued refrain of the parables is that great rejoicing in heaven accompanied the recovery of sinners (Matthew 18:13; Luke 15:7, 9, 32). Hence, endeavoring to recover the lost treasure of church discipline, whose end is recovering sinners, cannot but gladden the heart of God.

In seeking to recover the lost treasure of church discipline, it is important to gain a comprehensive view of the subject. Church discipline, like a coin, consists of two sides: formative and corrective. Formative discipline involves the building up of the body of Christ through attention to Bible study, prayer, fellowship, worship, church membership and other such means. Corrective discipline, on the other hand, is emergency care administered to an erring brother or sister in Christ. In short, formative discipline is more preventive in nature and corrective discipline is curative in nature.

Both sides of discipline, while distinguished for the purpose of the present discussion, are of equal value. Warham Walker noted the importance of observing both sides of church discipline:

... a family may be said to be well disciplined, not when punishment is frequent, but when the parental authority is so
habitually regarded that the necessity of punishment is rare. Indeed, the frequent recurrence of such a necessity, however promptly it may be met, is an indication of previous negligence, in respect to a nobler, if not a more important branch of family discipline. . . . If they are formed aright,—if they are made to understand their filial and fraternal obligations,—there will be little occasion to reform them.³

Sadly, however, the tendency in the church when it comes to discipline is to flip the coin and purposefully forget to look for it.

While both aspects suffer neglect in the church, corrective discipline is a rare, if not lost coin in most churches. The scarcity of circulation, however, is not due to the responsible application of formative discipline. Sin is not extinct in the church! Recent statistics gathered by the Barna Group highlight the moral decline in the church. The table below reveals the percentage of approval by various groups on certain social issues from information gathered in 2003.⁴

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SOCIAL ISSUES</th>
<th>All Adults</th>
<th>Born-Again Christians</th>
<th>Other Faiths</th>
<th>Atheists/ Agnostics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Divorce</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gambling</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abortion</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>71%</td>
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<td>42%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Viewing Pornography</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drunkenness</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What is in danger of extinction is not sin in the church, but the willingness of churches to put corrective discipline into practice as the Bible teaches. Despite the lack of popularity and the controversy surrounding the practice of corrective discipline in today's politically correct church, it is vital at least to consider the matter for three reasons.
CHURCH DISCIPLINE IS A NEW TESTAMENT DOCTRINE

The New Testament is full of examples regarding the practice of church discipline. Prominent texts dealing with the subject are: Matthew 18:15-17; 1 Corinthians 5; 2 Corinthians 13:1; 2 Thessalonians 3:14-15; 1 Timothy 1:18-20; Titus 3:10; and 2 John 9-11.

Regarding the quintessential New Testament text on discipline, Matthew 18:15-17, Jeschke astutely wrote: “The summons to go to an erring believer is not just a suggestion. It is a command. It is an imperative of the same order as the great commission of Matthew 28:19.”

Church discipline warrants obedience because it is a command of God that is vital to evangelism and missions. Peter writes in 1 Peter 2:9, “But you are A CHOSEN RACE, A royal PRIESTHOOD, A HOLY NATION, A PEOPLE FOR God's OWN POSSESSION, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light” (NASB). Corrective discipline works hand in hand with evangelism and missions by encouraging holiness in the church. Church discipline adorns the gospel with holiness!

CHURCH DISCIPLINE IS A NEGLECTED DOCTRINE

Church discipline is important to consider because this command of Christ receives little regard in the modern day church. The annals of church history bear rich testimony to the prominent place afforded to the practice of church discipline in the past. Yet, today, looks of consternation greet all who would dare mention the expression. In fact, church discipline is the equivalent of a spiritual curse word in most churches. To speak of it is bad enough, but actually to propose practicing it is unthinkable. What accounts for the present neglect? At least, two chief factors explain the neglect of discipline.

Neglect Results from Misinterpretations

One factor that explains the short supply of corrective discipline today is a misunderstanding regarding what the Bible teaches. Some point to passages such as Matthew 7:1, “Do not judge so that you will not be judged,” and argue that corrective discipline is contrary to the example of Christ. Mimicking the individualism of the American culture, some believers allege that Jesus is teaching that
individuals ought to mind their own business. Such an interpretation fails to do justice to the context of Matthew 7. Jesus was not teaching against corrective discipline, but instructing His disciples in the right way to judge or discipline. In fact, in Matthew 7:5, Jesus instructs believers to remove the log out of their own eye to see clearly how to help the erring believer.

Neglect Results from Misuse

Another factor that explains the neglect of discipline is improper applications of discipline in the past. In their book, Healing the Wounded: The Costly Love of Church Discipline, John White and Ken Blue asserted, “Harsh and misguided church discipline in the past has made Christian leaders and older Christians back off.” Hence, the mistakes of the past serve as a ready argument for some to dismiss the practice altogether. Rebutting such skewed logic, Jeschke contended, “We don’t abandon the institution of marriage simply because of bad notions of marriage or bad marriages. Rather, we try to recover good views of marriage and good marriages.” Recovery of right notions and practices regarding corrective discipline, not neglect, brings honor to Christ. Prior misuse of discipline does not free churches from their present responsibility of obeying the Lord.

Church Discipline Is a Necessary Doctrine

A final reason for exploring the topic of church discipline is that it is essential to the welfare of the church. Four main benefits spring forth from church discipline.

Discipline Is Necessary for Purity

Paul wrote to the church at Corinth and reminded the saints that when sin is not dealt with in the church it eventually “leavens the whole lump” (1 Corinthians 5:6 NASB). Writing in 2 Timothy 2:16-17, the Apostle writes, “But avoid worldly and empty chatter, for it will lead to further ungodliness, and their talk will spread like gangrene . . .” Again in Hebrews 12:15, the Scripture teaches, “See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled.” Thomas Watson observed, “Sin is the Trojan horse out of which comes a whole army of troubles.” Each of the texts above emphasize that sin, left unchecked by corrective discipline, spoils the purity of the church.
Discipline Is Necessary for Prosperity

Moses writes in Deuteronomy 5:29: “Oh that they had such a heart in them, that they would fear Me and keep all My commandments always, that it may be well with them and with their sons forever!” The principle advocated for Israel in Deuteronomy is an abiding truth for the church today. Divine favor rests upon churches that seek to do all the Lord commands, including His command to practice church discipline. Likewise, His disfavor rests upon churches that allow sin to go unchecked in the church. Sin alienates believers from God and other saints thereby stunting spiritual growth in the church. Walker noted:

If they [the churches] disregard his command,—if, instead of reproving, they have fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness which are perpetrated in their midst,—if they spare sin for the sake of the sinner, and so tacitly con-nive at wrongs against which their solemn and united testimony should be recorded,—they must subject themselves, in so doing, to his terrific frown. He whose eyes are as a flame of fire, is represented as walking in the midst of the golden candlesticks, closely observant of the evil, as well as of the good. He knows the works of all his churches; and while he assures such as ‘cannot bear them that are evil,’ of his gracious regard and protection, he declares his determina-tion, on the other hand, to fight against such as tolerate iniquity, with the sword of his mouth.9

God blesses churches that seek to put a check on evil and place a premium on obedience to His Word.

Discipline Is Necessary for Praise

The godliness that the practice of corrective discipline insures brings praise to God. Peter writes in 1 Peter 2:11-12:

Beloved, I urge you as aliens and strangers to abstain from fleshly lusts which wage war against the soul. Keep your behavior excellent among the Gentiles, so that in the thing in which they slander you as evildoers, they may because of your good deeds, as they observe them, glorify God in the day of visitation.
Bringing others to glorify God is one asset that accrues from a proper exercise of church discipline.

**Discipline Is Necessary for Progress**

The whole purpose of church discipline is to insure that the offenders make progress in the faith. Discipline is not punitive but reforming in nature. The main aim is to rescue an erring brother or sister from a besetting sin so that he/she might grow in grace.

Considering, then, that corrective discipline is a necessary command of the Lord that often receives little to no attention at present, it is important to consider how to recover the lost treasure of discipline. In searching out how to restore the treasure, the structure provided by Galatians 6:1 serves as the roadmap.

Paul writes, “Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted.” Five aspects described by Paul are critical to note in restoring biblical discipline.

**THE STEWARDS OF DISCIPLINE**

Part of the problem regarding the abandonment of church discipline is that no one seems to know who is responsible for exercising it. Identifying, therefore, the responsible parties is important in the recovery effort. Who is responsible? Paul identifies the “brethren” as the stewards to carry out discipline in Galatians 6:1. The term used by Paul in the present context is generic in nature and refers to all who belong to Christ. In other words, the responsibility for church discipline falls upon every born-again believer, not some board or committee.

As saints concerned to do what the Lord commands, all believers are responsible to engage in confronting sin in the church. Refusing to recover erring brothers or sisters in Christ is rebellion against God’s inviolable command!

Of course, churches guilty of neglect never call their refusal rebellion toward the Lord. No, various excuses for not fulfilling the duty salves the conscience so that their refusal appears justified in their own eyes and the eyes of others. What are the common excuses that seek to justify the neglect of discipline?
Sentimentalism

Churches excuse themselves from the duty of corrective discipline due to a soft or compassionate heart. The repeated mantra is, “We love them too much to confront them.” The truth is, however, that such an excuse belies a misguided love of man and what man thinks rather than a love of God and what He commands. God loves mankind and knows what is best regarding their souls. He commands discipline!

Spirituality

Other churches excuse themselves from their duty by arguing, “Who are we to point out the sin of an erring brother or sister, considering the sin in our own life?” While the present excuse sounds humble and spiritual, a close examination of the argument reveals carnality, not spirituality. If sin is residing in the life of a saint, then he is responsible to repent of it and fulfill the obligation of helping others with their sin. The antidote is to quit feigning false humility and spirituality in avoiding the obligation of discipline. Instead, one should repent and help brothers or sisters remove the specks out of their lives.

Shrewdness

Still other churches excuse themselves from corrective discipline by shrewdly citing the old adage, “Time heals all wounds.” Of course, not one member of a church, if he suffered a compound fracture of the leg would accept as loving such a cavalier response as, “time heals all wounds.” No, the anticipated response of a true friend would include obtaining immediate medical assistance. Likewise, when the serpent of sin strikes in the life of a brother or sister in Christ, the only sensible and caring response is immediate action in removing the venom.

Skepticism

Whenever a discussion of church discipline arises in a church, the conventional response often is, “I don’t see how it can work.” The skeptics dissect cases of discipline pointing out gnat-sized flaws. Conveniently, then, the whole issue is set aside and cast into the sea of forgetfulness. In response to skepticism about the viability of church discipline, Gregory A. Wills, assistant professor of
Church History at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, appropriately noted:

Perfect antisepsis in surgical operations is impossible, but that is no argument for neglecting to sterilize operating rooms. The persistence of a few germs is no reason to perform surgery in the sewer. The attempt at antisepsis improves the outcome considerably. So likewise the attempt to interpret our duties and discipline improves the results.¹⁰

The arguments against practicing church discipline are without foundation; they are nothing more than excuses. Excuses, it is important to remember, are lies presented in the skin of the truth. Church discipline is the responsibility of every believer in Christ. To avoid the duty is to disobey God. Having settled the question of responsibility for discipline, Paul next turns his attention to the subjects of discipline.

**THE SUBJECTS OF DISCIPLINE**

Paul describes the ones warranting discipline when he writes, “even if a man is caught in any trespass.” In doing so, he gives a two-fold description of the subjects: the identity of the subjects and the indiscretion of the subjects.

**Identity of the Subjects**

Paul writes “even if a man” in referring to the candidate for discipline. Since the letter is to believers, it is clear that the only proper subjects of discipline are Christians. Jesus makes the same point in Matthew 18:15, “And if your brother sins, go and reprove him in private” (emphasis added). Again, Paul, in writing to the church at Corinth makes clear that discipline is not for the worldly, but for the professing believers. He writes in 1 Corinthians 5:9-13:

I wrote you in my letter not to associate with immoral people; I did not at all mean with the immoral people of this world, or with the covetous and swindlers, or with idolaters, for then you would have to go out of the world. But actually, I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother if he is an immoral person, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or a swindler—not even to eat with such a one. For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Do you not judge those who are within the church? But those who
are outside, God judges, REMOVE THE WICKED MAN FROM AMONG YOURSELVES.”

The rule of discipline “is applicable only to persons who hold a standing in some Christian congregation.”

Paul’s admonition, however, does not prohibit a Christian from reproving an outsider. In Luke 3:19, John the Baptist reproved Herod for his wickedness. Scripture simply teaches that the procedure or process of discipline is fit only for believers.

Indiscrreption of the Subjects

What sin warrants discipline? Paul describes the indiscretion in the following terms, “caught in any trespass.” His description discloses two details about the sin that necessitates discipline.

Sin Requires Confirmation

The verb “caught” (προλνμϕθη) implies public knowledge or that eyewitness evidence exists to confirm the indiscretion, whether a sinful attitude or action. Hearsay evidence and innuendos are not legitimate grounds for discipline. Church members are not to don listening devices, binoculars, and become private detectives.

Sin has a way of coming to the surface for all to see. The words of Moses in Numbers 32:23 state, “Be sure your sin will find you out.” Believers are to concern themselves with the open sin of others, not speculations about secret sin.

Sin Requires Violation

The expression, “any trespass” (τινι παραπτωματι) signifies that the indiscretion is not merely a matter of taste or custom, but a violation of God’s clear command as found in Scripture. Coupled with the preceding passive verb, the implication is that a Christian is eligible for discipline not merely if premeditation exists, but even if the sin involves entrapment or a slip-up. Furthermore, the affixed pronoun, “any,” prevents attempts at dividing sin into false categories such as disciplinary sins and non-disciplinary sins.

Sin, in all of its forms, is deadly and obliges discipline. Initiating the process of discipline, however, is not appropriate unless a confirmed violation of a clear command of God occurs. Once confirmed, a failure to deal with sin is inviting disaster both personally and corporately.
THE STIPULATION IN DISCIPLINE

Paul affixes a stipulation regarding who is responsible for discipline in the church. He writes, “you who are spiritual restore such a one . . . .” While every born-again believer carries the responsibility of fulfilling the command to discipline, only those who are spiritual are to take up the job. Who are the spiritual believers? Spiritual believers are those living Spirit-filled lives, those who are walking according to the boundaries of the Word. John MacArthur Jr. wrote:

It should be noted that, whereas maturity is relative, depending on one’s progression and growth, spirituality is an absolute reality that is unrelated to growth. At any point in the life of a Christian, from the moment of salvation to his glorification, he is either spiritual, walking in the Spirit, or fleshly, walking in the deeds of the flesh.

Any believer walking by the Spirit, no matter how young in the faith, can help an erring brother or sister. Spiritual believers are responsible for restoring fellow believers.

THE STRATEGY OF DISCIPLINE

Paul embodies the purpose or strategy of discipline in the verb “restore” (καταρτίζετε). The present imperative in the Greek emphasizes that the believer’s job is to mend, adjust, or repair. In other words, God commands believers to restore or recover erring brothers and sisters in Christ. The purpose of discipline is not to throw people out of the church. It is not to embarrass people. It is not to play God, but to bring believers back into a right relationship to God. How, then, is restoration to proceed? Paul did not give details in his letter to the Galatians, but inherent in the verb “restore” are the procedures outlined in Matthew 18:15-17. A four-step strategy of recovery is discernible from what Jesus teaches.

Step One: Confrontation

Jesus teaches in Matthew 18:15, “if your brother sins, go and reprove him in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother.” Three aspects are important to note regarding the confrontation.
Assignment of the Confrontation

The assignment in confronting is two-fold: to go and reprove. Grammatically, it is crucial to note that the verb “go” is a present imperative and the verb “reprove” is an aorist imperative. What is the significance? The present imperative “go” emphasizes that believers are not just to go once, but conveys the idea that believers are to go and continue to pursue the person. The aorist imperative “reprove” conveys intensity in striving to convince. In other words, believers are to hang in there until the person sees his sin.

The process of discipline is not mechanical. If the erring saint is receptive, although not yet convinced of their error, multiple visits should occur endeavoring to shed light on the problem before moving to the next level in the process.

Arena for the Confrontation

Jesus sets the boundaries for such a confrontation by means of the phrase, “in private.” He emphasized that the meeting is to insure confidentiality regarding the matter. If a sin comes to the attention of a believer, he is not to call others on the phone to discuss the matter, but to discreetly deal with the situation that God providentially laid in his lap. Walker wrote:

It is to be told, not to others, but to the offender himself; and to remain, for the present, between his reprover and him alone. A premature disclosure of the matter may inflict a needless injury upon the reputation of the wrong-doer, and bring needless reproach upon the Christian name.13

The goal is not to embarrass the guilty party but to reclaim the offender. The goal is not to air out the dirty laundry of the church, like the National Inquirer, but to help the person deal with their sin privately. Exceptions to confidentiality, of course, exist. For example, if the offender committed a crime or if the person refuses to repent, then, the matter requires a more public arena. With few exceptions, confidentiality is the rule!

Assessment of the Confrontation

The means of assessing whether or not to move to the next level in the discipline process finds expression in Jesus’ words, namely, “if he listens to you, you have won your brother.” In Luke 17:3, the parallel passage reads, “if he repents, forgive him.”
Repentance, or the lack thereof, determines whether or not the discipline process moves to the next level.

**Step Two: Verification**

When repentance is absent in the first level of the process of discipline, Jesus counsels taking “one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed.” Jesus quotes from Deuteronomy 19:15 in describing the purpose of the witnesses. Jeschke wrote, “The purpose of additional counsel is . . . to assess the situation in general. It is to clarify the facts of a given case to prevent false charges. It is to discern the attitudes of both parties to ensure the problem is not some person's need to control others.”

In addition to White and Blue's contention, the intent of the witnesses is to assert a positive influence in gaining the ear of the offender. Choosing discerning, trustworthy and influential witnesses is important. “These must be brethren,—not unbelievers, but fellow disciples; and if practicable, it seems desirable that they should be members of the same church.”

**Step Three: Publication**

If the private confrontation and the influence of witnesses fail to result in repentance, Jesus instructs believers to “tell it to the church.” Regarding the communication of the case to the congregation, Jeschke wrote:

Two main points need to be noted about this third stage of the process. First, escalation does not signify any change in approach or spirit. The additional level of involvement does not signal a departure from a nonthreatening, compassionate, or gracious appeal. Official, structured, organized congregational action need not become impersonal, unloving, or unchristian. Second, congregational presence and participation is essential at this stage because the issue has become nothing less than membership itself.

Since the offense affects the membership as a whole, a general statement of the case is necessary.
Step Four: Exclusion

What should a church do when a member refuses to repent of sin? What should a church do when a faithful exercise of each phase of discipline meets with stubborn resistance and an unrepentant heart? Jesus directs the church to “let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax-gatherer.” What does Jesus mean by this? Jesus means that the church is to refuse to treat a person as a Christian whose life is inconsistent with the Word. “It means respecting their decisions and honestly treating them as persons of the world.”

The church is to communicate not only with the person involved, but also with other Christians and persons in the world, that the offender does not give evidence of true Christianity. In short, the church is to treat the person as a non-believer who needs to hear the gospel.

Following the biblical pattern precisely is important for acting under the authority and blessing of God and in preventing litigation. H. Wayne House in an article entitled, Church Discipline and the Courts, wrote, “A court listening to a complaint from a litigating member should respond positively to such use of due process by a local church.”

THE SPIRIT OF DISCIPLINE

All of the aforementioned process is, as Paul notes in Galatians 6:1, to take place “in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted.” Regarding the right attitude, Walker rightly asserted:

Whoever, therefore, would be successful in such reformatory efforts as he may think it his duty to put forth, must see to it that those efforts are dictated by love. If he would reclaim them that are out of the way, he must have compassion on them. He must be pitiful, courteous,—not rendering evil for evil, or railing for railing (1 Peter 3:8, 9). He must canvass their acts without prejudice, and candidly give them the most favorable construction they will bear. He must put on that fervent charity which hopeth all things, and thinketh no evil, farther than as it actually appears (1 Corinthians 13:4-7). He must not be overcome of evil, but seek to overcome evil with good (Romans 12:21). And finally, he must do all under the influence of an humbling consciousness that he is himself
liable to be tempted, and that nothing but grace can keep him from falling (Galatians 6:1).^{19}

Believers are sensitively to speak to the erring in words and in a tone best fitted to bring about their repentance and restoration to fellowship with God.

**THE CHALLENGE**

Martin Luther once wrote:

If I profess with the loudest voice and clearest exposition every portion of the truth of God except precisely that little point which the world and the devil are at that moment attacking, I am not confessing Christ however boldly I may be professing Christ. Where the battle rages, there the loyalty of the soldier is proved and to be steady on all the battlefield besides is mere flight and disgrace if he flinches at that one point.^{20}

Church discipline is a command of God given, as assuredly for the benefit of the church, as the Great Commission. Discipline promotes the purity of the church and adorns the gospel with holiness. Hence, to neglect the Lord’s command regarding church discipline is disloyalty to the King. May the church gladden the heart of God by recovering the lost treasure of church discipline. For God rejoic-es over the recovery of sinners!

**NOTES**

2. Ibid., 70.
5. Jeschke, 49.
7. Jeschke, 16.

Walker, 75-76.


Walker, 99.


Walker, 126-27.

Jeschke, 57.

Walker, 131.

Jeschke, 58-59.

Ibid., 95.


Walker, 93-94.

ECCLESIOLOGY: THE MOST CRITICAL ISSUE IN CHURCH PLANTING TODAY

J. D. Payne
North American Mission Board Nehemiah Project Director
Assistant Professor of Evangelism and Church Planting
Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“I believe a perverted and tarnished view of what a church is constitutes one of the greatest hurdles faced by church planters.”¹

“Church planting that fails to engage in theological reflection on the many aspects of the mission in which the church is invited by God to participate may serve only to multiply the number of churches which are ill-prepared for the challenges of the next century.”²

A couple of years ago, I conducted an informal study of 190 church planters representing thirteen different churches, denominations, and parachurch organizations asking them a single question: “What do you believe are the five most critical issues in North American church planting today?” After receiving responses from forty states and four provinces, the most critical issues listed in order of popularity were: 1. Lack of money; 2. Lack of leaders; 3. Lack of involvement from established churches; 4. Difficulty in contextualizing the gospel; and 5. Stress on the family. Though the responses were fascinating and have been very helpful in equipping and training church planters, I must admit that for the most part these felt needs stem from a much deeper theological issue regarding the nature and function of the local church. In an article in Evangelical Missions Quarterly, Tom Julien observed “Our problem is that we identify the local church by her cultural and historic expression, more than by her biblical essence.”³ After reading through hundreds of detailed responses and working with church planters for the past several years, I agree with Julien; and I am convinced that in North America the most critical issue in church planting today is an ecclesiological issue.

How a church planting team answers the question, “What is the church?” will affect everything in their ministry.⁴ Apart from the obvious impact on their doctrine, their answers will shape their
methods, influence their strategies, and mold their approaches to leadership development.

A casual survey of contemporary North American church planting circles in general reveals two problematic ecclesiologies influencing church planters. This article will describe the common unhealthy paternalistic and pragmatic ecclesiologies and will conclude by advocating the need for a biblical ecclesiology, listing some of the elements included in such an alternative.

**PATERNALISTIC ECCLESIOLOGY**

Paternalism is the ideology that supports the belief of one group dominating another group. One party seeks to maintain control over the other party. Paternalism establishes a superiority-inferiority dichotomy between the groups involved. By definition it creates a dependency of the inferior group for the superior group. For paternalism to exist, the dominant group is seen as the source of vitality, sustenance, and provision. Rather than the two groups existing in an interdependent relationship to accomplish a greater good, an unhealthy co-dependent relationship exists whereby the domineering group feels empowered and self-sacrificial because they are “emptying” themselves on behalf of the inferior group. On the other hand, the inferior group feels wanted and is grateful for the other group’s sacrificial giving. Rather than the relationship beginning like a parent-child relationship with the plans quickly to assist the child in becoming an adult, paternalism creates and maintains an indefinite parent-child dynamic.

Paternalism was a common practice in missionary work in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries, primarily outside of North America. As missionaries would leave from European and North American nations and travel to Eastern lands to preach the gospel and plant churches, many missionaries quickly found themselves in situations where a clash of cultures existed. Soon after arriving in Chinese provinces or African bush country, many missionaries, having very little training in cross-cultural ministry, naturally defaulted into their paradigms for evangelism, discipleship training, liturgies, education, and church structure and organization to which they were accustomed.

At this point in history, Western ethnocentrism ran high. Westerners rarely valued Non-western cultures and the Euro-American approach to life was seen as paramount. Colonialism was
of great importance politically and the Church had embraced it as an approach to missionary work. “After all,” many reasoned, “We have the gospel and our societies are not as bad as the hea-
then societies in the East. They need the gospel and they need to be educated so their societies will be civilized like us.”

With the Euro-American paradigm of ministry being a com-
mon expression with the missionaries, naturally, the methods and means of communicating the gospel and the teachings of Christ were very Western. Rather than allowing the gospel to come to the people through methods that were contextualized to their societies and allowing the churches planted to be indige-
nous churches, missionaries enculturated Easterners in the Euro-
American way of thought and life. Naturally, this approach hin-
dered the propagation of the gospel whenever the unregenerate nationals soon began to believe that to become a Christian meant an individual had to give up his or her cultural identity and become a European or an American. Rather than allowing the gospel to transform the people and their cultures, many mission-
aries gave the people both the gospel and Western civilization as a part of their task toward societal transformation.

As churches were planted, both the churches and their lead-
ers were taught Euro-American definitions of the local church. It was common for organization and structures, liturgies and music, teaching and preaching methods, and leadership development and theological education to look very much like those found in Western nations.

Once such culturally specific paradigms were in place, it was difficult for national believers to operate and facilitate such approaches to the Christian life. Not having been trained in the Western philosophies behind such models and the managerial skills necessary to maintain such practices, the missionaries quickly realized that these national believers were also ignorant and incapable of “doing” church the Western way. The result was that paternalism was necessary in order to maintain such church-
es in the “proper” way. A paternalistic ecclesiology as applied to a church planting context consists of three components: 1. What are our preferences for doing church the “right” way? 2. What is a good church model to support our understanding of the “right” way? 3. What is the biblical support for our determined model of church?5
The development of a paternalistic ecclesiology usually starts with the desires of the church planters. Some feel confident that they know what is “best” for a church, “After all,” they speculate, “We have been believers for several years. We know the problems that many churches face; therefore, we are going to plant churches as we prefer without those problems.” This rationale, however, assumes too much. The church planters are confident that they know what the church is based upon—the fact that they have had much experience in the churches. Second, though not to denigrate or negate experiences and wisdom gained through the years, some church planters fail to remember that there will never be a perfect church this side of heaven. It should be remembered that if the Apostle Paul planted churches with problems (e.g., the church at Corinth), contemporary church planters must realize that even their best efforts will not avoid all problems. Third, and most obvious, is the fact that any theological method that begins with one’s culture, rather than the Bible, is a poor approach to understanding the church.

After beginning with the culture of the church planters, church planters following a paternalistic ecclesiology usually decide upon a particular paradigm or model of church life to support their cultural preference. Rather than allowing the expression of the newly planted church to develop from the context, the paternalistic ecclesiology imposes a favorite expression of church organization and structure onto the people. For example, if the church planters believe that age-graded Sunday school classes are the best approach because such divisions worked well in their home church, then they will attempt to use such a paradigm with little regard for the fact that the people may be very resistant to adults and children being separated for Bible study.

The Scriptures are usually used in this ecclesiological paradigm, but usually after the preference and model of church are already determined. Rather than healthy exegesis guiding the understanding of the local church, eisegesis and poor hermeneutics are likely to be used. With the paternalistic ecclesiology, there is a strong possibility that church planters “see” what they already want to find in the Scriptures regarding the local church.
PRAGMATIC ECCLESIOLOGY

All Kingdom citizens should be pragmatic to some degree. We do want to know what is working and what is not working to reach people with the gospel and see the multiplication of churches across the globe. If we spend much of the Lord’s resources attempting to reach a certain population segment with the gospel and there is no response, then wise stewards will ask themselves, “Why?” and reconsider their evangelistic methods in light of the difficult soil. A sanctified pragmatism can be a good thing.

Pragmatism, however, can be unhealthy if taken too far. In one sense of the word, pragmatism is the doctrine which advocates, “use whatever means necessary to accomplish your task at hand.” Or still worse, the spiritualized version of pragmatism advocates, “If the means used to accomplish your tasks are working, then obviously God’s blessing is upon you and He is pleased.” It is easy to see how pragmatism can be taken too far and devolve into a philosophy void of biblical parameters.

Unfortunately, I have witnessed a pragmatic ecclesiology influencing church planters today. Thankfully, I have not encountered it in the purest sense as discussed in this article; nevertheless, I have witnessed many of the various elements as described. A pragmatic ecclesiology as applied to a church planting context consists of three components: 1. What is working to plant churches? 2. What is the cultural context of the people group? 3. What is the biblical support for our methods?

This contemporary ecclesiology begins by asking the question: “What works to plant churches?” Usually, the concept of “what” is understood as a particular method or model of church. Here the church planter begins by examining the globe for a system that has proven itself effective in planting churches. A pragmatic ecclesiology is usually being used whenever one hears church planters say, “Well, we’re going to plant a postmodern (or cell, house, seeker, purpose-driven, Reformed, contemporary, etc.) church, because pastor X has seen it work well in his area.”

After locating a particular method or model, the church planters usually attempt to make the paradigm fit in the cultural context of the people to whom they are called to minister. In many cases, this approach does work to reach people with the gospel and plant churches. Remember, it is a highly pragmatic approach. Murray warned against this approach when he wrote, “Church
cloning, by replicating existing patterns, may be successful in the short term, but this runs the risk of consigning both planting church and church planting to longer term irrelevance.” Wise church planters understand that a biblical ecclesiology does not allow for the satisfaction of the planting of a church, but rather the transformation of a society as people become followers of Jesus. Fulfilling the Great Commission is a marathon, not a sprint.

An attempt to find biblical support is made for why the church planting team (and ultimately the new congregation) does what it does. Though some legitimate support will be found, the temptation for proof-texting is strong.

A problem with this theological method of locating biblical support is not with the fact that the church planters want biblical evidence for their work. Rather, the problem is that the biblical support for which many desire is support for the methods or models as used by other “successful” church planters. These methods or models may have legitimate biblical support, but for church planters subscribing to a pragmatic ecclesiology, they have not wrestled with and owned the Scriptures. Rather, they have spent more time grappling with how to make the paradigm of church “work” to produce the desired results in their contexts.

**BIBLICAL ECCLESIOLOGY**

In all of the Scriptures, there is not a single mandate to go into the world and plant churches; yet, clearly there is a biblical pattern set forth in the Scriptures for church planting. The Matthean Great Commission is to go throughout the world and make disciples (Matt. 28:19), or followers of Jesus. Though there is no command to plant churches, clearly what follows in the pericope, and throughout the rest of the New Testament, is that the “baptizing” and “teaching them to observe” is to take place within the context of the local expression of the body of Christ, the church. Biblical church planting is evangelism that results in churches. It is a means of seeing people come to faith, being baptized, and being taught. It is a means of fulfilling the Great Commission.

Just as the Bible does not offer us a concise definition of church planting, it also does not offer us a concise statement defining the church. This lack of a clearly delineated statement is no limitation on behalf of God’s revelation. Rather, what we have is over one hundred references to the Church, church, or churches, numerous
descriptions of church life and ministry, scores of principles describing life in the Body, and various metaphors painting a picture of the nature and function of the church. In light of all of this scriptural information, church planters can discover a healthy biblical understanding of the nature and function of the church.8

A biblical ecclesiology, as applied to the realm of church planting, begins with the Scriptures. What does the Bible say in response to the question, “What is the Church?” Entire books have been written on this topic, and I am confident that there is no way for me to articulate a well-defined biblical ecclesiology in this brief article. Despite this limitation, I will describe a theological method for developing a biblical ecclesiology mentioning the importance of understanding the Kingdom and biblical metaphors for the Church as related to church planting.

We enter into the Kingdom as its citizens upon our confessions (Matt. 16:15-16) and immediately receive a great responsibility as Kingdom citizens (Matt. 16:18-19). Along with such a calling comes a Kingdom ethic that surpasses anything of this world (Matt. 5-7). This ethic quickly redefines how we are to live in response to God (Matt. 22:37-38), other Kingdom citizens (Matt. 18:15-20; 22:39), and those outside the Kingdom (Matt. 22:39; 28:18-20). The environment in which the Kingdom citizens are to live out this new ethic is within the community/fellowship (i.e., local church) of other Kingdom citizens.

In addition to the Matthean references just listed, the Bible lists many metaphors and actions of the Apostolic Church to describe the Church with words and concepts such as branches (John 15), kingdom of priests (1 Pet. 2), temple (1 Cor. 3:16), sheep (John 10), bride (Eph. 5), salt (Matt. 5:13), light (Matt. 5:14), body (1 Cor. 12), fellowship (1 John 1:7), and a community (Acts 2:44; 4:34). Taken within their contexts these concepts assist us in understanding the nature and functions of the local expression of the Body of Christ. Justice Anderson was correct when he wrote, “The nature of a local church can only be understood in the light of the New Testament doctrine of the spiritual [universal] Church.”9

Following a healthy understanding of the doctrine of the Church, church planters then must decide how to preach the gospel (i.e., “make disciples”) and concepts of Kingdom citizenship (i.e., “teach them to observe”) to the people in their unique contexts. Wise is the church planter who studies the culture of the people in order to communicate effectively the whole purpose of God (Acts
20:27). After establishing a healthy understanding of the church and the culture of one's ministry context, the church planting team should then begin to look at what is working to reach people with the gospel and plant churches.

Church planters should study the methods and models used by others, but methods and models are culturally specific and are not universally translatable. Effective methods and models need to be examined by church planters and sifted for their golden nuggets of truth that can then be applied to their own ministry contexts.

It is through much prayer and trial and error that church planters will begin to see an expression of church take shape that is culturally specific to the people to whom they are called to serve. When the church planting team begins with a healthy understanding of the Scriptures, they will do a much better job at laying a foundation for healthy discipleship and numerical growth in the days ahead.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR CHURCH PLANTING**

Though the implications of a healthy ecclesiology on church planting activities are numerous, I will limit my discussion to the following three particular areas: strategy, methods and leadership development. Each of these significant areas demands a biblical understanding of the church as a prerequisite for healthy ministry. Without the proper foundation, church planters run the risk of greatly hindering Kingdom work.

**Strategy**

Church planting teams must always begin their ministries with the end in mind. If church planters understand the church as existing for herself, then it is very easy for the church planting team to become content with the planting of a single church that will “reach everyone in this city.” Though this goal is a noble one, due to at least cultural differences and population density I know of no churches who are able to reach such a wide demographic and quantity of the people in a given area. Even in small rural regions where the likelihood of achieving such a goal may be more readily accomplished, clearly the pattern witnessed in the New Testament is one whereby the church planting team was involved in planting churches in various cities and instilling within those churches the D.N.A. necessary to continue to carry the gospel beyond themselves (e.g., 1
Thess. 1:8).10

Church planters who enter a context with the intention to plant one church have a myopic understanding of the Great Commission. A healthy ecclesiology causes church planters to realize that the church is to grow and multiply herself throughout a population segment or people group. Rather that strategizing for the planting of a single church, healthy church planting strategies include a wide-spread dissemination of the gospel with the intention of seeing numerous churches planted as a result of such preaching. A reproduction-orientation must be in the heart of the church planters.

The Apostle Paul clearly desired the gospel to spread across the world. Writing to the Thessalonians he revealed, “Finally, pray for us, brothers, that the Lord’s message may spread rapidly and be honored, just as it was with you (2 Thess. 3:1, HCSB). It is also likely that the Apostle believed that the gospel would continue to spread across the known world when he mentioned that his plans were to travel to Spain, believing that his work was completed in certain provinces (Rom. 15:19-24).

Church planting strategies must embrace a philosophy of reproduction. If the church is truly a living body of believers that loves God, each other, and the world, then healthy strategies will emerge from a biblical ecclesiology that will not allow church planters to rest in the desire to plant a single church and maybe later, plant other churches. Everything church planters do should be with the mentality of seeing the gospel spread rapidly and healthy churches multiplied across their regions or population segments. Strategies that embrace a philosophy of reproduction will result in disciples and churches who are reproduction-oriented in their ecclesiologies.

Methods

How church planters understand the nature of the church will affect their church planting methods. For example, imagine that there are two artists in one room with each receiving the assignment to paint a picture of a building. Before brushes are put to canvases, both artists already have a picture in mind of the desired outcome. Sometime later when the artists reveal their masterpieces one has painted a skyscraper and the other a small store. Given their assignments, both artists accomplished the tasks correctly, yet the end products were radically different.

The image of “church” which church planters have in mind
long before they enter the field will shape the outcome. This image will determine the church planting methods used in the work. If the understanding of a church is a small group of people with a multitude of programs, then the methods used will work to produce this result. If the understanding of church is a large group of people, with a magnificent sanctuary, a great praise team, and a nice sound system, then again, the methods used will be those which work to produce this understanding of church.

There are multitudes of ways (i.e., methods) to plant churches, though not all are conducive to the healthy multiplication of churches throughout a population segment or people group. A biblical ecclesiology reminds church planters that their methods need to be contextualized and highly reproducible by the people to whom they are called to minister. Rather than the church planters holding the keys to church planting through highly structured, highly subsidized, and highly technical church planting methods, a healthy understanding of the church leads to church planting methods that are easily embraced and adopted by the people themselves. Biblical church planting is a very simple ministry; it is evangelism that results in congregations. Church planters must make certain that their methods are ones that the people they reach are able to then apply as they are sent to plant other churches. Church planters must remember that they are not the key to reaching a people group, but rather the people themselves are the key. The people will be able to reach their kith and kin more efficiently and effectively than the church planters, assuming they have been taught highly reproducible methods of evangelism and church planting.

Leadership Development

One final area of importance is that of the close connection between leadership development and ecclesiology. How church planters understand the doctrine of the church will affect how they understand who is capable of being an elder, deacon, teacher, etc. Much caution should be taken into consideration regarding the importing of Western expectations on to the new believers. For example, an examination of many of the biblical requirements for elders and deacons (1 Tim. 3:1-13; Titus 1:5-9) place a great deal of expectation on the man's character, family dynamics, and reputation, rather than his business accomplishments, number of degrees, and managerial skills. Though one is clearly to be able to teach and exhort from the Scriptures (1 Tim. 3:2, Titus 1:9), it is dangerous
for church planters to allow these two characteristics to negate the others. Both the public and the private life are extremely important and cannot be separated.

Again, if the requirements for the birth of churches include technical structures and organizations that only highly skilled and highly trained people can implement and maintain, then church planters will significantly limit the number of people who can plant churches. Charles Brock was correct when he warned against church planters becoming “scaffolding builders”:

Organizational structure can be used and is needed by a church, but the organism should only develop organizational structures when, and as long as, they enhance the well being of the organism. In the beginning of church planting, the attention must be on the birth of the organism. Out of felt and real needs, the necessary programs and organizations can be added. The foundation is laid first, then the superstructure is built. We must beware of losing focus and becoming professional scaffolding builders. It is one thing to plant a church where the family of believers (the organism) becomes one, inhabited by the Spirit; it is something quite different if the church planter seeks to develop the programs and organizations first. It is like the builder who tries to develop the top story of the building at the same time he is developing the foundation. Few can do this, and anyone who tries faces insurmountable odds to effectively planting an indigenous church.11

Another important consideration regarding leadership development is the importance of modeling and on-the-job-training. Many church planters have been educated in the classroom, mainly removed from the realities of the world. They imitate what has been modeled before them, and therefore, attempt to develop leaders in new churches solely through a classroom model. Though this common Western approach to education is good, it can be problematic in missionary work where everything is not always safe and cut-and-dried. Paul reminded his readers to “imitate” him, obviously having set a reproducible example for the people to follow in belief and practice (1 Cor 4:16; 11:1; 1 Thess. 1:6; 2 Thess. 3:7, 9).

Much of Jesus’ teaching was both seen and heard as He and his disciples experienced life together. For example, prior to sending out the Seventy (Luke 10), He had already modeled for them
preaching, healing, and casting out demons (Luke 1-9); now, he was sending them out to do likewise. When they returned rejoicing over the authority over the demons (Luke 10:17), Jesus used this moment to teach them a greater truth (Luke 10:20).

Wise church planters staunchly adhere to the biblical prerequisites for church leaders and do not change with shifting cultural values. Also, rather than indoctrinating new believers with non-indigenous organizations and structures, church planters are wise to allow the leaders to come from the harvest fields and be raised up in a church culture that is appropriate to the newly planted church. Healthy leadership development includes that the church planters at least model a reproducible life-style and provide on-the-job-training for the leaders they are equipping to serve the church.

CONCLUSION

Church planters must take time to search the Scriptures to answer the question, “What is the church?” Since the Scriptures do not bow to the gods of this age, for some church planters this process will be painful, requiring them to surrender their visions, dreams, passions, desires, finances, and prestige that have developed over the years from Western cultural definitions and expectations for what constitutes a “healthy” church. Hope is found in the God of the ages Who has clearly described and explained His desire for His Church, both universal and local. Church planters must embrace a biblical ecclesiology rather than succumbing to a paternalistic or pragmatic ecclesiology that is commonplace today.

NOTES

4In this article, I will refer to the local church with a lower case “c” and the universal Church with an upper case “C”.
5Please understand that as I describe the components of both paternalistic and pragmatic ecclesiologies that I am in no way saying that these components always happen in a sequential order, as if one component has to follow a previous component in the minds of church planters. I have used a tripartite delineation addressing both of these ecclesiologies mainly for the sake of discussion in this article.
It should be remembered that though the Apostle Paul referred to the Corinthians as “babes in Christ” (1 Cor 3:1-2, HCSB), clearly it was not his desire for them to exist in such a state. His expectations for maturity were high, even in light of the fact that he had only remained with the Corinthians for eighteen months (Acts 18:11).

Murray, 136.

8The issue of a healthy ecclesiology has been a concern for both the North American Mission Board and the International Mission Board, with both of these Southern Baptist Convention agencies recently and clearly delineating their ecclesiological guidelines for missionaries.


10It is worth noting that 2000 years later we are followers of Christ because of the faithfulness of church planters who were imparted with such a spiritual-genetic makeup.

11Brock, 59.

12It should be remembered that the elders for many of the new churches in the New Testament came from the new believers. For example, in Acts 14:23 the Apostle Paul appointed elders in the newly planted churches. Also, Titus was left on Crete to appoint elders in every town (Titus 1:5).
FROM THE PASTOR’S STUDY

WORTHY OF WORSHIP

Steve Gaines
Pastor, Bellevue Baptist Church
Cordova, Tennessee

What is worship? That simple question broaches a broad subject that will scarcely be answered in a brief article in this or any other theological journal. However, several aspects of this stimulating subject can and should be addressed in settings such as this. This article concentrates on some of the most pertinent aspects of Christian worship based on what the Bible teaches about each.

THE OBJECT OF WORSHIP

It is amazing to that which people will pay homage. Some seem to worship a specific form of worship itself—a set of rituals or a certain way of approaching God. We must not worship a preferred manner of worship. We must worship God Himself. The old cliche is true—Christ did not come to give us a new religion, but a new relationship. God is our Father and we are to focus on Him when we worship. This is the essence of the first two of the Ten Commandments. Commandment one says, “You shall have no other gods before Me” (Exodus 20:3). The phrase “before Me” means “no where around or near Me.” God is in an exclusive category. He is the only One worthy of our worship and praise. The second of the Ten Commandments forbids making any sort of idolatrous figure that might detract the worshiper from focusing on the Lord Himself:

You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth. You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate Me, but showing lovingkindness to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments (Exodus 20:4-6).
Collectively, these first commandments tell us that God alone is to be the focal point of our adoration.

Jesus emphasized the same thing when He spoke words of rebuke to the Jews of His day, “You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; it is these that testify about Me; and you are unwilling to come to Me so that you may have life” (John 5:39-40). Jesus was in no way denigrating the Old Testament Scriptures with His statement. He was simply telling His Jewish listeners that even the Scriptures, as holy as they are, are not to be an object of worship. Rather, we are to worship the One to whom they point—Jesus Christ! The Scriptures are not an end in and of themselves. They are a means to the end—Jesus Christ!

While Christians respect and revere the Bible, we do not worship it. Our worship is reserved exclusively for the author of the Bible—Almighty God.

**JESUS’ REQUIREMENTS FOR WORSHIP**

The New Testament does not give many precise, obvious guidelines regarding worship. However, when Jesus spoke with the Samaritan woman at the well in Sychar, He set forth two basic requirements for our worship.

Jesus said to her, “Woman, believe Me, an hour is coming when neither in this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But an hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers. God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth” (John 4:21-24).

Jesus said that “true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth.”

First, we must worship God “in spirit.” Why? Because “God is spirit.” Thus, worship is spiritual. It is not merely an intellectual exercise, although it should involve our minds. Rather, it is a mystical, spiritual experience that transcends mere human intellect.

For a person to worship God “in spirit” he must be genuinely converted to Christ. That is, the worshiper must be “born of the Spirit” (John 3:5-8). When a person becomes a Christian, He receives the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:13). If someone does not
have the Holy Spirit, it is a sure indication that he is not saved (Romans 8:9). We have access to the Father through Jesus His only begotten Son through the power of the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 2:18). Consequently, those who do not know and love Jesus Christ do not have the Holy Spirit and are thus incapable of worshiping God in a manner He will accept.

But not every Christian stands ready to worship God. If the believer in Christ desires to express His adoration and praise, he must be “filled with the Spirit” (Ephesians 5:18). All believers have the Holy Spirit living within their physical bodies (1 Corinthians 6:19-20), but sometimes, due to sin, believers walk in the power of the flesh, not the Spirit. That is, they do not allow the Holy Spirit within to control them absolutely. In that state of carnality, the believer seeks to worship God in vain. But when he confesses all known sin and asks God to fill him afresh from within with the Spirit, his worship becomes acceptable. No wonder Paul shares that an immediate result of being filled with the Spirit is worship.

And do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord; always giving thanks for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God, even the Father; and be subject to one another in the fear of Christ (Ephesians 5:18-21).

Only a believer in Jesus Christ who is walking in the fullness of the Spirit can worship the Lord in an acceptable manner.

But Jesus gave a second requirement for worshiping the Father. He taught that we must worship Him “in truth.” That simply means that we must worship God biblically. Any form or expression of worship that cannot be substantiated by Scripture should be avoided. When someone tries to offer God praise in a manner not mentioned in the biblical text, he is akin to the sons of Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, in the Old Testament, whom God killed because they “offered strange fire to the Lord which He had not commanded” (Leviticus 10:1).

Sometimes people will try to worship the Lord in an unscriptural way and then claim that they were being “led by the Spirit.” But the Holy Spirit was the one who inspired the Scriptures, and He would never lead a believer to do something in worship that contradicted what He set forth in the biblical text.
That is why we should not pray to Mary or any other Christian who has preceded us in death. That is also why people should not claim that God has supernaturally anointed their hands with oil or gold dust, or that He has sprinkled the altar of their church with angel feathers. People who bark like dogs, roll in floors, and jerk uncontrollably should not blame God for such fanatical behavior because the Bible never sanctions or suggests such activity. Worship that is truly “in spirit” will also be “in truth.”

**MAJOR COMPONENTS OF WORSHIP**

When Christians gather in Jesus’ name to worship the Father in the power of the Spirit, what should take place? The worship of the first century believers gives us several essential components of worship.

**Preaching**

The earliest Christians came together to hear the pastor “rightly divide the word of truth” (2 Timothy 2:15). Leaders preached from the Old Testament Scriptures. They believed that all of the biblical text was breathed by God and was thus inerrant and infallible. Because they knew that those Old Testament Scriptures pointed to the Messiah, they preached about Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 1:23). That is exactly what Philip did when he preached to the Eunuch from Ethiopia. The Bible says, “Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning from this Scripture he preached Jesus to him” (Acts 8:35). These early believers preached the gospel of Jesus Christ, which focused on his sacrificial death for the sins of all mankind as well as His bodily, victorious, and eternal resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:3-4). They were convinced that “since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not come to know God, God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe” (1 Corinthians 1:21).

Preaching the Word of God is still essential to biblical worship in our day. If a pastor ought to be able to do anything, he ought to be able to preach. The local church must allow its pastor to have the time to study and prepare sermons so that he can have something meaningful to say when he steps into the pulpit. Pastors must still devote themselves to prayer and the ministry of the Word (Acts 6:4)!
Singing

Christian worship should also include singing unto the Lord. When Jesus and His disciples worshiped, they sang praises to the Father (Matthew 26:30). Likewise, Paul and Silas sang praises to God even though they had been arrested and beaten because they had preached the gospel. The Bible says, “But about midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns of praise to God, and the prisoners were listening to them” (Acts 16:25).

Paul also taught the early believers to worship God through music. He said, “Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God” (Colossians 3:16). This incredible verse tells us much about the music we use as we sing to the Lord in worship.

First the songs we sing should be scriptural in content. Music used in worship must be based on “the Word of Christ.” They should be theologically accurate and harmonious with Jesus’ teachings. Regardless of how great the “tune” is, the content of the song is the priority.

Worship songs that are based upon Scripture will by nature also be didactic in nature. They will assist the worshipers in “teaching and admonishing one another” in the faith. I have often said that the greatest book on Christian theology is the Bible itself. The second greatest is a Christian hymnal/songbook that is filled with music based on Scripture. We will teach a great deal of doctrine through the songs we sing in church.

Christian songs should also be varied in style. They should include “psalms and hymns and spiritual songs.” Whatever else those words mean, they seem to imply that the early believers probably sang more than one “style” of songs. We should do the same today and not allow personal preferences and the musical tastes of one particular group to dominate the selection of the songs used in our worship services. Churches that are more traditional in nature must be open to some of the wonderful new worship songs that are being written in our day. Likewise, more contemporary worshipers must not neglect the time-tested great hymns of the faith when they worship the Lord.

Worship music should also be accompanied by instruments. The fact that they sang “psalms” suggests that the early Christians indeed used musical instruments to accompany their singing. God
commanded that musical instruments be utilized in the Old Testament (Psalm 150). Musical instruments also are used in heaven (Revelation 8:2, 6; 15:2). Why wouldn’t God desire in our day that Christians worship Him with songs accompanied by musical instruments?

Finally, Christian singing must be an expression of heartfelt thanksgiving. We must always sing “with thankfulness in (our) hearts to the Lord.” We are commanded to “...continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that give thanks to His name” (Hebrews 13:15).

**OTHER COMPONENTS OF WORSHIP**

While preaching and singing seem to be the predominant components of New Testament worship, there are others that are appropriate. Believers in Christ should focus on prayer in worship services. The early Christians were certainly “devoted to prayer” (Acts 1:14; 2:42; 6:4; Colossians 4:2). We should also observe the biblical ordinances of baptism (Matthew 28:19-20) and the Lord’s Supper, which is often referred to as “the breaking of bread” (Acts 2:42; 20:7; 1 Corinthians 10:16-17). We ought to collect financial offerings when we gather together for worship (1 Corinthians 16:2). All of these are scriptural and should be implemented in worship services as the Holy Spirit leads the pastor, his staff, and the congregation.

**Neglected Biblical Expressions of Worship**

As Southern Baptists, we have traditionally avoided such physical expressions in worship as lifting hands, clapping hands, and dancing unto the Lord. These just haven’t been an integral part of our way of doing things. Yet, gratefully, more of our churches are opening up to such biblical expressions of worship.

**Lifting Up Holy Hands**

Years ago I preached an entire sermon concerning lifting holy hands to the Lord and what that represents. I gave scriptural support for it. It’s all over the Bible, especially in the Psalms (cf. 2 Chronicles 6:13; Nehemiah 8:6; Psalm 28:2; 63:4; 134:2; 141:2; 143:6; 1 Timothy 2:8).

Have you ever considered what it means to lift up your hands in worship to the Lord? For one thing, it means, “I surrender.”
When I worship by means of lifting my hands to the Lord, I find that it is easier to surrender myself to the Lord and to His will.

Lifting hands unto the Lord is also symbolic of an intimate relationship with God who is my heavenly Father. When a young child wants his father to pick him up, what does he do? He runs up to him and says, “Daddy, hold me!” At that moment, the child lifts up his hands and is taken up into his father’s loving arms. The child’s outstretched hands represent his desire for intimacy and closeness with his father. The same thing happens when a Christian desires to be held by his heavenly “Abba.”

A third way to consider lifting hands unto the Lord has to do with offering yourself completely unto the Lord. The priests in the Old Testament times would lift up the animal sacrifices to the Lord as they laid them on top of the altar. When they presented those animals in such a way, their hands were stretched upward to the Lord. No wonder the Psalmist said, “May my prayer be counted as incense before You; the lifting up of my hands as the evening offering” (Psalm 141:2). Later in the New Testament, Paul said that every Christian is to present himself as a living and holy offering unto the Lord (Romans 12:1).

Jesus lifted up His hands to bless His disciples (Luke 24:50). Paul said he wanted men to do this in the church (1 Timothy 2:8). Why then do people recoil from the idea of lifting hands to the Lord in worship? Some do because they insist that it brings too much attention to the worshiper. But if such reasoning is followed, then we probably don’t need to do or say anything when we worship God alongside other believers, lest we inadvertently cause someone to look our way. I see it differently. When I raise my hands to the Lord, I’m actually pointing people upward to Him, not drawing attention to myself.

I would never try to force anyone in this matter. There should be freedom to practice it or not to practice it. We certainly shouldn’t lift hands to the Lord just because others are. But I have occasionally said something like this: “Now, let’s all close our eyes, and if you have the desire and the liberty to do so, just lift your hands to the Lord and worship him while we sing this song.” After that, people often feel free to worship that way. Some people just need permission from their leader to do it. For me personally, lifting holy hands to the Lord is a very fulfilling, intimate means of worshiping Him. I’ve never allowed the traditions of others to prevent me from worshiping God that way. I lift my hands to Jesus; not to be seen by man.
Clapping Your Hands

It’s interesting that we often teach our young children to clap their hands in time with the songs they learn in children’s church or in their children’s choirs, but then we discourage them from clapping hands when they go to “big church.” Some people just have an aversion to clapping hands in church. The fact is, today’s generation is much more likely to show their approval of something that happens or is said in a worship service by clapping their hands than by saying “Amen.” It’s their normal, natural way of affirming what has just happened and giving praise to God.

The Bible says, “O clap your hands, all peoples; shout to God with the voice of joy” (Psalm 47:1). Notice, it does not say, “O clap your hands, all Charismatics.” It says, “All peoples.” Again, it should never be forced. But clapping hands (as well as lifting holy hands) should never—I repeat never—be forbidden in a Christian worship service. It may not be in accordance with your church’s tradition, but it is in accordance with the Word of God. The Bible is the authority for every local church in matters of faith and practice (i.e. what we believe and how we live). I find it interesting that many of the same people who oppose clapping and lifting hands in a worship service will do both at either a football or basketball game. Isn’t it an indictment against our pride and tradition when we are willing to act more biblically at an athletic event than we do when we worship corporately in the presence of the King of kings?

Praising Him with Dancing

Before you faint, I assure you that I am not suggesting at this point that Christians should indiscriminately dance up and down the isles of their church during times of corporate worship. However, I am suggesting that churches should be open to utilizing thematic, interpretive dancing (some might want to call it choreography) on special occasions such as seasonal musicals at Easter and Christmas presented by church choirs and orchestras. These occasions can indeed provide an appropriate “time to dance” (Ecclesiastes 3:4).

Through the years, the churches which I have led have utilized interpretive dancing in those settings. It might be a Jewish dance during a dramatic presentation of the life of Christ, or a more formal ballet dance that accompanies a song of worship. My own daughters have participated in such dances and they have brought great glory to the Lord in doing so.
Worshipful dancing certainly has scriptural support. The last chapter of Psalms says, “Praise Him with trumpet sound; praise Him with harp and lyre. Praise Him with timbrel and dancing; praise Him with stringed instruments and pipe. Praise Him with loud cymbals; praise Him with resounding cymbals. Let everything that has breath praise the LORD. Praise the LORD” (Psalm 150:3-6)! Likewise, Moses’ sister and the women of her day danced before the Lord in worship (Exodus 15:20), as did King David (2 Samuel 6:14). The crippled man who was healed at the Beautiful Gate came dangerously close to dancing when he entered the temple with Peter and John “walking and leaping and praising God” (Acts 3:8).

Again, it needs to be practiced in an appropriate setting such as a musical. It also must be done in a suitable manner. It is imperative that the participants be dressed appropriately, and that their movements are in no way provocative. When it is done correctly, the Lord can use interpretive dancing in a powerful and inspiring way to give visual aid and support to worship that focuses on Jesus Christ.

THE RESULTS OF WORSHIP

What should happen when we truly worship the Lord? I cannot help but believe that each of us, when we worship the Lord in spirit and in truth, will have similar, if not the exact same experiences, that Isaiah had when he “saw the Lord” (cf. Isaiah 6).

When We Worship, God Confronts Us

In the year of the death of King Uzziah, Judah’s great king who had ruled over them for more than fifty years, Isaiah “saw the Lord.” He was, “High and lifted up” (KJV) “lofty and exalted.” He was also dressed in an elaborate royal robe that had a long flowing train that “filled the temple” of heaven. He was surrounded by angelic beings called “seraphim” that shouted repeatedly in antiphonal worship, “Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of hosts, the whole earth is filled with His glory!” That awesome vision both captivated and comforted Isaiah. He realized that although Judah’s throne had been emptied, heaven’s throne was eternally and gloriously occupied.

When we gather for worship, we should see the Lord! We do not primarily gather in worship services to see one another. Rather,
we are there to see Him. In fact, worship services should not be planned for the primary purpose of attracting people. Instead, worship services should be planned to attract the manifest presence of God and He will attract the people. In His presence is fullness of joy (Psalm 16:11). The number one reason we come together to worship is to be confronted with the presence of Almighty God. If people leave our worship services talking about the preacher, the choir, the buildings, the program, etc., we have failed miserably. But if they leave saying, “We have been with Jesus!” then our worship is pleasing to God.

When We Worship, God Convicts Us

In this day of “feel-good religion,” it might shock some people to think that worship can and should bring conviction to the hearts of the worshipers. Once Isaiah saw the Lord for who He really was, then he also saw himself for who he really was. He saw himself as a sinner who needed forgiveness. He said, “Woe is me, for I am ruined!”

Does that happen to you when you worship the Lord? It should. We must not only be enamored with the glory of God, but we should also come face to face with our own wretchedness before Him. We should recognize Him as a God of absolute holiness who hates our sin.

When We Worship, God Cleanses Us

The conviction that Isaiah experienced led to his being cleansed. When he confessed his sin, Isaiah said, “Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a burning coal in his hand, which he had taken from the altar with tongs. He touched my mouth with it and said, ‘Behold, this has touched your lips; and your iniquity is taken away and your sin is forgiven’” (Isaiah 6:7-8). That should also happen to us when we worship. When the Lord points out our sin, we should confess and forsake it. When we do, we will experience the grace and cleansing of the Lord (1 John 1:9).

When We Worship, God Commissions Us

After he was cleansed, Isaiah was able to hear the voice of the Lord clearly. He was searching for a spokesman who would proclaim His message to His wayward people. When Isaiah heard God say, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?” He humbly, yet
enthusiastically, responded, “Here am I. Send me!” Thus he was called and commissioned as a prophet to the people of the Lord.

Genuine worship always results in a commissioning of God’s people to go and share His message to others. If your worship does not cause you to desire to witness and tell others about Jesus Christ, then it is not genuine. When we spend time adoring Him, we will leave with the desire to tell others about Him.

**THE HEART OF WORSHIP**

Whatever else worship is, it is an act of humble homage and adoration that results in spiritual intimacy with God and absolute submission to God. Someone has described worship vividly by referring to it as an intimate encounter with the Almighty during which He draws the worshiper to offer his heart humbly by faith to the Lord in reverence. The Lord then responds to the worshiper in grace by giving him the affection of His heart. Thus, when real worship takes place, we miraculously exchange hearts with God. He leaves with ours and we leave with His.

That worship is first and foremost a matter of the heart is attested to repeatedly in Scripture. One day Jesus was asked to single out the most significant of all the commandments. Without hesitation He quoted from Deuteronomy 6:5, the famous Hebrew Shema—“YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND, AND WITH ALL YOUR STRENGTH” (Mark 12:30). Notice that this text refers to loving God with one’s “heart and soul” before it mentions “mind and strength.” Yes we are to love the Lord intellectually, but it is much more than that. It must involve our heart and soul as well. Indeed, Jesus castigated heartless worship when he rebuked the Pharisees by saying, “You hypocrites, rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you: ‘THIS PEOPLE HONORS ME WITH THEIR LIPS, BUT THEIR HEART IS FAR AWAY FROM ME’” (Matthew 15:7-8).

All of this is reminiscent of the Old Testament account of Samuel when he was searching for a successor to wicked King Saul. As he interviewed prospective candidates from among the sons of Jesse, a Bethlehemite, Samuel came across Eliab. The young man must have been quite impressive in physical appearance because the prophet said to himself, “Surely the LORD’s anointed is before Him!” (1 Samuel 16:6). But God was not focused on Eliab’s striking physique. Instead He quickly corrected his prophet by saying, “Do
not look at his appearance or at the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart” (1 Samuel 16:7). The Lord preferred Eliab’s younger brother David, whom Scripture describes as a man after God’s own heart (cf. Acts 13:22).

CONCLUSION

When next Sunday rolls around and you gather with other believers to worship and praise the Lord, what will happen? Will you mindlessly and heartlessly participate in rigid, prescribed, painfully predictable religious rituals? Or will you passionately engage in biblical worship?

God is looking for worshipers! Do you remember the words of Jesus mentioned earlier? He said, “But an hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers” (John 4:23).

I don’t know about you, but I desire for the Lord to seek me in that way. But before He will, I must seek Him in worship.

When you gather this Lord’s Day, try to picture the Lord looking down from heaven and asking, “Is there anyone out there who really wants to worship Me and enter into My presence?” Then look to Him with a heart of gratitude and faith and say something like this: “Father, seek no further. Here I am to worship; my heart is yours!”

What will His response be? He will come to you and you will experience fullness of joy in His presence. As the old song says, “Heaven will come down and glory will fill your soul.” That is what we need. That is worship!
Their Conformity to the Model of the New Testament

Having considered the polity of the New Testament churches, and the deviations from that form of government which have arisen in the progress of Christian history, and having traced the progress of Baptist principles in many lands and ages, we come now to compare the Baptist churches of today with the scriptural model. In what respects they resemble the apostolic churches, and how they differ from them, and the reasons, respectively, for these resemblances and differences, we are now to consider. The main points of the New Testament polity, as they were brought out in the beginning of this discussion, are these: societies composed of baptized believers in Christ, independent of each other in government, but having many common interests and important relations, self-governed, yet with officers for the general direction and management of affairs. These officers were regularly of two kinds, elders and deacons, the former of whom are also called bishops and pastors. On a candid study of the New Testament only, with what reflected light could be had from other sources, we reached the conclusion that these were the main elements of the New Testament polity. The question for us now is, are these elements of church government reproduced in the Baptist churches of today? If they are, why are Baptists so careful to reproduce these outlines of church organization as exemplified in the New Testament Christian bodies? And if the Baptists, with a sincere desire to reproduce the polity of the New Testament churches, fail in some measure so to do, what are the reasons for such falling short? These are the principal questions which will occupy us in the present chapter.

Of these inquiries, the first to which we need to give attention is, how far is there among the Baptist churches of today a real conformity to the New Testament model? It is the avowed, honest purpose of the Baptist people to reproduce in their churches, as far as is possible and obligatory, the form of church organization and government which prevailed among churches founded by the Apostles.
To what extent they succeed or fail is a simple question of fact and observation. We may easily trace the principal points of resemblance and of difference. It is apparent from the summary statement just made that there is a striking, and even essential resemblance between the Baptist churches of today and the churches of apostolic times.

In the matter of membership there is evident similarity. In the New Testament we have no account of any being members of churches except such as were considered to be truly regenerated believers and had actually submitted to the rite of baptism. Now the Baptist churches insist as one of their fundamental principles that only truly regenerated believers in Christ, after having been properly baptized on profession of their faith in the Lord, should be received as members of the church. There is some diversity of opinion as to the method of a statement of Christian experience from applicants for membership, and of course mistakes are sometimes made; but in the main, and to the extent of human knowledge, Baptist churches earnestly adhere to this as one of their fundamental principles, viz., a converted and baptized membership.

Again, in the matter of self-government, there is a very clear case of similarity. There is no trace in the New Testament of any higher governing body making laws or rules for the independent churches of the Lord. It is also, a marked characteristic of Baptists in our own day that each one of their churches shall be a self-governing unit. Each church itself, by a majority vote, determines its own action in all cases. There is naturally difference of custom as to a quorum, as each church has its own constitution and rules of order. Nor is there absolute uniformity of practice in regard to the voters. In some churches neither women nor minors have a vote, and perhaps in a large number the younger members are not expected to vote on questions of importance, though there may not be any rule on this point. It is true, also, that in very many of the churches, perhaps with regret we might say a majority of them, the larger part of the members do not attend the business meetings, and it is practically a fraction of the church which regulates its business concerns. But the theory upon which the churches proceed is, that all the members of the church, assembled in business meeting, shall by a majority vote determine the action of the body. This action includes a number of things, such as the reception of members and the decision of all difficult cases connected with that important function, the discipline of members, election of officers,
administration of all business affairs, regulation of worship, adoption of doctrinal views, and, in fact, all things connected with church order and church life.

Another well-defined element in Baptist church life is that of independence. In all their history the Baptist churches have been very jealous of their independence. It may be granted that sometimes they may have erred in asserting this to the detriment of the general interests of the denomination, but certainly the theory is valid, even if practice has sometimes been unreasonable. Baptist churches recognize no earthly authority above that of the local church. They bow to no hierarchy, they elect no representative or judicial body over themselves, they repudiate all such control in religious matters; yet there is a denominational life and unity. The churches recognize each other as churches of a common Lord and Master. They unite for common work, they rejoice in common principles, they observe to a large extent a common standard of life, doctrine and customs. Their unity in independency is one of the most remarkable phenomena of their history. And though often put to severe strain, this unity is in the main probably as well preserved as that of other bodies in which there is more apparent and external unity.

Still another point of similarity between Baptist churches and those of the New Testament lies in the important matter of the church officers. The Baptist churches retain the two scriptural officers, elder (or pastor) and deacon. The pastor is especially charged with the spiritual concerns of the church—the preaching, the conduct of worship, the spiritual oversight of the members, the administration of the ordinances, and all matters pertaining to these. The deacons look after the temporal affairs of the church, assist the pastor in many ways, and are especially charged with the care of the poor. The churches recognize these officers are executive only. The seat of authority is in the church, and to the church all its officers are directly responsible.

Any candid observer will surely see that the resemblances pointed out are not fanciful nor overstrained. They are striking and important, and if not exact in all details, they clearly are so in fundamental principles. It is true, however, that there are differences between the Baptist churches of today and the bodies of Christian believers mentioned in the New Testament. Some things practiced by the apostolic churches are not found among the Baptists; and it must be admitted that some things have been added to the Baptist
church order of modern times which we do not find in the New Testament. It is right that we should give a candid consideration to these points of difference.

We will notice that first some things omitted. There are some matters of custom which are not reproduced, such as the weekly observance of the Lord's Supper, and possibly other church actions, as well as many social customs. The supernatural gifts which were granted to the churches of the New Testament Baptists do not of course attempt to reproduce, such as the gift of prophecy, together with the order of prophets, the gift of tongues, of healing, and the like. Some bodies of Christians here and there have tried to reproduce all these in their churches, but not particularly the Baptists.

In regard to the general officers among the churches, we must also note some differences. Baptists have no apostles. It is true, as elsewhere mentioned, that the General Association of the Separate Baptists in Virginia did in the year 1774 appoint Samuel Harris to be an apostle, but this office was of short duration, and was never recognized by any other body of Baptists. There are no prophets, in the scriptural sense of that word. Evangelists and teachers are recognized, but not in the same sense as in the apostolic churches. Baptist churches have discarded the plurality of elders. It is the custom now, even in the very large churches, to have only one active pastor, or elder, while it seems clear that in the New Testament churches, certainly the larger ones, there were several or even many elders. Nor do many churches recognize the office of deaconess, though there may be some intimation that such an office existed in the New Testament churches. It may be that in the matters of the support of the elders, and of the authority exercised by them, there are also differences. These seem to be the principle things in which Baptist churches of today fall short by way of omission when compared with the churches of the New Testament. What may be said in justification of these omissions will appear later; but let us not fail to observe that as compared with the resemblances before pointed out these differences are few and not vital.

When we come to things which have been added to the modern churches, things which had no existence, so far as the records go, in the apostolic churches, the differences are much greater than in case of the omissions. In the local churches the additions are considerable. Among these are to be found additional officers. Every well organized church nowadays must have a clerk, treasurer, trustees and various committees for the proper regulation of its
business affairs. Then there are many customs prevalent in the modern churches of which we can find no trace in the New Testament, such as Sunday-schools, various societies under the direction of the church composed of different groups of the membership, and other things of like nature. Then there are some matters of church order, such as the adoption by many churches of a creed, or declaration of principles, and a covenant, with many other details too numerous to mention.

In the relations of the churches to each other, many things have been added. All the general bodies of the denominations, from associations up to conventions, all sorts of meetings, special or stated, all the general committees, or presbyteries, or councils, and other expedients for maintaining different parts of the denominational life, find no visible analogue in the New Testament churches. In the general religious and denominational life of our times there are many institutions which had no existence in the apostolic age. Here belong all our colleges and seminaries, our charitable institutions, our well organized and equipped missionary and publication agencies. While many of these institutions are of great importance in themselves, and make modern churches seem very different from those of the apostolic age, they do not depart from, nor destroy, the essential principles of church polity as outlined in the New Testament.

The next important question is, Why do the Baptists endeavor to maintain conformity to the New Testament model? It is admitted that there is no express command, as in the case of Baptism and the Lord's Supper, making the form of church government perpetual. We cannot point to a distinct and emphatic injunction of either our Lord or his Apostles on this subject. To many this has seemed sufficient reason for departing as far as may seem expedient, even from the clear practice of the New Testament churches, but to Baptists it seems far otherwise; for neither is there any authority, express or implied, which makes church government a matter of indifference, or sanctions departure from the New Testament model. The reasons for the Baptist position may be very simply unfolded.

The general argument between Protestants and Catholics, between evangelicals and rationalists; that the Scriptures fairly interpreted and intelligently applied to the different conditions of our modern life are the only sufficient rule of faith and practice in regard to matters of religion, is the one fundamental and all-embracing reason why the Baptists conscientiously prefer to main-
tain as far as they can the form of government exemplified in the New Testament church. Baptists maintain that apostolic custom, even without a definite command, is a precedent of the utmost value. If they be required to show cause why they follow this precedent, then must those who deviate from the practice of the Apostles give stronger reason for their course.

Again, the Baptist form of church government is more accordant with the general principles and practices of the Christian religion than are the opposing theories. Notice some particulars, such as the supreme headship of Christ, the equality of all believers, the freedom and responsibility of the individual Christian, a converted church membership, and submission to the state, but not union with it.

Furthermore, the departures written in history from the scriptural mode of government have certainly been no improvement upon it, but have the rather wrought much evil. Observe among the more noticeable of these departures the fearful errors and perver-
sions which have characterized the papacy throughout its mar-
vellous development. Consider, too, the evils of state churches, and notice how, even in the older countries where such institutions have long prevailed, and have been in a measure sanctified by the dearest associations, there is a rising tide of opposition to a state-governed church. We should also not fail to observe that even among evangelical Christians, among Paedobaptist denominations in our free country, some of these evils have been perpetuated and still call for argument and correction.

In addition to all this the advantages of the Baptist mode of church government are such as to commend it even if it had no scriptural basis. Its practical advantages are great. These put it into favorable comparison with the others. If in some respects it does not work well, it has at least done as well as any other. It has shown its power to unite, and that very freely, great numbers in pursuit of a common end. It develops the local church and the individual member quite as well as any other system. It conserves the moral and doctrinal purity both of the ministry and of the separate congregations just as well as any other mode of church govern-
ment. Baptists have had their troubles, are having them now, and are going to have them to the end of time, no doubt. But upon the whole, with their theory of church government, they have managed their difficulties about as well as their brethren of other denomina-
tions, with a more cumbrous and clanking ecclesiastical machinery, have been able to manage theirs.
While some practical difficulties cannot be denied, the theoretical advantages of this polity are very clear and striking. If all the people in a common region or country were actually church members, and all these church members were soundly converted and actively at work, would not this be for them a supremely good mode of church government? Would there be need of any other, if Christians were what Christians ought to be? This polity recognizes and encourages the highest spiritual attainments of its adherents with the very least appeal to ambition and other worldly motives.

Recurring now to the admitted fact, that, not withstanding their efforts, they do not exactly and in all points reproduce the model of the New Testament, the question arises, how do the Baptists explain and justify their departures from the New Testament model? We must say that among these are some inevitable differences which grow out of the different times. To reproduce the apostolic church in every particular we must needs reproduce the life of the apostolic age, and that of course is a sheer impossibility; nor is it claimed that there should be exact conformity to the apostolic church in every minute detail. We may further admit that it is hard to define the exact points of allowable departure from apostolic custom in these matters. We are in danger of omitting some things that ought to be kept and of adding some things that should be left off, and here as in all similar cases there must ever be difference of opinion. We cannot expect to have perfect agreement even among Baptists themselves upon some of these points. It may be permissible to classify the changes observed, as follows: the unavoidable, the desirable, the doubtful and the harmful.

Notice then, first, what we may call unavoidable changes. No doubt the Apostles practiced many things which have not been preserved for us in the inspired records. We do not know how they acted as regards many interesting and important points connected with church polity. How glad we would be, for instance, if we knew just how they set about organizing a church, ordaining a minister, and many other such things. Again, we recognize in the apostolic churches the existence of many things which we have to consider as extraordinary and peculiar to that age. Here should be placed the apostolic office, the miraculous gifts of tongues, prophecy and healing. These existed by direct divine appointment and not by church authority. If ever in the good providence of God these gifts are again bestowed upon the churches, together with such undoubted divine credentials as to disallow every trace of fanaticism, we must
accept them; but as things are, the churches have no more right now than they had then to decree and appoint these manifestations of divine grace and power.

In addition to this, we must observe some things that were peculiar to the apostolic age, things that cannot be reproduced in our times; and correspondingly, there are some things peculiar to our age that could not have been anticipated by arrangements which were specially adapted to those times. It is freely admitted that this is dangerous ground, and that the principle here stated may be unduly pressed, as it has been pressed, in the interest of clear and flagrant departures from apostolic teaching, yet it is a necessary principle, and a useful one when applied with suitable caution. It is to be noticed, too, that this principle applies in general to matters of not very great importance; that is, to the details of custom rather than to the essentials of organization and government.

We may go even further and say that some of the changes which appear in the Baptist churches, as compared with those of the New Testament, are even desirable. Here again, we must proceed with caution; for this principle, too, may be pressed to harmful extremes. By no means can it be desirable to change anything fundamental in the apostolic constitution of churches. The principle applies rather to the things which have been added in order to promote the practical and spiritual efficiency of the churches; for example, the minor offices of the church. We could not get along very well without clerks, treasurers and trustees. In fact, it may reasonably be questioned whether these officers are additions. It is not unlikely that they, or similar ones, had place in the apostolic churches, though there is no record to that effect. The same thing may be said in regard to local organizations, such as union meetings, associations, and the like. There is no word in the New Testament regarding an association, and yet our fathers found that such bodies were exceedingly desirable in promoting the spiritual and other interests of the churches, and apparently without hesitation they formed these bodies. And what is true of the local assemblies, or district bodies, is also true of those more general organizations which have been devised for the furtherance of the cause of Christ. In all these matters it is safe to say that in no sense do these additions to apostolic church order contravene the principles of the New Testament. In general it may be said that where a mode of working is not forbidden by Scripture and not contrary to
Scripture, and is clearly and certainly productive of good, it may be safely considered a desirable innovation.

Besides these desirable changes, about which there is not likely to arise much question, we shall have to recognize some changes that are of doubtful propriety. The doubt arises partly from the nature of the changes themselves as to whether they are agreeable or contrary to the spirit of the New Testament teaching; and partly from doubt whether in these particular cases the New Testament precedent is to be regarded as binding. A number of things may here be mentioned. One is, that there seems to have been in the apostolic times only one church organization in any one place, or town, or even city. Some think that now there should be only one Baptist church in a large city, but that it should be divided into different congregations meeting in different places for convenience of worship. It is very likely that this was true of the apostolic churches, but it can hardly be proved to have been always the case; and even if it were, we could scarcely consider this a binding precedent, because different circumstances from those which prevailed in the earlier days might make it expedient to adopt a changed method now; that is to say, this matter would fall under the head of things left discretionary with the churches.

Another matter regards the plurality of elders in the apostolic churches. Reason was given in a former part of this work for thinking that the earliest Christian churches were under the care of several, and perhaps in the case of large churches, even of many elders. Our modern practice has certainly departed from this usage so far as the authoritative pastor is concerned. Often it happens that there is more than one ordained preacher in a church, but this is a very different thing from the plural eldership of the apostolic churches. Sometimes modern churches have assistants to the pastor, but this is not very common. Some few may have an order of elders, who do not preach, but assist the pastor in attending to the spiritual concerns of the church, leaving the deacons to look after the poor and the finances. This, again, is probably different from the apostolic order. The question before us is whether there should be a plural pastorship, the several pastors being of equal authority in each several church. Many things might be said theoretically in favor of this plan. If there were perfect harmony and co-operation between these pastors, such an arrangement would greatly promote the efficiency of the church. It would enable the pastors to perform a vast deal more of much needed service in the way of the oversight of the
flock. The great difficulty, however, in the way of establishing this arrangement would be to provide for the adequate support of several pastors. Now, as we are not absolutely sure as to how the plural eldership was supported or organized, in the apostolic churches, and as it is likely that our churches are divided up, so to speak, into smaller branches, which are ordinarily not too large to be under the oversight of one man, it does not seem necessary to consider the plural eldership as a permanent apostolic institution. But in the case of our unwieldy city churches it would seem very desirable either that they should divide yet further, or recur to the plural eldership of the earlier times. The point may be left doubtful as belonging under the head of discretionary matters.

Another question is as to the order of deaconesses. Only two passages of Scripture can be fairly interpreted as favoring the existence of such officers in the apostolic churches. These are Rom. 16:1 and 1 Tim. 3:11, but as was observed in the discussion of these passages in a former chapter, they do not certainly teach the existence of deaconesses in those days. We should say, therefore, that this custom is not clearly enough set forth in the Scriptures to be obligatory upon the churches of today, yet, there being just this trace of authority for the office, there would be no objection to establishing it should it be found expedient and clearly promotive of good.

When we come to consider the doubtful additions that have been made to the apostolic order, the case is somewhat different. It is to be feared that many of the innovations have not been for the best. All proposed additions to the organization of the New Testament church should be very carefully scanned and earnestly considered before they are adopted.

The question now arises, Whether there are in prevalent Baptist church life and order any harmful innovations upon New Testament institutions? And we must admit that there appear to be some. But it is worthy of remark that if there be such harmful changes they belong rather to details of arrangement than to the fundamental principles of church order, and are matters of custom rather than of constitution, that is, pertaining to worship and to social actions rather than to the organization of the churches. Moreover, these changes might be more justly described as inconsistencies rather than as avowed, or purposed and justified departures from the apostolic model.
Here we must mention the decay of corrective discipline. It is a mournful fact that in many churches today apostolic discipline may be said not to exist, and some few apologists for this state of things might doubtless appear; but surely most of the churches would contend in theory, if they do not in actual practice, for a pure and scriptural church discipline.

Another innovation which appears to be gaining ground in some quarters of our country, and for which a number of stout advocates have taken the field, is the public speaking of women. The main line of argument by which it is sought to justify this departure from apostolic custom is two-fold. First, that the apostolic prohibition of women’s speaking in public was simply in accordance with the habits of that age and was never intended to be permanent; the other is, that the undoubted existence of female prophets in the apostolic times shows that even then specially qualified women did sometimes address public assemblies. To the advocates of the modern custom these two lines of thought seem satisfactory, but it appears that the growth of custom has sought for the arguments, and the arguments did not cause the change. To most interpreters the clear prohibition of women’s speaking found in 1 Cor. 14:34 seems sufficient to mark this modern innovation as contrary to the purposes of inspiration.

Another matter which needs to be noticed here may be described as a tendency toward the usurpation of power over the churches. Inside of the churches themselves sometimes the so-called “board of deacons,” and sometimes a small group of would-be leaders undertakes to manage the affairs of the congregation. This is due in large measure, it must in candor be said, not to any grasping for authority by these persons, but to neglect on the part of the churches themselves. There may be also now and then a trace of desire to direct or control church action by organizations outside of the churches; but there does not seem to be much of this. Usually the co-operative bodies are very respectful to the independency of the churches, and the churches very jealous of the faintest semblance of outside dictation.

Still another difficulty in the way of innovation confronts us in the multiplying of societies and agencies connected with the churches for doing the work proper to the church. Societies of different kinds within the membership may not be an unmitigated evil, but they do have a certain disintegrating tendency, and may lower somewhat the conception of the church as a unit attending to
its own affairs and marketing out its own work. All these societies, of whatever sort they be, should be made to recognize their subordination to the church itself, and the church by friendly interest and inquiry should keep itself informed by annual reports or otherwise as to their work. If properly subordinated to the church and controlled by it, these organizations are capable of great good, but otherwise they become a serious departure from apostolic methods and a menace to the vitality and power of specific church life.

These various matters have been only suggestively treated without any attempt at fullness of discussion; but upon a candid survey of the whole situation it appears that the departures among the Baptist churches from the actual plan of the apostolic churches are of very much less moment than their conformities to that model. We have seen that the main principles of apostolic organization are fairly well preserved in the Baptist churches of today; while the changes and innovations, though apparently numerous, are really such as grow out of the changed conditions of our time, or may be justified upon a careful study of the principles of the apostolic church polity.

Trying to define the emergent church movement is like trying to nail jello to a wall. D. A. Carson does not try to offer a definitive explanation of this postmodern phenomenon. However, he shares balanced observations about the broad characteristics of these churches and about the postmodern culture which they engage. The term “balanced” is mine since many of the emergent leaders have condemned Carson’s work as being negative, traditional, and lacking understanding. Given the emergents’ tendency not to allow their beliefs to be defined, Carson does a service for those outside the movement by outlining its basic aspects.

Given the gathering momentum of the emergent movement (or “conversation” as they prefer), Carson’s book makes an important contribution. Although emerging philosophy began among reactionaries in the independent and Bible churches of the north and mid-western United States, pastors in many sections of the United States and Europe have embraced it. Pastors conferences and young leader meetings around the world feature emergent speakers such as Brian McLaren, Dan Kimball, and Doug Pagitt. Perhaps the most significant force for spreading the emergent gospel was Mike Yaconelli’s merger of Youth Specialties (the established leader in Youth Ministry materials) and Emergent, with Zondervan carrying a special section devoted to Emergent/YS materials.

Carson notes primary characteristics shared by emergent churches, including their protest of modernism and fundamentalism. They condemn seeker-sensitive churches and mega-churches (although one emergent church in Grand Rapids has 10,000 people meeting in a mall). Too, desiring authenticity as the summa bonum of Christianity, emergents believe that authenticity and traditionalism are mutually exclusive. Accepting the premise of postmodern deconstructionism that no absolute truth can be known, emergents focus on story and emotive response. They believe the truth (moral) of a biblical story is more important than whether the story is historically true (an approach that recycles the traditionally liberal approach). Being relativists and embracing diversity, emergents value inclusion rather than the exclusiveness of absolutism. Finally,
but not exhaustively, emergents want missional churches, as if the churches that gave rise to the modern missions movement are not so.

For emergents, worship is back to the future with emphasis on existential emotional response to the internally personal and interpersonally collective movement of the Spirit. Preaching in the traditional sense is denigrated as “speaching” (see Doug Pagitt’s Reimagining Preaching) and redefined as dialogue and narrative, while carefully avoiding meta-narrative presuppositions of propositional truth.

Carson credits the emergents for their desire for authenticity, while arguing against their implication that traditional churches are inauthentic. He lauds them for making serious attempts at engaging the postmodern culture, yet questions whether they have read contemporary culture accurately. Carson lauds the emergents’ desire to touch the earthly lives of needy humans, and at the same time calls for them to recognize the heavenly needs of souls as well.

Most importantly, Carson makes the foundational point that the defining question for any church, including emergents, is whether its beliefs, activities, and proposals are biblically sound. The key question is not whether the church ought to be missional, authentic, interactive, sensitive, interpersonal, or spiritually connected (since most churches would lay claim to those qualities). Rather, the key question is whether the epistemology, or foundational basis for truth, lies within the Word of God or within the subjective response of humankind. He faults emergent leaders for embracing the philosophies of Friedrich Nietzsche, Jacques Derrida, Michael Foucault and others while putting the Bible into the category of “beloved story.”

In one fell sentence, Carson opens himself to the emergents’ claim of intolerance when he calls their condemnation of modernism and confessional Christianity “not only historically skewed and ethically ungrateful, but . . . frequently theologically shallow and intellectually incoherent” (p. 68). Most of Carson’s work is less openly vitriolic. He offers solidly considered theological, epistemological, philosophical, and logical arguments for reconsideration of the emergent interpretation of history and its redefinition of the church. However, it is easy to become lost in his intricate arguments.

In his summation, Carson asserts that believers can authentically embrace both truth and experience as long as Christ is recog-
nized as Lord of both. He appeals for emergents to recognize that they simultaneously can take God's Word as Truth and infuse its dynamic into ministry within a changing and needy culture.

Reviewed by Jere L. Phillips
Professor of Practical Theology
Director, Extensions and Distance Learning
Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary

Köstenberger, Andreas, gen. ed. Whatever Happened to Truth?
Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2005.

Andreas Köstenberger, R. Albert Mohler Jr., J. P. Moreland, and Kevin J. Vanhoozer collaborate on this brief volume to address the question of truth from four perspectives. They seek to respond to the onslaught of postmodern thinking that abandons all hope of truth in favor of relativistic platitudes, and their responses are both timely and articulate. Köstenberger serves as the general editor to this volume; he compiles and edits these essays (originally given as lectures in 2004 at the plenary session of the 56th Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society), introduces the work, and then summarizes the volume in a brief epilogue. This review considers each of the essays in turn and then evaluates the work as a whole.

Köstenberger introduces the work by discussing briefly the demise of truth in the intellectual arena. No sentence captures his concern more succinctly than his statement that “the very notion of truth has largely become a casualty of postmodern thought and discourse” (9). The introduction traces some roots of this idea, focusing especially on some seminal ideas of the late Francis Schaeffer. Köstenberger then presents the four essays, noting that each author addresses truth from a different perspective (his own biblical approach, Mohler's cultural appraisal, Moreland's philosophical tack, and Vanhoozer's hermeneutical-theological assessment). Finally, he summarizes the arguments and defends the doctrine of truth as a reliable hope in this postmodern age.

Köstenberger's essay examines truth biblically, concerning itself with Pilate's question at Christ's trial. Focusing on the Johannine account of the trial, Köstenberger considers Pilate's question (“What is truth?”?) both in its ancient setting and its current relevance. He initiates the study by considering the word “truth” itself both in its Hebrew and Greek forms, concluding that for John truth
is “... a Christological concept” (21). He then turns his attention to the historicity of the account itself, defending it before the charges brought against it by Strauss and Baur, and concludes that “John's portrait is thoroughly compatible with that of the Synoptics and coherent within itself and with the rest of the Fourth Gospel” (28). The third section deals with the concept of truth among Johannine themes; he notes John's universal approach, his timelessness, and John's use of the question when confronting Pilate to accost humanity generally and each human particularly. Finally, he examines the major characters in the story (Jesus, the Jews and especially Caiaphas, and Pilate), and shows “how these two characters are unequally yoked in the rejection of Jesus as the Messiah and ‘King of the Jews’” (47). He concludes his essay by noting the contrast between Pilate's kingdom, which collapsed within three years, and the growth of the message of the One who is Truth.

Mohler's cultural essay addresses the shift in modern and postmodern culture away from “The Truth” to “truths” that validate whatever morals and philosophy the writer seeks to convey. He traces the contours of this shift away from absolute truth. The shift begins with Enlightenment rationalism, continues through the modern emphasis on the scientific method as the arbiter of truth, and culminates in the concerns that postmodern philosophers such as Richard Rorty raise. The heart of his essay considers the postmodern claims as: 1) a deconstruction of truth; 2) the death of the metanarrative; 3) the demise of the text; 4) the dominion of therapy; 5) the decline of authority; and; 6) the displacement of morality (58-63). He sprinkles his essay with citations from postmodern defenders; some of their quotations are rather hilarious considered contextually. In one ironic instance, he quotes Rorty's absolute statement about the relativity of all truth, “Truth is made rather than found” (58). (Rorty apparently wants others to “find” his truth as the source of evaluating all other truth claims.) In another section, he considers Jean-Francois Lyotard's famous metanarrative about postmodernity, “incredulity toward metanarratives” (59). As Mohler wrestles with the question of postmodernity, he rejects the neo-evangelicals' willingness to concede too much and insists that postmodernity has “fatally overreached,” because of its anti-foundationalism and its anti-realism (68). He opts instead for a genuine return to revelation, “a confidence in the God who speaks” (70).
Moreland takes on postmodernism philosophically, calling it at the outset “an immoral and cowardly viewpoint that people who love truth and knowledge, especially disciples of the Lord Jesus, should do everything they can to heal” (76). He appeals to the correspondence theory of truth, insisting, “Reality makes thoughts true or false” (77). He unravels two flaws many postmoderns make—they fail to distinguish between psychological objectivity and rational objectivity, and they attack the “straw man” of Cartesian foundationalism while ignoring the “modest foundationalism” embraced by the majority of philosophers today. Moreland argues for proper understanding of the place of linguistics in propositions and concludes with an impassioned plea to reject postmodernism—“the cure that kills the patient, the military strategy that concedes defeat before the first shot is ever fired” (92).

Vanhoozer's essay seems to cloud the very subject the other writers illuminate. At times, he appears to concede too much ground to his detractors while demanding too much from his friends. For instance, Vanhoozer dismisses Carl F. H. Henry's propositional approach to interpretation and inerrancy as an example of those who “string together individual propositions like beads on a string,” even suggesting that Henry's insistence on content caused him to “overlook the significance of biblical literary form” (108). On the other hand, he appeals to Hans Frei and George Lindbeck (“second-generation Barthians”) as heroes “largely responsible for the demise of liberal theology” (107). To be fair, however, Vanhoozer's marriage of propositional and biblical forms (“theodrama”) may reveal a richness that mere propositionalism alone does not communicate. His word-picture captures the idea well, “The unified sum and substance of the Bible is theodramatic: it is all about God's word and God's deeds, accomplished by his ‘two hands’ (Son and Spirit) and about what we should do and say in response” (110). Calling his approach to theology “postconservative,” he insists on “our evangelical birthright—truth in all of its canonical radiance, not a diluted mess of propositionalist pottage” (119). He does not reject propositionalism (calling himself a “modified propositionalist”); rather, he declares, “The truth of God's word is not merely propositional, then, but richly propositional” (122). Vanhoozer's marriage of form and proposition reintroduces the richness of the text in all of its literary forms and the settings which express these propositions.
Köstenberger concludes by recapitulating the authors’ best efforts, and acknowledging that this book will not end the debate on truth. On the other hand, he holds forth the evangelical hope over that debate, “While the final word has not yet been spoken in the contemporary hermeneutical debate, we believe that the final word has indeed been spoken in the history of God’s dealings with humanity. With the biblical authors, we believe that in Jesus, all of God’s promises are ‘yes’ and ‘amen’” (135). The present volume’s essays grant the believer multi-faceted perspectives on truth and its defense in the present crisis.

Reviewed by Stanley O. May
Chair, Department of Missions
Professor of Missions
Director, Church Relations and Practical Missions
Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary


Tom Nettles is Professor of Historical Theology at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. His teaching career also includes positions at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary, and Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. Nettles is an accomplished writer, historian, and theologian as well as a strong voice among Reformed Southern Baptists.

The premises of the author are: 1. The “inerrancy controversy” in the SBC has restored biblical authority among its ranks; 2. The next step in the historic process of reformation among Southern Baptists is theological renewal based upon restored biblical authority; 3. Theological renewal is achieved when Southern Baptists recognize their Calvinist’s roots; and 4. Southern Baptists will experience a new day in theological expression, preaching, and evangelism if they engage in a careful analysis of biblical doctrines. Using the Old Testament story of Jehu and his incomplete efforts at reform as a paradigm of failure, Dr. Nettles used the Protestant Reformation as an example of true directional change. Two principles came into focus during the struggles of the early reformers: the
formal principle (all doctrine and practice based upon the Bible) and the material principle (the actual doctrine and practice based upon the formal principle, which is justification “by grace alone”). Southern Baptists seem to have recovered the “formal” principle and now is the time for the implementation of the “material” principle. Nettles purposed for this slim book “to explore the material principle in its historical manifestations in Baptist life along with some of the practical outworkings of that biblical issue (6).” He, however, noted: “The task of reclaiming, therefore, is not complete. If only the acceptance of the divine authority of the deposit gains adherence but the content of the treasure itself lies dormant, the recovery is a sham.” (10)

So, how are Southern Baptists doing? Strategically, then, Nettles reviews “several areas for expanding, energetic, & brotherly conversation.” The first area reflecting theological renewal is confessional. Theological vitality produces confessions. Whether proposing a clearer articulation of biblical truth or answering heretical concepts, confessions represent the outworking of the material principle. Theological moderates scream “creedalism.” The charge, however, is unsubstantiated. The appearance of confessions reflects welcomed theological renewal. Another area requiring theological diligence is in the pulpit. Biblical exposition without careful theological expression is rampant today. Evangelism also suffers in the context of shallow theology. Two concerns are raised by the author: One is the message: are we presenting the gospel or an aberrant form of it? Two is the method of evangelism: are we following decisionistic, pragmatic approaches proven to get “results” or are we holding forth the unfettered truth of God’s Word?

Reformation among Southern Baptists also includes a re-invigoration of certain themes: One is the use of the Law in sharing the gospel. Two is the recovery of a grace-centered theology. The issue in soteriology is monergism versus synergism. Is salvation a work of God, and thereby totally a work of grace, or is it a cooperative effort between the sinner and the Sovereign? Grace-centered theology also includes a correct understanding of the nature of the atonement: Christ died to save, not simply to make salvation possible for all.

Three other themes will further reformation among Southern Baptists: The first is Christ-centered trinitarianism. Currently the threat of inclusivism is only answered by a mature Christology in which the deity of Christ and His exclusivity in salvation is the cen-
terpiece and an informed trinitarianism is the standard. Second is a theologically integrated ecclesiology. Nettles expressed this concern: “The most distinctive feature of Baptist life, the doctrine of the church, will not survive in its historical form apart from comprehensive doctrinal reformation.” (113) The final theme addresses the issue of a Christian worldview. Accordingly, doctrine plays a substantial role in this development; in fact it is at the heart of worldview deliberations. A Christian worldview built on solid biblical doctrine informs all areas of practice.

Nettles’ call for theological renewal as a final step toward reformation among Southern Baptists is certainly needed and welcomed. His presentation is filled with insight, both theologically and historically. As a help for the reader, he begins the book with a list of definitions for important concepts. Three concerns, however, are raised. One is the analysis of the shift in Southern Baptist life back to biblical authority. The present writer fears that the implementation of the formal principle under the banner of “inerrancy” is nothing more than a political “conservative resurgence.” This explains the difficulty of following through with the material principle and the dawning of true reformation. The other two concerns are easily answered by a longer book. The issue of inclusivism was not engaged directly and the matter of the Christian worldview was treated without concluding that Calvinism is the Christian worldview (cf. Abraham Kuyper).

Reviewed by John W. Mahony
Professor of Theology
Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary
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**Volume 2, November 2007 “Integrity in Ministry”**

This volume will seek to address such issues as, but not limited to, the following: The integrity of ministers in regard to money and materialism, sexuality, leadership and power, family, preaching, and ministerial competition.

**Submission Guidelines**

- Submissions should be 3,750 to 5,000 words, approximately 15-20 double-spaced pages of text on 8 1/2 X 11 paper.
- Contributors whose work is used will receive a stipend.
- The title, author's name, institutional affiliation, and position, if applicable, should appear at the top of the first page.
- Concerning form for citation of sources, submissions should conform to Kate Turabian’s *A Manual for Writers*.
- Notes should appear at the end of the essay, numbered consecutively throughout the text.
- Authors should use MS Word.
- Authors should submit essays electronically to dcornett@mabts.edu
- All articles published in Theology for Ministry will be the exclusive property of the journal.
- The editorial committee has the exclusive right to accept or reject any article submitted.
- The deadline for submissions is July 15.