

The Pathway

Unauthorized consent: Self-perpetuating trustee boards violate historic Baptist principles

Malcolm B. Yarnell, III

June 19, 2002 -

From their earliest days, Baptists have stood for responsible participation by every Christian in the communal decision-making processes. They have also been jealous to preserve this sanctified sense of ecclesiastical democracy. Those same churches grant the authority by which Baptist leaders publicly act on behalf of their churches to them.

Unfortunately, today, some of those leaders have violated this Baptist ideal of communal decision-making. Deceptively, many of the leaders who have usurped the authority of the churches claim they are doing so in order to preserve those same Baptist principles and distinctives. A historical review of Baptist principles may put this activity in its proper light.

A little Baptist history

John Smyth, the pastor of the First Baptist church in modern times, found the authority to re-institute believers' baptism not on the basis of his own personal opinion but on the basis of a congregational decision. This pioneer among Baptists affirmed both the leadership of pastors and the congregation's ultimate responsibility to Jesus Christ. He would not countenance any effort by the people to keep their minister from preaching the Word, but he was also careful to preserve the flow of authority from Christ to the church.

"The care of the whole church jointly must be to keep her power given her by Christ, and not to suffer any known sin, or any tyranny or usurpation over them," Smyth wrote in 1607.

The church must make sure that she does not surrender the authority that has been granted to her by her Prophet, Priest and King – Jesus.

Thomas Helwys was a prominent member of that first congregation. Because he believed that Smyth was forsaking his Baptist principles by seeking communion with the Dutch Anabaptists, this layman separated from his pastor. Helwys bravely returned with a small congregation to the persecution he knew they would encounter in England. This was the first Baptist church on English soil and was the forerunner to those Baptist churches that exist to this day.

In his book, *A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity*, Helwys claimed the authority to organize churches did not come from the bishop of Rome nor from the English monarch and his bishops. He rejected the location of church authority in any one person or small group of people removed from the local church. This also drove him to reject the Presbyterian model being promoted by the Puritans, who allowed local churches some authority but located it primarily in regional or national synods that were dominated by pastors and prominent laymen.

Rather, Helwys believed that the true church was found only where local congregations of baptized believers were gathered. It was in the local churches that Christian authority was to be found. Anyone trying to usurp the churches' authority was declared to be under the sway of Antichrist. Using apocalyptic language to make his point, Helwys identified the first beast of Revelation with the papal form of church government and the second beast with Episcopal government; Puritans and non-Baptistic Congregationalists were false prophets. These powerful oligarchies did not care for such revolutionary political theology. Helwys was thrown in Newgate Prison in 1612 and is believed to have died there a few years later, a martyr for Baptist ecclesiology.

As the churches grew in number in England and America, they began to organize themselves in local, regional and/or national associations and conventions. Because the same Christ who was the King of the Baptist church at Horsleydown was also the King of the Baptist church at Finsbury Fields, the unity of Christ demanded the union of the churches. The association met this demand for Christian unity among Baptists. These associations were organized for two major purposes." On the one hand, they were formed to pool resources of the churches for the sake of benevolent, missionary/evangelistic and educational enterprises. On the other hand, they were formed to help foster unity in faith and practice. Yet, while the churches associated for the sake of unity and even demanded that their associations exclude errant churches, they also respected the local nature of church authority.

"The churches cannot invest messengers with any of the rights, powers, authority, or responsibilities of the churches themselves," former SBC President and Mercer University President J.B. Gambrell noted in 1900.

Gambrell believed the churches should cooperate and pool their resources, but they should never let go of the power they have received from their Lord. Messengers represent their churches only for a short period of time, and are subsequently held accountable by the churches. Messengers or trustees or denominational servants cannot be fully vested with the churches' authority. Indeed Baptist leaders are on a very short ecclesiastical leash! Their powers to act can and should be withdrawn when

they cease to accomplish the churches' will.

Gambrell believed the boards of the various denominational enterprises are "channels" by which the local churches come together to build the kingdom of God. The denominational enterprises are not ends to themselves but "means" to the end of building God's kingdom. When the power of the local churches is "transferred" to a board, the board is participating in an "apostasy from the New Testament ideal" and has adopted the Roman or Presbyterian model instead.

Historically, Baptists were scandalized when elitists tried to grab control of Baptist institutions. When Rhode Island College was established in the early 1760s, the Baptists fashioned a rough draft of a constitution that gave Baptist trustees the governing power. The primarily Presbyterian or Congregationalist faculty, however, presented a revised charter to the state authorities and were almost successful in giving ultimate authority to the "fellows" of the new school. The Baptists responded by letting the state government know they had been "misled" and "imposed upon." They then called together Baptists from as far away as Philadelphia and brought forward a second revision that returned the primary authority to the Baptists.

"Thus the Baptists narrowly escaped being jockeyed out of their college by a set of men in whom they reposed entire confidence," Baptist historian H. Leon McBeth writes in his book, *A Sourcebook for Baptist Heritage*.

Revering the line of authority

Even when well-meaning Baptists temporarily violate the line of authority that stretches from Christ to the churches, Baptists will become incensed.

For example, in 1817, Richard Furman, pastor of the First Baptist Church of Charleston, S.C., and first president of the Triennial Convention, proposed the establishment of the first Baptist theological seminary in the United States. Since the convention, to which both southern and northern Baptists belonged, met only every third year, this meant action could not be taken for three years. Anxious to begin the much-needed enterprise, the convention board met in 1818 and authorized a new seminary. The board acted without authority, and to make matters worse, the venerable Luther Rice bought land for the seminary in Washington, D.C., near the White House, again without authority.

Furman, rather than being elated by these developments, objected to the manner in which decisions affecting all Baptists were being made by an elite who were not thus empowered to act. (To add insult to injury, the proposed seminary that these early Baptists built for themselves has long since ceased to serve the churches.) Baptists have never appreciated their divinely given authority being usurped, even by fellow Baptists who have the best of intentions.

How does the line of authority from Christ to the churches govern the institutions that Baptists build? Perhaps the dying words of B.H. Carroll, the founder of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, can inform us. The commission he gave to his successor, L.R. Scarborough, traced the authority of the Cross of Christ through the churches to the convention and the board of trustees; from thence it flows to the faculty and ultimately, the individual professor. The authority to operate as a Baptist educational institution could -- and should -- be withdrawn if and when heresy became a problem.

"Lee, keep the seminary lashed to the Cross," Carroll said. "If heresy ever comes in the teaching, take it to the faculty. If they will not hear you and take prompt action, take it to the trustees of the seminary. If they will not hear you, take it to the Convention that appoints the board of trustees, and if they will not hear you, take it to the great common people of our churches. You will not fail to get a hearing then."

Carroll had a strong assumption that the Baptist churches would want to intervene if God were not being honored in one of their institutions. Denominational servants and institutions must respect the lines of authority. "The great common people of our churches" are the last hope for our institutions on this side of the Second Coming of Jesus Christ.

The Missouri situation

Recently, I was asked by a local church in Parkville to speak to the defunding of five Missouri Baptist institutions by the Missouri Baptist Convention. Having only recently been introduced to this historic state's Baptist life, I could not speak to the specific issues under consideration. However, as a committed Baptist and an historical theologian, I could -- and did speak -- to the principles that have informed Baptists through the last four centuries. Those principles, I believe, call for the churches to rise up and demand that their institutions submit to the will of the churches.

Not being a lawyer, I cannot speak to the legal issues that are involved. However, being a scholar, I can speak to the theological principles at issue. It is time that the people in the pews rise up with their pastors to call the boards of these Missouri Baptist institutions to submit to the common will. Those boards that will not submit are not acting in a Baptist manner. Those board members must ask themselves whether they can verbally maintain the Baptist principle of local church authority while violating that same principle with their actions.

Of course, many will point out that Baptist educational institutions in other states have taken similar steps towards self-perpetuating boards. This is true, and the fruit of such non-Baptistic activity is now being borne. Wake Forest, Baylor, Furman, Stetson, Richmond, Mercer, Samford, Mississippi and Meredith have all declared their autonomy from their state conventions.

Most of these schools have aligned themselves with the liberal camp of Baptist life; some have seen Christian emphases removed from campus life. It is a basic truism in historical research that when a college loosens its moorings to the church, it will drift away from any significant Christian focus.

The great Baptist schools established with such sacrifice by our forefathers are slowly being lost. When will these boards, whether in Missouri or elsewhere, have the integrity to return their governance to the churches? When will the people rise up and demand that Baptist institutions function for the purposes for which they were established and in the way in which they were meant to function? My prayer is that these formerly Baptist institutions will become Baptist once again, and sooner rather than later.

(Malcolm B. Yarnell, III, Ph.D., is dean of faculty and associate professor of historical theology at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary.)