

**From Christological Ecclesiology to Functional Ecclesiasticism:
Developments in Southern Baptist Understandings
of the Nature and Role of the Churches**

© Rev. Dr. Malcolm B. Yarnell, III
Director of the Center for Theological Research
Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary

A Paper Presented to the Anglican Communion-Baptist World Alliance
International Theological Conversations held in Wolfville, Nova Scotia
11 September 2003

During a six-year pastoral ministry complete with both Baptist and interdenominational ministerial associations, then a three-year sojourn at Oxford University, followed by a two-year stint on the continuing committee of the Anglican Communion-Baptist World Alliance International Conversations, I have been periodically expected to explain the theological positions of Southern Baptists, both to non-Southern Baptist Baptists and to theologians from the Anglican Communion. The alternation between raised eyebrows and furrowed frowns, followed by intense questioning, told me much about how this apparently exotic but vibrant expression of Christian communal life, my community's life, was perceived. The Southern Baptist Convention represents the largest convention of Baptist churches in North America, indeed in the world – there are over 42,000 Southern Baptist churches with a reported membership of over 16 million. The Southern Baptist Convention also fields full-time and temporary domestic and international missionaries who number in the tens of thousands. Moreover, as is widely known, we have just completed a major theological realignment known as the “Conservative Resurgence” or “Conservative Reformation” by the victors, but as the “Fundamentalist Takeover” by the losers. Yet, in many ways, in spite of our numerical strength, vigorous missionary efforts, and concern for doctrine, Southern Baptists are perceived as a unique Christian and Baptist community.

To elucidate developing understandings of the nature and role of the church, we will consider the development of Southern Baptists from the English Baptist tradition, which is itself a product of the early seventeenth-century Church of England. After this historical treatment of reflection upon the essential nature of Southern Baptist ecclesiology, the functional beliefs and practices of Southern Baptists will be summarily treated in a systematic manner. The functional role of the church will be considered in relation to the churches' structures, the churches' activities, and the churches in their relations to others. It will become evident that Southern Baptists have traded their original Christological ecclesiology for a functional ecclesiasticism.

The Historical Development of Southern Baptist Ecclesiology

In order to elucidate the current understanding of the nature of the church according to Southern Baptists, it may be helpful to trace their development historically from their Baptist foundations in England. Of course, the best way to understand Baptist foundations is to begin with their theological grounding in and departure from the

established church in England during the “long Reformation” of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Baptist Foundations in England

Baptists share a common doctrinal and ecclesial heritage with their religious relatives in the Reformation Church of England. Many of the *Thirty-Nine Articles*, gathered by Thomas Cranmer into forty-two articles during the short Protestant reign of Edward VI and later edited and authoritatively promulgated during the long reign of Elizabeth I are quite acceptable to Baptists – indeed, some are considered quite necessary. The definition of the Trinity found in the first five articles (and in the creeds affirmed in the eighth article) did not stir controversy among the theological forerunners of the Baptists. More importantly, articles six and seven on the Bible would have received hearty approval by the early Baptists. It might be argued that their desire to know and proclaim Scripture, which “containeth all things necessary to salvation” is what began the drive towards separation. Article six’s statement that nothing is required for belief except what is found in the Bible was emphasized by the Puritans in their regulative principle – nothing is to be practiced in the church except what is commanded by Scripture. The Calvinist regulative principle is distinctly different from the Lutheran principle of indifference or *adiaphora*. English conformists, though Calvinistic in soteriology, adopted the less literal principle of indifference in their struggle with the Puritans. The early Separatists took the Puritan position and radicalized it, in the words of Robert Browne calling for a scriptural “reformation without tarrying for any.”

When Browne and like-minded radicals were denied episcopal preaching licenses, they looked elsewhere for the authorization they so strongly desired. This internal compulsion to discern, discuss, and defend the doctrines of the Word, and their bishops’ refusal to renew a sanctioned outlet for that desire, is what first drove the Elizabethan radical Puritans toward a separating ecclesiology. John Smyth went a step further than Browne, advocating not only a separated and gathered covenantal church but a covenant defined by the exclusive practice of believers’ baptism. If the bishops had not been so reticent to allow these radical preachers their preaching licenses, one might speculate whether their logical search for an alternative basis of ecclesial authority would have ended in Separatism, and whether the fracturing of the Church of England might have been avoided or at the least delayed.

In addition to a shared appreciation for the Word of God, the forefathers of modern Baptists and the forefathers of modern Anglicans would have equally affirmed those official confessional articles dealing with justification. Articles nine through eighteen, which discuss this crucial Protestant dogma, could have been ascribed by most of the early Baptists, although the sacramental conclusion to article nine, on original sin, would have been troublesome if it led to an argument for infant baptism. Baptists concurred with the Reformed doctrines which repeated the Pauline understanding of election, sin, and salvation.

The magisterially enforced doctrines of God, the Bible, and salvation did not violate the consciences of the early Baptists and their theological forerunners, the Separatists. The difficulty lay within the final twenty-one articles, articles which deal with ecclesiology. All Protestants were dependent upon an understanding of the visible church as *congregatio fidelium*, the congregation of the faithful, as first advocated by

Martin Luther and defined at the beginning of article 19. Disagreement would have begun with the next few words, which define the marks of the church to be “where the pure Word of God is preached” and “the Sacraments be duly ministered according to Christ’s ordinance.” Besides the obvious disagreement over the application of the sacrament of baptism to infants, Baptists emulated the Puritans in affirming three marks of the visible church rather than two.

The Separatists and their descendents, the Baptists, developed their radical ecclesiologies by absorbing and reacting to the political philosophy and ecclesiology of the Elizabethan-era Church of England. Most of their ecclesiological doctrines can be found in embryonic form in the Book of Common Prayer. While they were radicals, they were nevertheless singing theology from the same book with the official church. They agreed that authority did descend as a gift of God and that that authority must be exercised responsibly. They, too, prayed for the queen, her ministers, the clergy, and the people, at the morning and evening prayers. Like many Elizabethans, they embraced the ideal of a “mixed polity.” Using the Aristotelian political categories of monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy, they learned from such luminaries as William Cecil and Thomas Smith that the best polity was some combination of the three. These early Separatists and Baptists were neither anti-monarchical nor thorough democrats. They simply reflected upon and furthered the prevailing political theories of their day.

While affirming mixed polity, they began to envision a way in which they might give greater honor to the King of Kings Who was lauded in the authorized prayer book. They wanted to reify the line of *Te Deum* – “Thou art the King of glory, O Christ” – in their local churches. If these radical preachers and their followers were not to be authorized in their pursuit of godliness by the episcopal creatures of the Queen, where then could they find their divine, and thereby legitimate, authorization? At the end of both the morning and evening prayers as well as the litany, a collect of Chrysostom referred to the premier ecclesial text of the gospels: “when two or three are gathered together in Thy name.” This reference to Matthew 18, one of two and arguably the more important, in which Jesus spoke of the church, played in the mind of these preachers. The presence of Christ had long carried the power of Christ – remember the soteriological and apotropaic claims of medieval Christians concerning the consecrated host or the political and theological claims of the Tudor monarchs pictured on the flyleaf of the official vernacular Bibles. In Matthew 18:20, a text which served as the *locus classicus* for early Separatists and Baptists, it is quite explicitly stated that “where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in their midst.”

Where is Christ and where is his authority? Here, in the gathered congregation. In the confessions of the official prayer book, the people are called to approach the throne of grace with the priest as equals. Prayer is truly a “common” and leveling exercise in Anglican theology. Prayer is truly a “common” and leveling exercise in Baptist theology. Prayer is the place where Baptists first found the authority they required to rebel against the perceived ungodly recalcitrance and illegitimate usurpation of authority by their bishops. If Christ and his authority are present amidst the people called to prayer, how can that authority be defined? Here, the early Separatists and Baptists turned to the Calvinist commonplace of the threefold office of Christ. Christ is prophet, priest, and king, and His people participate in His tripartite office. He is, in the words of the official

communion alms prayer, “our only Mediator” and “our Lord.” It is He Who dispenses the authority to preach, to pray, and to rule.

The official church’s doctrinal articles may have defined only two marks for the visible church – the Word and the sacraments – but the official ordinal had the bishop pronounce three marks to the newly ordained priest: “Will you then give faithful diligence always so to minister the Doctrine and Sacraments, and the Discipline of Christ . . . ?” Luther and the more traditional continental Reformers had embraced only two marks and had excluded the third mark as a sign of perfectionism. John Calvin alternated between two and three marks, but Martin Bucer, John a Lasco, and many later Calvinists definitely affirmed three marks. The marks of the church must include the discipline of the church. “Discipline” was a synonym for “government,” even for “rule.” The Separatists and their Baptist disciples always spoke of three marks for the visible church, and these three marks were correlated with the threefold office of their ecclesiastical mediator, King Jesus. In His role as prophet, Jesus mediates the office of proclamation to His church. In His role as priest, Jesus mediates the office of intercession to His church. In His role as king, Jesus mediates the office of rule to His church. The church participates communally in the threefold office of Christ: they are the prophecy, the priesthood, and the kingdom. They are, in the words of Peter, the prince of the apostles, a “royal priesthood . . . so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him.”

Another piece to the puzzle of the doctrines which informed the ecclesiology of the early Baptists is found in their localization of covenant theology. Christ’s atonement enables the church to participate in the soteriological covenant, and His threefold office enables the church to participate in the ecclesiological covenant. The application of covenantal theology was promoted in English evangelical circles at least since William Tyndale, but the Separatists added the threefold office. How, then, does a church gather and make Christ present? The gathering of the church was accomplished through separation from the ungodly parishes and the adoption of a covenant. The ecclesiastical covenant could be neither reduced to a crass social contract as in Enlightenment politics, nor elevated to a claim on God’s grace as in the more Pelagian forms of Arminian soteriology. God and His people came together in covenant and to form the local church. This church is where Christ is, where His offices are shared, and where the de-licensed preachers found their desired authorization to proclaim the Word.

Some may consider this stringing of Anglican theological statements into a Baptist ecclesiology as incomplete in its analysis. After all, did not Baptists reject the authority of the magistrate as defined by the official formularies? This is true. Baptists did build on certain concepts and bypass others, such as the ecclesiastical authority of the monarch. However, this expression of continuity and discontinuity was consistent with the first words in the Book of Common Prayer. The Reformation’s leading Archbishop of Canterbury believed the church “should keep the mean between the two extremes, of too much stuffiness in refusing, and of too much easiness in admitting any variation from it.” It could be argued that the early Separatists and Baptists were living that belief out in their radical and Christological ecclesiology. However, it is doubtless true that Cranmer would have been horrified by the fissiparous trajectory of these radicals.

Southern Baptist Foundations

As the seventeenth century progressed, two important events occurred which set the context for Southern Baptist life. First, the civil wars redefined English society and made room for both General and Particular Baptists to thrive. Second, the newly discovered American continent was opened for immigration. In England, the ecclesiological ideals of the Baptists found expression not only in the church but also in the state. Baptists joined with other congregationalists in pursuing the reification of the kingdom of God. They concluded that the closet Romanist, Charles I, was not their true king; rather, Jesus is King; and the pretender lost his head, literally. After the demise of the more radical Baptists with the Interregnum and in certain sectors of the Fifth Monarchy movement, English Baptists sought respectability. They found a measure of comradeship by allying themselves with the Independents and the Presbyterians. The First London Confession reflects the older radical ecclesiology, while the Second London Confession reshaped Baptist thought and made it more presentable and less revolutionary. The Presbyterians' *Westminster Confession* and the Independents' *Savoy Declaration* helped the Baptists repackage their ideology in terms more acceptable to the newly resurgent but chastened official church.

The first American Baptists appeared in New England, where they sought to establish the Kingdom of God by planting congregations in the wilderness. The stories of Roger Williams, Isaac Backus, and John Leland – usually rendered in a rather ridiculous modernist tone – have been told before and need not be mentioned here. The first Baptists to appear in the south apparently came from the west of England and settled in South Carolina. Prior to the awakenings, the Baptists who inhabited the southern colonies immigrated either from established Baptist churches in the other American colonies or from Britain. During the eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century evangelical awakenings, the “Regular [Particular] Baptists” and the “General Baptists” were joined by the fugitive “Separate Baptists.” Together, they fought for religious liberty in the predominately Anglican and Puritan colonies. Their support for the successful American Revolution won them friends in high places and the right places. Over time, Baptists were able to gain not only tolerance for their churches but also religious freedom, which in American terms primarily meant the abolition of taxes to support their denominational opponents.

With the growth of the American colonies came the movement of Baptists ever westward into the continent. As farms were established on large plots of land, many people found themselves isolated from one another and increasingly self-sufficient. Baptists, among others, brought the gospel to these frontier pioneers. In this heady environment of freedom and self-sufficiency, fortified by advances in technology and wealth, the Baptists were successful in establishing self-governing congregations. Local Baptists practiced a form of democratic government which correlated to a great extent with the forms of government common in the American hinterland, a phenomenon noted by the French philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville of American churches generally and the German philosopher Max Weber of Baptist churches specifically. These self-governing congregations were periodically susceptible to religious enthusiasm and doctrinal deviation. The Philadelphia Association, in response, sought to bring religious and doctrinal uniformity to American Baptists, but the need for a national organization was perceived. The first national Baptist organization, the Triennial Convention, was founded

in 1814 to support foreign missionaries. It became the venue for discussions leading to American Baptist advances in higher education and missionary enterprises. The Triennial Convention was led in its first years by Richard Furman, a slave-holding southerner from Charleston, South Carolina.

Although they were integral to the foundation of the Triennial Convention and other national Baptist societies, Southern Baptists could not long remain in the national fold. The Southern Baptist Convention was formed in 1845 in reaction to the perceived encroachment of northern abolitionist values into the decision-making of the national missionary boards. Southern Baptists, for the most part, supported the Confederacy during the American Civil War, and some of their leading pastor-theologians argued forcefully for a positive biblical opinion of slavery. Most Southern Baptists, today, are somewhat ashamed of this episode, and the national convention has taken the step of apologizing for past offenses toward the African-American minority through public resolutions. In spite of their misappropriation of Scripture to politically subjugate the black population, Southern Baptists saw great results from their evangelistic influence upon the slave population. As a result some large black Baptist denominations have come into existence.

Through much of the nineteenth century and into the early years of the twentieth century, Southern Baptists were as concerned about orthodoxy in their ecclesiology as were their forefathers. Hints of the political philosophy and Calvinistic theology which influenced early Baptist development could still be found, but the general lack of education on the post-revolutionary frontier and in the post-bellum south, coupled with the self-sufficient nature of the churches, separated these later Baptists from their ideological roots. The original understanding of the nature of Baptist churches as Christologically-covenanted congregations was eventually lost in the relative isolation and poverty of the predominantly rural south. For a time, a type of succession of the persecuted, Landmarkism, provided the ideological glue needed by Baptists, but its tenure was attenuated by its implausibility. There was not a total amnesia, as attested by the research of Gregory Wills on nineteenth-century Alabama Baptists. However, the loss of the original ideology which defined the nature of Baptist ecclesiology meant that functional concerns dominated discourse on the church. The functional ecclesiastical practices remained while ontological ecclesiology died off. Exegesis and polemic were focused on defending established practices rather than remembering and renewing theological foundations. This can be seen in the work of J.L. Dagg, the premier southern Baptist theologian of the mid-nineteenth century. Dagg left a detailed systematic theology which was coupled with a book on church polity. The book on church polity was functional and contained little ontological reflection. There are discernable traces in nineteenth-century southern [later, Southern] Baptist literature of the ideological foundations of Baptist ecclesiology, but the focus had shifted to a functional ecclesiasticism. J.L. Reynolds' *Church Polity or the Kingdom of Christ* is one of the few ideological pieces available on the nature of Baptist ecclesiology in America during that century, and his discussion there is peremptorily shortened by more immediate concerns. This amnesia concerning the ideological nature of Baptist ecclesiology had its parallels among the northern American Baptists, too.

As the medieval papacy learned, ecclesiastical practice requires a theology to justify its existence. Churches must have an ecclesiological ideology to justify their

ecclesiastical practices. They can function for a time without an ecclesiology but they must eventually justify their ecclesiastical ways. In the absence of the older theology of the nature of the church which originally justified their practices, Baptists searched for a new ideology. Francis Wayland, earlier in the north, and E. Y. Mullins, later in the South, helped supply that new ideology by appealing to the American experience of individualism. Both men, brilliant and influential, admittedly lacked formal training in classical history and theology, and embraced the currents of American culture as reflective of Baptist values. Mullins's emphasis on a solipsistic "soul competency," which is complemented by the atomistic doctrine of "the priesthood of the believer," coupled with a mild but cancerous anti-ecclesiasticism convincingly appealed to those looking for the essence of what it means to be Southern Baptist. In the twentieth century, Southern Baptist literature on the church became functional on the one hand and ideologically individualistic on the other. By the 1930s this new ideology furthered the demise of the practice of church discipline, where church discipline was earlier considered a major indicator of communal integrity. With the belated introduction of scholarly liberalism into Southern Baptist theological circles, the move to a crassly voluntaristic understanding of the nature of the church was complete. The research of Ernst Troeltsch classified nineteenth-century Baptist churches as sectarian. The best description of the dominant twentieth-century Southern Baptist ecclesial ideology in Troeltschian terms is neither church-type nor sect-type, but mystic. The Southern Baptist "mystic" is only loosely and suspiciously related to an association of like-minded people.

A Functional Ecclesiasticism for Southern Baptists

At this point, we end our discussion of developments in the Southern Baptist understanding of the nature of the church and turn our focus upon the functional role of the church. The functional ecclesiasticism of Southern Baptist churches today will be considered in three rubrics: the structures of the churches, the activities of the churches, and the churches in relation to others. The role of the church in relation to its own people may be partially discerned in its structures. The role of the church in relation to God may be grasped by examining its activities. The role of the church in relation to the rest of the world may be detected by an evaluation of its external values.

Southern Baptist Churches in Relation to their People: Structures

Considered under the rubric of church structures is the local church, the officers of the church, and the members of the church. Southern Baptists emphasize the local churches above any other expression of Christian community. Indeed, any communal expression other than *the local church* will find detractors rising to voice their objections that the authority of the local church is being compromised. Over the years, denominational leaders have been quick to distance themselves from any centralizing rhetoric. Although our leading denominational body, the Executive Committee of the Southern Baptist Convention, is located in Nashville, Tennessee, the leaders of that body identify the local church and not Nashville as the headquarters for Southern Baptists. "Local church autonomy" is the doctrinal description which Southern Baptist theologians have assigned to this attitude. To threaten this autonomy is to threaten the integrity of Southern Baptist ecclesiastical practice.

Baptists have always given some emphasis to the local church, but during the Landmark movement of the nineteenth century, Southern Baptists came to fear any external influences whatsoever. While most Christian theologians would recognize the truth of both the local church and the universal church, it was not until 1963 that Southern Baptists officially recognized the existence of the universal church, and that did not happen without some resistance. Even today, Southern Baptists see their local churches as sacrosanct. Many Southern Baptist churches are still reluctant to invite non-Baptist preachers to their pulpits, to accept non-Baptists into their church membership, and to encourage open communion.

That said, even the most ardent defenders of Southern Baptist local church autonomy realize the influence that the denomination can have upon the life of the local churches. This explains why proponents of local church autonomy, whether fundamentalist or conservative or moderate or liberal in orientation, have found the recent battle for control of the conventions to be so important. The groups that control the national convention or the larger state conventions have an enormous amount of patronage at their disposal in the short-term. Moreover, in the long term, they may set the theological direction of Southern Baptist seminaries and colleges, and thus influence the direction of the local churches. The colleges and seminaries train the pastors who will eventually lead the churches.

In most local churches, the ultimate authority is still held by the congregation. This authority was originally outlined in a church covenant, constitution and/or articles of incorporation. While the doctrinal matters addressed by church covenants and constitutions can sometimes be ignored, the issue of authority seems to be a perennial concern. There is a constant give-and-take occurring in the churches between various members. This is because operational authority in the church is variously delegated, officially or unofficially, to the pastor, the church staff, the deacons, the elders, or some powerful committee of laypersons. These operational authorities may be defined in the constitution and by-laws of the church. Where they are not clearly delineated or remembered, these operational authorities, exercised by church officers, can compete with one another, in healthy or unhealthy ways.

Generally, the congregation calls a pastor, the primary figure among the *church officers*, to regularly lead in worship and business. The calling of a pastor is an important event in the life of the church, so important that the method of calling is defined in the constitution. A “search committee” is appointed by the church in one of its business meetings to begin accepting vitas and interviewing candidates. The hope is that the committee will soon discern “God’s man” and present that candidate to the church as a prospective pastor, usually after a sermon delivered to the church “in view of a call.” Unfortunately, some churches are in the habit of forming a search committee on an annual or bi-annual basis, either because of some type of disagreement or because the new pastor has found “a better field of service.” Pastors are expected to have a real sense that God, and not only the church, is calling them to fill their role as the church’s spiritual leader. The qualifications applied to bishops and elders in 1 Timothy and Titus are used to determine the spiritual fitness of a candidate. For Southern Baptists, pastors are elders are bishops. The more intense examination of a new candidate for a Southern Baptist pastorate usually occurs in an ordination council formed with the support of other local churches at the request of the local church which has decided to call the new minister.

Pastors are expected, though by no means required, to have a seminary education. Ordination involves ordained ministers from the association who are invited to lay hands upon the ordinand. Female candidates for the role of senior pastor are officially discouraged by the denomination's latest confession of faith, and many of the local churches would never consider a female candidate, whatever the national denomination determines.

Although most churches are small and can only support one ministerial staff member, larger churches will have a senior pastor who is aided by numerous staff members. These staff members are employees of the church and not the denomination nor the pastor, though they report to the pastor. Staff members can be either ministerial (ordained) or non-ministerial (support). The most common ministerial staff members assist the pastor by leading in music, organizing the educational ministries of the church, ministering to the youth or some other age group, leading the outreach ministries of the church, or managing the non-ministerial support staff. A ministerial staff member's tenure can be of various length and enjoyment, dependent upon reception by the senior pastor and the church membership.

Southern Baptists have traditionally affirmed two offices in the church, that of the pastor and that of the deacons. Periodically in Southern Baptist history, there have been movements toward having three offices in the church: pastor, elders, and deacons. Recently, there has been a growing interest in the elder-model for the structure of the church among younger pastors. It is yet to be seen whether this is driven more by the questionable exposition of some New Testament passages or by the desire of younger pastors to permanently dilute the rival authority of that often troublesome office of the deacons. Because there has been great turnover in the pastorate – some studies say the average tenure of a pastor is less than two years – the laity have been required to provide continuity in the church. Those congregations which have a twofold office look to the deacons for leadership during the interim between pastors. “Boards” of deacons have often lost their original purpose of aiding the pastor by serving the church's more mundane needs and have begun functioning as a corporate board of directors or trustees. (The latter trend is confused by the presence of a distinct body required by articles of incorporation, the literal “trustees” of the church.)

Theologically, the *members* of the church should be considered prior to the officers of the church. However, in practice, many modern Southern Baptist churches give more attention to their officers than to their members. Indeed, in the larger churches, “the super churches,” which can contain multiple thousands of members, the pastor has been compared to a rock-n-roll or movie “star” and the worship service has taken on the air of a performance. The members are seen as “consumers” which the ministries of the church serve with ever more elaboration in the fear that these consumers will find a better service provider in a competing church. Although one might be tempted to focus on the problems at the top end of the local church food chain, the impact of modern individualism (and post-modern pluralism) can also be detected in the older “First Baptist” urban and suburban churches and the smaller rural and inner-city churches. New members usually join a church based upon “transfer by letter,” “transfer by statement,” or “believer's baptism.” “Transfer by letter” describes the process of a sister Baptist church verifying that this candidate for membership has been a member in good standing. Such transfers of membership have become rubber-stamps rather than indicators of whether the

member was actually faithful and good. "Transfer by statement" can be of two types, either a statement from a church "of like faith and practice" that this church member is eligible for membership or a statement from the proposed member that he once belonged to a church "of like faith and practice." This category is troubling as even cursory communal oversight is effectively bypassed. Membership "by believer's baptism" is required of all new Christians. This form of membership is often, but not always, required of Christians who have been baptized as infants in another Christian tradition.

Over time, the membership requirements for becoming and remaining as members have been loosened by the churches. The old categories have been maintained but new definitions are being offered. "Open membership" no longer carries the stigma which it once held among Southern Baptists, although the idea is still very unpopular. All that is required to get on the rolls of many churches is to "walk down the aisle" during the "invitation" and have the pastor declare one a new member by one of the above-mentioned forms. Some churches still maintain a separate vote during the monthly or quarterly business meeting, but even that vote can be perfunctory. Requirements made of those who have become members are no longer rigorous or particularly measurable. Once a person is a church member, churches are reluctant to remove their name except in the event of death. These trends beyond even the individualistic association of like-minded individuals are probably a function of a number of factors: the non-judgmental nature of post-modernity, the desire of pastors on a career path to increase their membership sizes, and the anti-historical bias which most Americans possess. The barriers to entering the community and maintaining membership are relatively low.

In their role of relating to themselves, Southern Baptists organize themselves primarily at the local level. The local churches choose church officers to lead the church in its activities. They now have comparatively low barriers to the granting and maintenance of membership.

Southern Baptist Churches in Relation to God: Activities

Considered under the rubric of church activities are the roles in the churches' relation to God of worship and proclamation, baptism, the Lord's Supper, and church discipline. Southern Baptists in *worship and proclamation* are not liturgical, at least in the sense of a written liturgy. Worship, however, is important, so important that rearranging or omitting portions of the unwritten liturgy can be detrimental to a preacher's tenure in a church. Baptists typically worship in a formal way on Sunday morning; smaller numbers attend the less formal Sunday evening and mid-week prayer services. In the more traditional churches, the hymnal provides the musical portion of the service, while more contemporary churches choose popular short choruses, too often with limited theological content. Prayers, mostly extemporaneous, are uttered by the pastor or a deacon or a special guest at the beginning of the service, before the offering, perhaps before the sermon, and as the benediction. The offering as an expression of tithing or sacrificial giving is periodically emphasized. The affective zenith of the service is generally experienced towards the end of the sermon and during the "invitation." The invitation or "altar call" became popular during the evangelical awakenings as a time for public commitments by individuals, either members or visitors. A public commitment, also known as "walking the aisle," can be made when one accepts Christ personally as Lord and Savior, wishes to join the church, "surrenders" to the ministry, or "rededicates"

one's life to Christ. The invitation is now considered an essential aspect of the public worship of the church. Indeed, it would appear to the casual observer that walking the aisle is more prerequisite for church membership than baptism.

The central place in a worship service is given to a sermon from the pastor or a special guest. The sermons are ideally Scriptural expositions though the topical sermon is having a strong run in Southern Baptist pulpits. The quality of the sermon from the viewpoint of content or style is dependent upon the preacher. Some preachers are very committed to a verse-by-verse exposition; others alternate book studies with topical studies; yet others are more than ready to preach "how to" sermons which appeal to their audience's "felt needs." The average sermon will begin with the biblical text. The body of the sermon will arrange the material under a few perhaps alliterative headings, explain the text, illustrate the text, and then apply the text to the audience. Explanations come from linguistic studies, commentary references, and the preacher's personal encounters with the Word. Illustrations are pulled from the Bible itself, history, personal experience or contemporary events. Applications are personalized to what the preacher perceives are the audience's greatest spiritual needs. The conclusion usually includes a strong appeal to some action or actions. An evangelistic appeal to "invite Jesus into your heart" is to be expected from most. Some evangelistic appeals can be quite forceful in their psychical impact. A confident, boisterous style with a harmonic rise and fall in tone and pitch building to a climactic call to come to Jesus can often overcome other deficiencies in content. Strong content with a retiring style is appreciated but such preachers are rarely asked to appear before their fellows in preaching conferences. Church members expect a fresh, exciting sermon each Sunday morning. Sunday evening and week-day prayer meetings require less preparation. The sermon is the primary means of restoring human relations with God and because of their concern for personal salvation, Baptists give it pride of place in church life.

The "sacraments," which Southern Baptists prefer to call "ordinances," are celebrated, ideally, out of a sense of joyous obedience and responsive confession to the work of God in their lives. The ordinances are not necessarily effective means of grace though they are viewed as providing a blessing to the church. Those who participate in the ordinances profess their initial conversion in baptism and their continuing fellowship with God and His church in the Lord's Supper.

Baptism is a condition for church membership and is intended for believers only. After the new believer is greeted during the invitation and received verbally into the church, either by pastoral proclamation or a cursory church vote, the baptizand will conference with the pastor or a staff member. The basics of the faith – God, Christ, salvation, personal Bible reading, prayer, tithing, the meaning of baptism – will be reasserted by the pastor and affirmed by the baptizand. After the conference a date will be arranged for baptism in a public worship service. Baptism is not seen as a requirement for regeneration but as an expression of spiritual rebirth. It is performed by a minister or deacon or other designated church member. The mode of baptism is full immersion which symbolizes the convert's identification with the death of Jesus (and personal death to sin) and with His resurrection (and commitment to live a Christian life and express hope in eternal life). The Trinitarian formula of the Great Commission is viewed as a proclamation of the convert's identification with the Christian God. Southern Baptists have been steadily losing their insistence upon baptism for believers only as their primary

distinctive. Although Southern Baptists have not experimented with paedobaptism, our churches are baptizing ever younger new members. Even if we are not guilty of “cradle” baptism, we can be accused of “preschool” baptism: some of our scholars question the effective difference. As an alternative to paedobaptism, many churches have “baby dedication services” in which God is thanked for the new arrival which the church and the parents commit themselves to discipling.

The *Lord's Supper* is sometimes called communion, rarely called the Eucharist, and never called the Mass. Most Southern Baptists appear to hold either a Zwinglian view of communion at best or a Schwenckfeldian view at worst. Often the Lord's Supper is simply tacked on other worship services on a quarterly basis. If a sermon is preached on the Lord's Supper, it will inevitably include a diatribe against the Roman understanding and an affirmation of memorialism. There is a rising sense among younger Southern Baptists that the Lord's Supper should be understood in a Calvinistic sense as a spiritual communion with the risen Christ and His body and that it deserves a more central place in the life of the churches. During the nineteenth century, the Landmark movement encouraged Southern Baptists in the middle and western south to serve communion only to the particular members of that local church in a practice known as “strict communion.” In the twentieth century, most churches would allow other believing baptized Christians to participate in a local church communion in a practice known as “close communion.” Today, more churches are inviting any Christian to participate in a practice known as “open communion.” Reflecting their individualistic tendencies, the churches generally dispense the grape juice – wine is eschewed in deference to the temperance movement – in personal cups and the bread in separate small crackers. The communicant is usually exhorted to examine oneself for holiness and faithfulness prior to consumption – the older communal understanding of examination has been largely forgotten.

As has already been hinted at, *church discipline* has largely fallen into disuse. Baptist church members seemed to be more concerned to misinterpret Jesus' statement, “judge not lest ye be judged,” as an undiscerning tolerance and to avoid the heartaches of controversy, than to reveal the church as the body of a holy Christ. It is rare for a church to practice discipline except in the case of the pastor or another staff member. Most churches find it scandalous to keep a minister who has fallen into open sin, but sinful laypersons are regularly countenanced. The churches have embraced the goal of numerical growth and in an effort to bring in new members, they made the decision, consciously or unconsciously, to lay fewer requirements upon church members. One study has shown that church discipline fell into disuse by the 1930s. It is not very common for a church to purge its rolls of non-attending church members. The purging of the rolls is seen as something of a radical act and some ministers have faced difficulty when seeking such.

In their role of relating themselves to God, the churches engage in worship, proclaim the Word, habitually practice the ordinance of believers' baptism, haphazardly practice the ordinance of communion and almost never practice church discipline.

Southern Baptist Churches in Relation to the “Other”

By the “other,” we mean those who are not members of this particular local Southern Baptist church. It cannot be emphasized enough that Southern Baptists have a

impulse to emphasize the local churches. Those groups outside the local Southern Baptist church are the others. Considered under the rubric of churches in relation to others are the mission of the church, associations and conventions, religious liberty, and ecumenism. Southern Baptists define their mission as shaping their relation to the world. They form associations and conventions to cooperate with other Baptist churches. They emphasize religious liberty in their dealings with the culture and the state. And they have an intentionally limited view of what constitutes valid cooperation with other Christian traditions.

Southern Baptist churches define *the mission of the church* in an evangelistic manner: the churches make concerted and sustained efforts to reach those who are soteriologically lost with the good news of the atoning death and powerful resurrection of the God-man, Jesus Christ. The mission of the church is accomplished on a local level by evangelistic outreach. Local evangelistic outreach is accomplished through lifestyle evangelism, servant evangelism, and confrontational evangelism, and during worship. Local churches often employ professional evangelists on a temporary basis both to call the church to revival and to appeal in crusades for the conversion of the lost. The mission of the church is accomplished beyond the local church's immediate area through the commissioning and support of professional and short-term missionaries. Some non-SBC southern Baptist churches see the convention missionary boards as impinging on the local church's autonomy and send and support their own missionaries. Churches affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention support missions through the Cooperative Program and through special annual offerings. Members of these affiliated churches are encouraged to consider God's call upon their lives to become missionaries. Those sensing such a call are put through a rigorous application process with the International Mission Board or the North American Mission Board. Appointed missionaries are held in high esteem by the churches as they leave a comfortable culture to take the good news of Jesus Christ across national and linguistic boundaries. The impact of these mission endeavors, especially in the international arena, has been numerically positive. Other effects are best left to the judgment of the beneficiaries of these efforts. The ultimate judge, of course, is God.

In order to cooperate with one another, local Southern Baptist churches formed *associations and conventions*. Associations fulfill three primary purposes: the promotion of missions, the pooling of resources for higher education, and the enablement of benevolence ministries. In their cooperative model, Southern Baptists have opted for a "convention" method rather than the "society" method preferred by northern Baptists. Only churches may join a convention while societies are open to churches, individuals, and other organizations. There are three primary levels of cooperation between Southern Baptist churches: the local association, the state convention, and the national convention. For some churches, the local association is the place where the overhead projector is kept; for others, it is where doctrinal controversies are settled; for yet others, it is a lifeline of Christian fellowship and the Director of Missions is a resource of wisdom in times of trouble. Churches place the association in their annual budget and send messengers to monthly and annual meetings. The association can exclude churches considered heretical or unethical, but the association has no coercive power or legal claim upon the local churches. It is a voluntary organization though its voluntarism is not to be understood in a crassly libertarian sense. The authority flows from the churches to the association. The same can be said of the state and national conventions. The Cooperative

Program is the financial lifeline by which the churches maintain the state and national conventions. Most churches put the state convention in their budget and a substantial percentage is passed by the state to the national convention. As a result of the Controversy, these time-worn methods of funding state and national convention ministries have been changing. Indeed, in a number of states – Virginia, Texas, and Missouri being the most prominent – rival conventions have been formed to compete for local church dollars and commitment. Southern Baptists cooperated in the establishment of the Baptist World Alliance, but in recent years that relationship has been strained.

Through various committees or commissions on public affairs, Southern Baptists relate themselves to issues which impact the wider culture. The primary cultural concern of Southern Baptists has been to promote *religious liberty*. With the rise of the conservatives, however, two different views of religious liberty have come to dominate the discussion. The old moderate view was to argue for the strict separation of church and state. The conservative convention-supported Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, headed by Richard Land, favors an accommodationist position in which the state ideally makes room for the church to proclaim the Word and have a positive social influence. Under the previous moderate regime, Southern Baptists were equivocal on abortion and other hot-button cultural issues, except for the issue of racism which they eventually opposed. Under the conservative regime, Southern Baptists have declared themselves combatants in the culture wars, taking positions on the abortion issue as pro-life, on homosexuality as only allowing sexual relations in a faithful marriage between a man and a woman, and on the races as against bigotry. Both conservative and moderate Southern Baptists have raised funds to combat world hunger. Conservative Southern Baptists are more traditional in their views of the roles of men and women in the family while moderates are more attuned to the culture. Under Richard Land's leadership, Southern Baptists have tried to convince the American government to promote genuine religious liberty not only at home but throughout the world, including countries such as Iraq and Afghanistan. Interestingly, the sectarian nature of their forefathers has been forgotten as Southern Baptists have grown in number. Indeed, so large have Baptists become that they have by default inherited the mantle of an established church in numerous communities in the south. This is disheartening to those who cherish the dissenting nature of their history but encouraging to those who see the church leavening society.

Southern Baptists are extremely reluctant to formally affiliate themselves with supporters of *ecumenism*. The article on cooperation in the *Baptist Faith & Message*, which was recently revised in 2000, states:

Christian unity in the New Testament sense is spiritual harmony and voluntary cooperation for common ends by various groups of Christ's people. Cooperation is desirable between the various Christian denominations, when the end to be attained is itself justified, and when such cooperation involves no violation of conscience or compromise of loyalty to Christ and His Word as revealed in the New Testament.

The qualifying clauses are interpreted in the strictest evangelistic and doctrinally orthodox manner. There is little desire for formal ecumenical discussions which are intended to lead to shared ministries and sacraments/ordinances. Indeed,

Southern Baptists are quite suspicious of any efforts to bring about structural unity. Currently, “spiritual harmony” is the best that other Christian denominations can hope for from Southern Baptists.