

**“Ecclesiological Guidelines to Inform
Southern Baptist Church Planters”**

Position Paper Presented
to the
North American Mission Board

Stan Norman, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Theology
Occupying the Cooperative Program Chair of SBC Studies
Director, Baptist Center for Theology and Ministry
New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	
“The Church”: The Baptist Faith and Message 2000	3
Biblical Authority: The Authority of a Baptist Church	4
The Authority of the Entire Bible	
The Authority of the New Testament	
The Lordship of Christ	6
Classic Marks of a True Church	8
Local and Universal Church	10
A Covenant Community	11
Church Discipline	13
Regenerate Church Membership	14
Congregational Polity	16
Autonomy	17
The Goal of Congregational Polity	18
Offices of the Church	19
Pastor/Elder/Overseer	
Deacons	
Function versus Office	
Ordinances of a Baptist Church	25
Believer’s Baptism by Immersion	
Lord’s Supper	
Mission of the Church	29
Summary	33
The Genius of Baptist Ecclesiology	33

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Introduction

Southern Baptist mission agencies assist Southern Baptist churches in the task of church planting. In this church planting ministry, Southern Baptist church planters must have and work with an ecclesiology that is both biblical and Baptist. Church planting strategies and endeavors must be conducted in such a way that they are obedient and submitted to the New Testament for faith and practice as well as committed to Baptist ecclesiology as stated in the *Baptist Faith and Message 2000*. In other words, these church plants exist and function as Baptist churches in accordance with the confessional statement of the Southern Baptist Convention. The following guidelines and discussion will assist the North American Mission Board to know the type of churches it affirms and will direct its church planting ministry.

The Baptist Faith and Message 2000

The article “The Church” as contained in the *Baptist Faith and Message 2000* describes a Baptist church in the following way:

A New Testament church of the Lord Jesus Christ is an autonomous local congregation of baptized believers, associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the gospel; observing the two ordinances of Christ, governed by His laws, exercising the gifts, rights, and privileges invested in them by His Word, and seeking to extend the gospel to the ends of the earth. Each congregation operates under the Lordship of Christ through democratic processes. In such a congregation each member is responsible and accountable to Christ as Lord. Its scriptural officers are pastors and deacons. While both men and women are gifted for service in the church, the office of pastor is limited to men as qualified by Scripture. 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.

The following material will provide a theological commentary on the significance of the BFM article for a Baptist understanding of the nature and purpose of the church.

Biblical Authority: The Authority of a Baptist Church

Baptists classically affirm the inspiration and authority of both Old and New Testaments. Doctrines such as the nature and personhood of God, creation, and sin require the authoritative and inspired voice of the Old Testament for theological construction. No credible Baptist would ever discount the value and status of the Old Testament as the revelation of God, its vital place in the canon, and its necessity for theological development. The Old Testament has been and must continue to be included for many of the beliefs that are crucial to the Christian faith.

The Authority of the Entire Bible

Baptists express their distinctive commitment to biblical authority best in their belief and practice of the church. The early Baptists viewed themselves as the logical outcome to the Reformation principle of *sola scriptura*, the idea that Bible is the sole authority for faith and practice. These Baptists made this assertion because they believed that no other Christian denomination was as consistent or committed in their appeal to and application of the teachings of the Bible for ecclesiastical practice as the Baptists were. Although all Christians in theory acknowledge that the “Bible alone” is the Word of God, Baptists have historically believed that their strict adherence and submission to biblical teaching is what distinguishes them and their churches from other Christian denominations. Baptists assert that their belief in the absolute authority of the Bible is logical and practical outcome of their attempt to apply biblical teaching to all realms of life, particularly the church.

As far as Baptists are concerned, a complete submission to the Bible results in the rise

and existence of a New Testament church. Baptists further believe that the restoration and function of the New Testament church is in part their mission. That is, an unswerving commitment to biblical authority and practice should result in the existence of churches that are Baptist in nature and purpose. Baptists have historically rejected religious tradition as a supplement to the teaching of the Bible. Baptists instead contend that their absolute commitment to biblical authority must determine their beliefs and practices regarding all aspects of church life. Baptists believe what they do about the nature of the Church, baptism, the Lord's Supper, congregational polity, etc. because their convictions on these matters are determined by the Bible.¹

The Authority of the New Testament

With regard to the Baptist doctrine of the church, the New Testament provides fuller and clearer revelation. The New Testament gives revelation on the nature and purpose of the Church not found in the Old Testament. As New Testament believers, beliefs and practices regarding the Church must be constructed upon New Testament teaching. Deviant practices and beliefs arise when Christians attempt to develop their doctrine of the church primarily upon Old Testament revelation or when Christians subordinate New Testament teachings to Old Testament teachings. Some of the beliefs regarded as unbiblical by Baptists found in other churches include infant baptism, a distinct or special priesthood, and state-established churches. Baptists are united in their conviction that the New Testament is the standard for our belief about the nature of the church. The reliance upon the New Testament for faith and practice is what safeguards and ensures the proper function of a New Testament church. The Baptist understanding of the

¹R. Stanton Norman, *More Than Just a Name: Preserving Our Baptist Identity* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2001), 67-72.

church therefore is the attempt of Baptists to reflect their obedience and submission to biblical authority in general and the teachings of the New Testament in particular. To state it another way, a Baptist church is the visible manifestation of the Baptist commitment to *sola scriptura*.²

The Lordship of Christ

The current BFM article on the church contains several statements that relate the doctrine of the Lordship of Christ with the Baptist understanding of the Church. The article connects “a New Testament church” to “the Lord Jesus Christ.” Each congregation is “governed by His laws” and operates under His Lordship through democratic processes and congregational polity. In addition, each member of a congregation is responsible and accountable to Christ as Lord. These statements demonstrate the importance of this doctrine for the existence and function of a Baptist church.

The Lordship of Christ is foremost an objective truth. Christ rules sovereignly over all things. His rule is absolute. We commonly hear some Christians say something like, “we need to make Jesus Lord.” We do not make Him Lord; He is Lord by virtue of His person. There is only one Lord, God the Son, through whom, in whom, and to whom are all things (Col. 1:15-20). All things were made by Him and will be summed up in Him. Through His incarnation, the Lord became one with humanity in order to be its Savior. By virtue of His atonement, He reigns over mankind as Redeemer and Judge (cf. Acts 17:31). Christ has authority and achieved authority by His saving death and victorious resurrection. The ascended Christ now sits at the right hand of the Father, continually making intercession for those who are His. The result of His completed work of atonement is a fuller assertion of His Lordship over all things. Whether or not an individual personally experiences Christ’s lordship in no way affects the objectivity of His rule.

²Norman, *More Than Just a Name*, 72-75.

Jesus Christ is Lord over all creation and declares His Lordship in the Great Commission: “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth” (Matt. 28:18).

The Lordship of Christ is secondarily a subjective truth. The Lordship of Christ is crucially important for our understanding of salvation. The confession of the Christian faith from its inception has been “Jesus is Lord!” The Bible indicates that this profession is possible only by the presence and work of the Holy Spirit in the life of a believer (1 Cor. 12:3). The subjective element is experienced in the personal appropriation of Christ’s rule in the hearts and lives of individual believers in their salvation experience. The Christian faith is essentially the vital union between God and man through Jesus Christ. The Lordship of Christ asserts that no person or human institution can mediate or interfere with the relationship between the King and His subjects. Religious systems, ceremonies, or external practices must not be permitted to come between the believer and the Master.

The doctrine of the Lordship of Christ was present in Baptist life almost from its inception. The classic statement by John Smyth in 1610 gives evidence of the early presence of this belief among Baptists: “Christ only is king and lawgiver of the church and conscience.” Thomas Armitage stated in 1890: “The living and underlying principles of Baptist Churches, relate to the sovereign and absolute headship of Christ in his Churches.”³ Another Baptist leader noted that “Baptists have always held this doctrine of Christ’s supreme headship as one of their most spiritual possessions. It lies at the basis of their polity and furnishes the keynote of their history.”⁴ Baptists have always claimed as part of their theological heritage the notion of the sovereignty of Christ and a determination to ensure a full and consistent recognition of His

³Thomas Armitage, *A History of the Baptists* (New York: Bryan, Taylor, & Co., 1887), 150.

⁴S. F. Skevington, *The Distinctive Principle of Baptists* (n.p., 1914), 37.

personal and direct authority over the souls of men.⁵ The Lordship of Christ is personally apprehended through the revelation of Scripture and the internal witness of the Holy Spirit.

Christ's sovereignty has direct bearing upon the Baptist understanding of the church. The statement "in such a congregation each member is responsible and accountable to Christ as Lord" suggests that this doctrine has both individual and corporate implications. Individual believers who are not rightly related to a local congregation are not fully submitted to Christ's Lordship. In addition, each member is responsible to participate in ministry in the context of a local church. The Lordship of Christ is also a declaration of His ownership and rulership over the Church. He purchased the Church with His blood. He owns the church; the members of the congregation are the stewards of His possession. Further, the Lordship of Christ underscores His leadership and direction of His people. Through the witness of the Word and the Spirit, Jesus provides direct guidance for the Church as it functions in its mission. Each local congregation should always endeavor to define its purpose and ministry in light of and in submission to the King of Kings. Since the Lordship of Christ provides the reason for the existence of the Church, all that a church is and does should ultimately point to the Lord of the Church.

Classic Marks of a True Church

During the patristic period, certain characteristics were developed to identify the true church. These "marks" were considered necessary to distinguish the true Christian church from heretical or schismatic groups. These traits were unity, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity. The Roman Catholic Church has used these marks for centuries as a means to define and distinguish itself from other Christian groups.

⁵John D. Freeman, "The Place of Baptists in the Christian Church," in *Baptist World Congress, London, July 11-19, 1905. Authorised Record of Proceedings* (London: Baptist Union Publication Department, 1905), 22.

Baptists and other Protestant groups have sought to utilize these marks with alternative interpretations. Unity of the church is defined in terms of oneness of fellowship in joint submission to Christ and joined by the bond of the Spirit. Holiness points to the set-apartness for service and worship as opposed to the sinless perfection of the church members. Catholicity refers to the ultimate oneness of all God's children in the final state. Apostolicity underscores the commitment of a church to the witness of and submission to the teachings of the apostles as contained in the Scriptures.⁶

During the Reformation, the question of what were the marks of a true church arose again. In particular, Protestants began to ask whether or not the Roman Catholic Church was a true church. The focus shifted from an emphasis upon institution to a vital relationship with Christ. In an effort to reclaim the emphasis of union with Christ, the Baptists along with the Reformers began to point to the right preaching of the Word of God and the right administration of the ordinances as evidences of a genuine church of God. In addition, the Baptist concern for church purity gave rise to the right administration of church discipline as a mark of a true church. We can summarize the previous discussion as follows. A true church is united in fellowship and the bonds of the Holy Spirit with a congregation set apart from the world in pursuit of holiness in worship and service. A true church is the unity of all the redeemed of all the ages as will ultimately be revealed and enjoyed in the final state. A true church is committed and submitted absolutely to the revelation of Jesus Christ as given by the apostles. A true church manifests its authenticity in the right preaching of the Word of God, the right administration of the ordinances, and the right administration of church discipline.

⁶James Leo Garrett, Jr. *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1995), 478-80.

Local and Universal Church

In the New Testament the word “church” is used to refer to believers at any level, ranging from a very small group meeting in a private home to the group of all true believers in the universal church. A “house church” is called a “church” in Romans 16:5 (“greet also the church in their house”) and 1 Corinthians 16:19 (“Aquila and Priscilla greet you warmly in the Lord, and so does the church that meets at their house”). The church in an entire city is also called a “church” (1 Cor. 1:2; 2 Cor. 1:1; and 1 Thess. 1:1). The church in a region is referred to as a “church” in Acts 9:31: “So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was built up.” The church throughout the entire world can be referred to as “the church.” Paul says, “Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her” (Eph. 5:25) and says, “God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers . . .” (1 Cor. 12:28). In this latter verse the mention of “apostles,” who were not given to any individual church, is a clear reference to the church universal.

The BFM 2000 describes the church as both local (“an autonomous local congregation”) and as universal (“the church . . . includes all of the redeemed of all the ages, believers from every tribe, and tongue, and people, and nation”). In most New Testament passages, the church is depicted as a local assembly of Christians who meet, worship, and minister in the name of Jesus Christ. Each local church is a tangible expression of the universal church. The concept of the universal church is biblical and important, but the reality of church life can only be experienced on the local level. The blessings, ministries, ordinances, and discipline of a church are only to be realized, appropriated, and practiced tangibly in a local congregation.

Although the typical use of church refers to a local assembly, the word is also used in the universal sense. The church for which Jesus gave Himself is bigger than a single local

congregation. The concept of the universal church reminds us that our fellowship in Christ and our bond in the Spirit transcend barriers of race, geography, time, tradition, and denomination.

A Covenant Community

The current BFM states that a New Testament church is a group of believers “associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the gospel.” Part of our Baptist ecclesiology is that a true church is a group of people joined together in voluntary covenant with God. The early Baptists believed that a church should be a group of saved people gathered from the world at large. The church exists as a group of believers united for the purpose of serving together as the people of God under the Lordship of Christ.

The idea of covenant underscores that individual believers through the act of regeneration are moved by the Spirit to unite together as a corporate whole called the church. The Baptist concept of a covenant community asserts that the church is the result of the free activity of God in the lives of individual believers. Our “association by covenant in the faith and fellowship” stands in sharp contrast to the notion that the church is an organization created by coercive governmental authority or institutional/territorial, ecclesiastical manipulation.

The idea of covenant implies that church life must be experienced in local congregations. The covenant community is by nature local, the result of a particular, visible group of believers united in confession. For Baptists, the covenant that joins believers together in the church of Jesus Christ is sealed in believer’s baptism.⁷

The notion of covenant therefore points to the truth that a church is a group of people united together in their joint confession of Jesus Christ as Lord. The church consists of those

⁷Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Pub., 1994), 611-12. Although much about Grenz’s theological method and constructions in this work are problematic, his observations about the importance and role of covenant for a local church are helpful and instructive.

called out by the preaching of the gospel to live in union with God and other believers. Because all members of a congregation confess allegiance to Christ, they are a people joined together in corporate confession of and submission to God through Christ. This idea is expressed in the BFM 2000 statement: “In such a congregation each member is responsible and accountable to Christ as Lord.” Their mutual confession of Jesus as Christ also means that the believers are united to one another in fellowship and service; they are committed as disciples of Christ to one another. Christians within a covenant community mutually agree to walk together as the people of God. Each individual believer should have a sense of belonging to God and to one another.⁸

The idea of covenant extends beyond the immediate membership of a local church to address the relationship among Southern Baptist churches. Southern Baptist churches have historically related to one another to cooperate together in evangelistic, missionary, educational, social, and benevolent causes. This cooperative relationship is described in article XIV (“Cooperation”) of the BFM 2000.

Christ’s people should, as occasion requires, organize such associations and conventions as may best secure cooperation for the great objects of the Kingdom of God. Such organizations have no authority over one another or over the churches. They are voluntary and advisory bodies designed to elicit, combine, and direct the energies of our people in the most effective manner. Members of New Testament churches should cooperate with one another in carrying forward the missionary, educational, and benevolent ministries for the extension of Christ’s Kingdom. 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.

Baptist churches or mission points/efforts that are Southern Baptist are recognized to be in association with, cooperation with, and of like faith and order with other Southern Baptist churches, associations, or conventions.

Whether a church is a new work or an existing, well-established congregation, each Baptist church should have a covenant. Church covenants are usually written, and each person must agree to the covenant as a condition of membership into a local congregation. Covenants are based upon and must reflect biblical principles. Although they may state the various beliefs and convictions of the congregation, the covenant of a Baptist church must minimally affirm three things: the Lordship of Jesus Christ over the church and its members; the divine inspiration, inerrancy, and authority of the Bible; and the membership of the church consisting only of regenerate persons who have professed their faith in believer's baptism by immersion.⁹

Church Discipline

Historically speaking, one of the convictions of early Baptists was their pledge to separate themselves from the world and to submit themselves to Christ and to each other. Church discipline was considered as one means of achieving this distinction. Baptists regarded this matter as so important that they defined church discipline as a mark of a true church and practiced it accordingly.¹⁰ Church discipline was considered first and foremost an act of obedience of to the teachings of Christ (Matt. 18:15-20). Discipline was also regarded as the

⁸Robert T. Handy, "The Philadelphia Tradition," in *Baptist Concepts of the Church*, ed. Winthrop S. Hudson (Philadelphia: Judson Press, 1959), 36.

⁹"Seven Guidelines for Church Planting which Reflect Baptist Ecclesiology," the Theological Studies Division, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Ft. Worth, Texas, September, 2004.

¹⁰The identification of proper church discipline as a mark of a New Testament church dates back as far as the Belgic Confession [1561]: "The marks by which the true Church is known are these: If the pure doctrine of the gospel is preached therein; if she maintains the pure administration of the sacraments as instituted by Christ; if church discipline is exercised in punishing of sin; in short, if all things are managed according to the Word of God, all things contrary thereto rejected, and Jesus Christ acknowledged as the only Head of the Church. Hereby the true Church may certainly be known, from which no man has a right to separate himself." "The Belgic Confession," in *The Creeds of Christendom*, ed. Philip Schaff, rev. David S. Schaff, vol. 3 (New York: Harper and Row, 1931), 419-420. Also, the *Abstract of Principles of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary* (1858) identifies the three essential marks of a New Testament church as order, discipline, and worship: "The Lord Jesus is the head of the Church, which is composed of all His true disciples, and in Him is invested supremely all power for its government. According to His commandment, Christians are to associate themselves into particular societies or churches; and to

means of preserving and facilitating fidelity to right doctrine, purity of life (holiness), and unity of fellowship.¹¹ Baptists believed that church discipline was the prerogative of a local church. They also contended that the diligent practice of discipline preserved the integrity of the Lord's Supper.¹²

Baptists sought to maintain a clear distinction between those that belonged to Christ and those that belonged to the world. Those desiring to join a Baptist church knew that their membership included accountability to the authority of that congregation. In addition, membership in a Baptist church required the voluntary submission of their beliefs and conduct to the judgment of the church. Baptists believed that the gospel message lost its integrity and power if the church did not remain distinct from the world. They also believed that church discipline was one means of preserving the integrity of the message and ministry of the local church.¹³

Regenerate Church Membership

The doctrine of a regenerate church for Baptists is the belief that local congregations of Baptists are ideally to be composed only of those who have and continue to give evidence of the new birth that comes from the Holy Spirit. In other words, the membership of visible, local congregations is to consist ideally only of persons who have received spiritual life and who live in fellowship with Christ and with Christian brothers and sisters. Although unregenerate people

each of these churches He hath given needful authority for administering that order, discipline and worship which He hath appointed. The regular officers of a Church are Bishops or Elders, and Deacons.

¹¹R. Albert Mohler, Jr. "Church Discipline: The Missing Mark," in *Polity: Biblical Arguments on How To Conduct Church Life*, ed. Mark E. Dever (Washington, D.C.: Center for Church Reform, 2001), 53-56.

¹²Greg Wills, "The Church: Baptists and Their Churches in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries," in *Polity: Biblical Arguments on How To Conduct Church Life*, ed. Mark E. Dever (Washington, D.C.: Center for Church Reform, 2001), 26-27.

¹³Wills, 28.

may be included in various meetings and ministries of a local church, the membership of the congregation is to be regenerate by definition. This doctrine impacts both the admission of members to a congregation and the proper maintenance of the church membership.

The doctrine of a regenerate church is foremost the attempt of Baptists to construct their local churches in submission to the authority of the New Testament. The concept of a regenerate church membership embodies Jesus' teachings on the necessity of the new birth (John 3:3, 7). Paul also alludes to the idea in his statements about "baptism into death" (Rom. 6:3) and "a new creation" (2 Cor. 5:17). The apostle Peter speaks of a "new birth" and being "born again" (1 Pet. 1:3, 23). The apostle John exhorts the believers, "let us love one another because love is from God, and everyone who loves has been born of God" (1 John 4:7). John also notes that "everyone who has been born of God does not sin, because His seed remains in him; he is not able to sin, because he has been born of God" (1 John 3:9). As a spiritual organization that is distinct from the world, none should be admitted to the membership or the spiritual privileges except those who have experienced the gift of spiritual life.

A regenerate church membership points to the personal nature of salvation. Regeneration implies repentance of sin, a changed nature, a new heart, and a surrendered will. A regenerate church membership also points to the voluntary surrender of an individual and the corporate body to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. The outward act of believer's baptism signifies the inner and personal transformation of regeneration. In this sense, the doctrine of a regenerate church membership encapsulates all that a church is to do and to be.

Belief in a regenerate church membership affirms the necessity of the moral purity of a church. The quest to have a church that follows the biblical model is a commitment to retain the distinction between the world and the covenant community of God. Failing to emphasize

regeneration as a prerequisite for church membership has historically resulted in the loss of an emphasis upon the church as a holy community and has given rise to moral corruption and heretical teachings within the fellowship. The distinctions between the redeemed and unredeemed are eventually blurred, if not lost altogether.

A regenerate church underscores the spiritual vitality of its members and the spiritual work of God. The integrity of the gospel message is protected and enhanced by a people who reflect the holy character of God. Further, the ability to function within a spiritual community presupposes the new birth. In addition, the church as represented in the New Testament necessitates spiritual birth in order to function within a spiritual community. No unregenerate person could appropriately relate to believers or credibly practice the spiritual disciplines or rightly participate in the spiritual ministry. All aspects of church life demand the regenerative work of the Holy Spirit in order to become a part and participant in a community of born again believers.

Congregational Polity

Congregational polity may be defined as “that form of church governance in which final human authority rests with the local or particular congregation when it gathers for decision-making. This means that decisions about membership, leadership, doctrine, worship, conduct, missions, finances, property, relationships, and the like are to be made by the gathered congregation except when such decisions have been delegated by the congregation to individual members or groups of members.”¹⁴ The intention of congregational polity is that the congregation governs itself under the lordship of Jesus Christ and the leadership of the Holy

¹⁴Garrett, “The Congregation-led Church: Congregational Polity,” in *Perspectives on Church Government: Five Views of Church Polity*, eds. Chad Owen Brand and R. Stanton Norman (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Pub., 2004), 157.

Spirit, under the delegated authority of pastors and deacons, but with no governing ecclesial bodies exerting authority over the church. All members participate in the decision-making process.¹⁵ The congregational polity of a church must embody democratic processes, be responsible to the lordship of Jesus Christ, and be guided by His authoritative word, the inerrant Scriptures.¹⁶

Autonomy

The BFM 2000 describes local churches as “autonomous” because this principle is believed to reflect the basic New Testament position on church government. The primary focus in Acts and the Epistles is the local church. The Bible makes no reference to any entity exerting authority above or beyond the local church. No instance of control over a local church by outside organizations or individuals is found. The apostles made recommendations and gave advice, but exercised no real rulership or control. Even Paul had to argue for his apostolic authority and beseech his readers to follow his teachings (Gal. 1:11-24).¹⁷

Autonomy means that each local church is self-governing. Each congregation makes its own decisions regarding all facets of church life, including personnel, fiscal, building/grounds, and other matter. A local congregation may freely choose to seek counsel from other churches and denominational officials, but the membership is not required or bound to follow that advice.

¹⁵Garrett, *Systematic Theology: Biblical, Historical, and Evangelical*, vol. 2. (2d. ed.: North Richland Hills, TX.: BIBAL Press, 2001), 644.

¹⁶“Seven Guidelines for Church Planting which Reflect Baptist Ecclesiology,” the Theological Studies Division, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Ft. Worth, Texas, September, 2004.

¹⁷Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, unabridged, 1 vol. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1991), 1079.

The decisions of a local church do not require outside ratification or approval.¹⁸

The autonomy of the local church means that each congregation can choose for itself how to relate to other congregations. A church may practice “independent congregational polity” in which it chooses “not to associate on a sustained basis with other congregations or to affiliate with and support denominational . . . bodies for missionary, educational, benevolent, or other purposes.” A congregation may practice “cooperative congregational polity” by freely associating “with other congregations ‘of like faith and order’ and to support denominational bodies for missionary, educational, benevolent, or other purposes.”¹⁹

Autonomy also shapes the internal structures of a congregation. Churches may choose to organize themselves in structures such as the pastor and deacons, the pastor-deacons-committees, or the pastor-deacons-committees-church council. Some Baptists contend that congregational polity permits a plural elder-led structure.²⁰ In each of these cases, the internal structures are subject to the final authority of the congregation.

The Goal of Congregational Polity

The ultimate goal of congregation polity is for each church to discern and follow the will of the Lord of the Church. With this in mind, certain qualifications of congregational polity should preclude some of the abuses often associated with this form of church governance. First, congregational polity does not mean that the church votes on the will of God. The goal is to ascertain what is the will of God and then to obey Him. Congregational polity ideally is to

¹⁸Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 1079.

¹⁹Garrett, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2, 644-45.

²⁰“Elder” is not an additional church office. The term “elder” is synonymous with the word “pastor.” The polity would thus be a plurality of pastors providing spiritual leadership and direction for a local church.

mature the believers as they corporately participate in the process. Second, congregational polity does not mean that the majority rules. While there may be a majority, if that vote is contrary to the will of God, the congregation walks in disobedience. Rather, the goal is for the direct rule of Christ to be manifested within the congregation. Congregational polity is the attempt of Baptist churches to realize this Christocracy and submit themselves to His rule.

Offices of the Church

Baptist ecclesiology has historically affirmed two Scriptural officers of a New Testament church. These officers are pastors and deacons.

Pastor/Elder/Overseer

The words pastor and elder are used in the New Testament to describe the same office. The concept “elder” focuses more upon the character of the man whereas the term “overseer” emphasizes more the function. These two terms came to be used interchangeably as they both referred to the leaders of the congregation. *Presbuteros* conveys the idea of a wise, mature leader who is honored and respected by those of the community by virtue of the integrity of his life. *Episkopos* looks more to the work of the individual whose duty it is to provide “oversight” over the congregation.²¹

Daniel Akin identifies eight functions given in the New Testament for the office of pastor/elder. First, the pastor has overall responsibility for the oversight and direction of the church (1 Peter 5:2; Heb. 13:17). Second, the pastor is responsible to seek in all matters the mind of Christ (who is the Head of the Church) through the guidance of the Holy Spirit and the

²¹Daniel Akin, “The Single-Elder-Led Church: The Bible’s Witness to a Congregational/Single-Elder-Led Polity,” in *Perspectives on Church Government: Five Views of Church Polity*, eds. Chad Owen Brand and R. Stanton Norman (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Pub., 2004), 53-54.

Word of God (Eph. 1:22; Col. 1:18; 1 Pet. 5:2). Third, the pastor must be apt to teach, able to exhort the church in sound doctrine and be ready to refute those who contradict the truth (Eph. 4:11; 1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:9). Fourth, the pastor shall provide instruction for the maintenance of healthy relationships within the church (Gal. 6:1; 1 Thess. 5:12; 2 Thess. 3:14-15). Fifth, the pastor shall exercise at least general oversight of the financial matters of the church (Acts 11:30). Sixth, the pastor should lead (with appropriate congregational input) in the appointing of deacons as necessary to accomplish the mission of the church (Acts 6:1-6). Seventh, the pastor is to lead by *example* (Heb. 13:7; 1 Pet. 5:2-3). Finally, the pastor is to lead in the exercise of church discipline (Gal. 6:1), but not to the exclusion of the entire body when warranted (Matt. 18; 1 Cor. 5; 2 Cor. 2).²²

Deacons

Deacons have played a significant role in Baptist churches throughout their existence. Early American Baptists identified three “tables” of service for deaconate. Deacons were to care for the table of the Lord’s Supper, a ministry of administration over the ordinance. Deacons were also charged with the table for the poor, a ministry of benevolence and mercy. Finally, deacons were to exercise care for the table of the pastor, referring to their support and service in some aspects of pastoral ministry.²³

The office of deacon is not one of rule but of service, both to the physical and spiritual needs of the congregation. Just as the Lord became a “servant” (*diakonon*) (Rom. 15:8; see also Matt 20:28; Mark 10:45; John 13:1-17), so also deacons are to serve the congregation under the

²²Akin, “Single-Elder-Led Church,” 54-55.

²³Garrett, “The Congregation-Led Church,” 188.

supervision of the pastor. Diaconal service should enable the pastor to devote himself to prayer for the congregation and to oversight of the ministry of the Word (Acts 6:4). Deacons are to discharge their duties to the spiritual and material needs of the congregation and, as service permits, to the spiritual and material needs of the world. Inferences drawn from the qualifications for deacons (1 Tim. 3:8-13) suggest that deacons could have some oversight for the church's finances and other administrative related responsibilities. In general, the office of deacon is one of "sympathy and service," after the example of the Lord Jesus, especially in their helping one another in time of need.

The BFM 2000 leaves open the issue of whether or not women can serve as deaconesses in SBC churches. My position is that, if a local church ordains its deacons, then women cannot serve in this capacity. In SBC life, ordination carries with it implications of authority and oversight, and I believe the Bible relegates authority and oversight to men (I Timothy 2:12-15.) If a church, however, does not ordain its deacons, then the authority-oversight prohibitions would not apply. In that case, the generic meaning of the term 'deacon' (Greek: diakonia) is that of a servant or a table waiter. Thus, any member of the congregation is qualified to serve. Since there is no clear instance recorded in Scripture of the presence of female deacons, I will use masculine language in my references to deacons.

Function versus Office

Are "pastor" and "deacon" offices mandated in the New Testament, or are oversight and service functions that a church simply needs to ensure occur? To ask the question another way, can a group of believers be a "church" without the official presence of "pastor" and "deacon?" Does the New Testament require that a local church have pastor(s) and deacons?

Churches must ensure that their ministries are biblically faithful and appropriately functional. Certain scriptural passages indicate, however, that having the right person to perform those duties is as equally significant. For example, in Acts 13:1-3, the Holy Spirit leads the believers at Antioch to set apart Barnabas and Saul for a particular mission endeavor. This passage indicates that God had a unique calling for these two men; not just anyone would do. Only Saul and Barnabas were consecrated by the Spirit for the particular task. If ministry-function were the only consideration, then the matter of who would perform the particular ministry-function would be relatively inconsequential. Yet, these verses suggest that God called Barnabas and Saul because they were the most suitable and appropriately gifted for the task at hand. In addition, the church at Antioch affirmed the call of these two men by the laying on of hands, publicly recognizing the Spirit's missionary call of these men. The emphasis in Acts 13 is both upon the ministry need and upon those uniquely called and qualified to fulfill the particular ministry.

The passages that list the qualifications for overseers (1 Tim. 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9) and for deacons (1 Tim. 3:8-14) are even clearer. Paul's discussion focuses on qualifications for overseers and deacons, not upon their duties. Although Paul does mention that the overseer must be able to teach, he does not give a list of responsibilities; these must be inferred from the names of the offices, the qualifications themselves, and other passages of Scripture (cf. 1 Tim. 5:17).²⁴ The list of qualifications indicates that certain individuals would be qualified to serve and others would not. Paul places as much importance on the quality of character as he does upon the nature of the duty. If the emphasis was only upon function, qualifications would be of secondary importance; the point would be getting the job done, not the character of the man who performs

²⁴Thomas D. Lea and Hayne P. Griffin, Jr. *1, 2 Timothy, Titus*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman Press., 1992), 105-06.

the duty. These and similar passages (cf. Acts 6:36) suggest, however, that certain ministries of a church can only be performed by those who meet the biblical qualifications. If no qualified, God-called men were found to serve as overseer or deacon, the implication is that these duties would be left unattended. A person who attempts to serve as overseer or deacon and who does not meet the biblical qualifications is disobedient to the Word of God. Ministry-function is not the only concern for the ministry of a church; the right man to perform the duties is equally as important. These considerations indicate that pastor and deacon are not simply “teaching and serving” functions but rather offices that require a qualified man to serve in these roles.

Another issue on the matter of church officers is the matter of definition; that is, can a church be a church without these offices? Can a group of believers be regarded as a church as long as they have “teaching and serving” functions, or must they have clearly identified men serving in publicly recognized roles as pastor and deacon? Two considerations suggest that these officers are essential and definitive for a group to be and function as a New Testament church. First, as the early church developed, where clear evidence exists on the subject, the Bible indicates that qualified men served as deacons (Acts 6) and overseers (Acts 20). By the time that Paul wrote the Pastoral epistles, the expectation was that elders and deacons were essential for the proper function of a church. Paul wrote to Titus in part to instruct him to “set right what was left undone and . . . to appoint elders in every town” (Titus 1:5). The well-being and vitality of the churches in Crete necessitated the right men serving in offices. In addition, the implications of 1 Timothy 3:1-13 is that both overseer and deacon are necessary and definitive for a group of believers to function as a church and to be obedient to the instruction of God. Where the Bible speaks on the matter, qualified men perform the ministry of the Word and the ministry of service.

A second consideration is the need for order within the life of a church. A church officer

is a man who has been God-called and God-equipped and who has been publicly recognized by the church to perform certain functions for the benefit of the whole church. In Baptist life, pastors and deacons are recognized as officers of a New Testament church. The men who assume these responsibilities are publicly recognized (usually by ordination) by a church as qualified to serve in these roles. Public recognition is important in order to fulfill their responsibilities in an orderly manner. If public recognition and affirmation of church officers were absent, then the congregation would not know from week to week who would fulfill or perform the duties associated with these ministries. Several people could show up on any given Sunday ready to give the sermon. Conversely, no one could come prepared to bring a message from God's word. Further, those who do not meet the biblical qualifications could attempt to assume these ministry responsibilities. The orderly function of a church necessitates that those men called of God to serve in these capacities be formally recognized by a church as qualified to be an overseer or a deacon. Public recognition of these offices is important because of the leadership roles attached to these duties. The people need to know and affirm who their leaders are. Certain ministries do not require public affirmation, but because of the importance and leadership biblically attached to pastor and deacon, the orderly leadership of a congregation requires the public recognition of pastor and deacon as offices of a New Testament church.²⁵

The aforementioned passages regarding pastors and deacons are both descriptive *and* prescriptive. It is incorrect to say, however, that a church without these biblical offices is automatically invalid. The offices of pastor and deacon should be present, but situations or occasions may occur when churches may find themselves without pastors and deacons. On such occasions, these congregations can still function as a church (else why would Paul appoint or instruct others to appoint elders if there was no church, and why would the apostles appoint

²⁵Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 905.

deacons to serve the needs of the church?). Diligent effort should be made by the congregation, however, to secure pastoral leadership and diaconal service when the offices are vacant. These offices are normative, and New Testament churches should seek as expeditiously as possible to raise up qualified men to serve in these biblically mandated roles.

Ordinances of a Baptist Church

The BFM 2000 states that a Baptist church observes “the two ordinances of Christ.” An ordinance is a practice established by Jesus Christ that commemorates and symbolizes some aspect of His atoning sacrifice or redeeming work. An ordinance differs from a sacrament in that the latter is believed to bring the participant somehow within the sphere of grace. Ordinances are not considered to impart any type of grace.

Most Baptists traditionally advocate two ordinances: baptism and the Lord’s Supper. In most Christian denominations, the beliefs about the nature of one ordinance or sacrament are often the same for the other ordinances or sacraments. Baptists hold to a commemorative/symbolic view of both of the ordinance of baptism and the Lord’s Supper.²⁶

Believer’s Baptism by Immersion

Baptists believe that they are following the biblical pattern and teaching when they practice the immersion of believers in water as baptism. Baptists believe that the New Testament teaches that only baptized believers were admitted into the membership of their congregations. An “unbaptized believer” is a foreign concept to the New Testament and is considered antithetical to the teachings of the Bible. “All who became members of the primitive churches were admitted by immersion; and as none were admitted but believers, none but believers were

²⁶Norman, *More Than Just a Name*, 101-02.

immersed.”²⁷ “Baptism occupied an important place in the witness and practice of the New Testament church. It was regarded as the inevitable concomitant of Church membership, and it is unlikely that anyone was admitted into the Church’s fellowship without it.”²⁸

Baptists have always attempted to follow biblical prescriptions for the practice of baptism. With regard to the mode, Baptists contend that the rite of baptism is by immersion. They assert that the New Testament mode is by immersion. No biblical evidence exists for baptism by sprinkling or pouring. To practice another mode for the ordinance of baptism would be to disobey the Bible’s teachings on the manner and destroy the meaning of the rite.²⁹ With regard to the subject, Baptists believe that a saving experience with Christ is the prerequisite for baptism. Baptism without a conscious, willful decision to follow Christ is nonsensical. Because baptism symbolizes faith, repentance, surrender, purity, etc., Baptists believe that the only subjects of baptism are believers who are capable of professing their own faith. Baptists have almost universally discounted infant baptism, believing that the practice is a violation of the teachings of the New Testament and the essence of the salvation of the individual. Baptists have classically understood infant baptism to rest upon human tradition rather than biblical teaching. Baptism is thus the symbolic expression of a person’s conversion. “The only question involved is the candidate’s personal profession of faith in Christ, of which Baptism is intended to be the outward and visible sign. Baptism, as Baptists see it, is meant for believers and believers only, and they are convinced that the New Testament speaks with one voice on the point.”³⁰ Contrary

²⁷John Quincy Adams, *Baptists the Only Thorough Religious Reformers*, rev. ed. (New York: Sheldon & Co., 1876), 152.

²⁸Henry Cook, *What Baptists Stand For* (London: Kingsgate Press, 1947), 135.

²⁹E. Y. Mullins, *The Axioms of Religion: A New Interpretation of the Baptist Faith* (Philadelphia: Griffith & Rowland, 1980), 166.

³⁰Cook, *What Baptists Stand For*, 135.

to popular perception, Baptists do not assert the baptism of adults; rather, Baptists contend for the baptism of believers.

The baptism of believers by immersion conveys several important theological truths. Baptism expresses that the believer has entered into a new spiritual relationship with God. Baptism symbolizes the purification of the believer from sin and regeneration by the power of the Holy Spirit. Baptism points to the union of the believer with Christ; the person now identifies with the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (dying to self and sin and living for Christ). Baptism also points to the hope of the resurrection of the body from the dead. Baptists reject any interpretations that suggest that baptism has regenerative power. Baptism is not “magical;” the water does not wash away sin nor does it dispense grace. Baptism is the immersion in water of a person who is already born again and symbolizes death to sin and resurrection to a new life.³¹ Baptism does not produce repentance or faith, but it does express these realities. Baptism is the first step of discipleship and is the believer’s profession of faith in Jesus Christ.³²

Lord’s Supper

The second ordinance of a Baptist church is the Lord’s Supper. The Lord’s Supper is a rite which Christ Himself established for the church to practice as a commemoration of His death and is closely linked with the Jewish Passover meal (Matt. 26:17-30; Mk. 14:12-26; Lk. 22:7-23). Within Christendom, the ritual with its diverse meanings is designated as Holy Communion, the Mass, and the Eucharist. The majority of Baptists refer to the observance as the Lord’s Supper.

³¹Robert A. Baker, *The Baptist March in History* (Nashville: Convention Press, 1958), 8.

³²*Baptist Why and Why Not* (Nashville: The Sunday School Boards of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1900), 183-84.

The Scriptural references state that Jesus told His disciples, as often and whenever they observed the rite, to remember His sacrificial death and to anticipate a future observance together with Him and all His followers.

Baptists believe that several themes are associated with and identified by the observance of the Lord's Supper. The first theme is remembrance and reenactment. Participants in the Lord's Supper are to remember Jesus, especially His sacrificial death on the cross. As the partakers "remember" what Christ has done, they also commemoratively re-enact the events of the crucifixion. A second motif is thanksgiving. Believers are not only to thank God for the elements of the Supper of which they partake but also to thank God for the sacrifice of Christ for the forgiveness of their sins. A third tenet of the Lord's Supper is communion, or fellowship. Baptists believe that those who participate in the Supper in a local church declare their personal and corporate union with Christ as well as their fellowship with one another. All figuratively partake of the single body and blood of Christ. The sharing of the cup and the bread underscores that the many have become one in Christ. Finally, the Lord's Supper anticipates and proclaims the Lord's second coming. The meal is a visible proclamation of the substitutionary death of Jesus Christ. The supper also proclaims that the same Lord who died, was raised, and ascended to the Father will return in triumph, blessing, and judgment.³³

Baptist churches are not uniform on the elements used in or the frequency of the observance of the Lord's Supper. Because of the strong temperance convictions in Baptist life, most Baptist churches use unfermented grape juice for the cup. Some Baptists insist that the bread be unleavened, other Baptists use some form of leavened bread, and some use broken crackers. Some Baptists use a single loaf of bread, from which each participant tears a piece, as

³³Garrett, *Systematic Theology*, 611-12.

a means of symbolizing their union. Some Baptists observe the Lord's Supper monthly, other Baptist churches have the Supper once a quarter.

Baptists restrict participation in the Lord's Supper to Christians who have been biblically baptized and are in right fellowship with their local churches. Those who come to the Lord's Table must have professed their faith in baptism. The baptism is of believer's only and must be by immersion. In addition, church discipline has been tied to the Lord's Supper. Only those who are in right fellowship with their local churches are invited to participate in the ritual. Those who are subject to the disciplinary act of a local church are not to partake of the Lord's Table. Upon repentance and restoration, those who had previously been denied access to the Lord's Table may return.

Mission of the Church

The BFM 2000 states that a Baptist church should seek "to extend the gospel to the ends of the earth," that is, "to make disciples of all nations" (Matt. 28:19). The task of extending the gospel (or making disciples) is achieved through *worship, proclamation* and *witness, nurture* and *education*, and *ministry*.³⁴ These purposes are not only for the benefit of the membership of the church, but also to reach the greater community—"unto all the world." The purpose of the church is to be implemented with a sense of mission according to the calling of God. Extending the gospel is the ministry of the Church to the world. The declaration that Jesus Christ is the risen Savior and reigning Lord is central to all endeavors.³⁵

Worship is encountering God in experiences that deepen a Christian's faith and

³⁴Southern Baptist Inter-Agency Council, "Denominational Definition of a Church" (Nashville: The Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1986), 11. The following summary of the purposes of a Baptist church are excerpted from this document. In this document, evangelism and missions were included in the definitions of proclamation and witness.

strengthen his service and response to mission. Worship is preparatory and foundational to and inherent in the functions of proclamation and witnessing, nurturing and educating, and ministry. The worship of the Triune God is not, however, simply a means to an end; worship is in itself an essential aspect of the purpose of the church.³⁶ The church is to worship the Living God. God has destined and appointed believers in Christ “to live for the praise of His glory” (Eph. 1:12).

Another purpose of the church is proclamation and witness. Jesus came preaching, calling for repentance and obedience to God’s kingly rule (Mark 1:14). One of His first acts was to call out followers who would share this mission (Mark 1:16-20). He not only taught His disciples essential truths but He sent them out on mission to proclaim the kingdom of God and to give witness to the compassion and power of the Father (Matt. 10:5-15; Mark 6:7-13; Luke 9:1-6; 10:1-18). After His resurrection, He commissioned them to be witnesses of the good news of God’s saving act of redemption through Jesus Christ, to make disciples everywhere, and to ground new converts in His teaching (Luke 24:46-48; Matt. 28:18-20; John 20:21). The church is to communicate the gospel not only to persons nearby, but also to persons wherever they are, to the uttermost part of the earth (Acts 1:8). Proclamation and witness, therefore, will carry the church beyond geographic boundaries and the members of the local church body.

Implementation of Jesus’ commission includes penetrating new frontiers with the gospel, acting out of a belief that the field is the whole world.³⁷

Nurture and education are also primary tasks of a Baptist church. Nurture and education includes the whole process by which the church prepared persons for the acceptance of Christ,

³⁵Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 868.

³⁶Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 867.

³⁷Southern Baptist Inter-Agency Council, “Denominational Definition of a Church,” 9.

and following that, guided their development toward the goal of Christian maturity. Believers and congregations were expected to grow in grace and knowledge toward full maturity in Christ (2 Pet. 3:18; Eph. 4:11-13). Although individuals were responsible for their Christian growth and action (2 Tim. 2:15; 2 Pet. 1:5-11), the church was enjoined to facilitate these. Church leaders had the express task of feeding the flock (John 21:15-17; 1 Pet. 5:2; Acts 20:28), and the pastor-teacher had heavy responsibility for “equipping the saints for ministry” (Eph. 4:11-13). Nurture and education are the two sides of one coin. Nurture is the sum of experiences that nourish, modify, and develop individuals within a fellowship. Education involves the means provided for growth in knowledge, wisdom, moral righteousness, and performance. Nurture and education are concerned for the development of competent, full grown Christians who can likewise share in the missional purposes of the church.³⁸

A final purpose of the church is ministry. The church receives its ministry from Jesus Christ. He is forever the example of sacrificial, self-giving love. He “went about doing good” (Acts 10:38), ministering to human needs, challenging abuses of power, instructing His followers to forget themselves and give themselves in a gracious service to others (Matt. 20:25-28; John 13:15). The ministry to which Christ calls His followers takes many forms (Matt. 25:34-40), but its distinctiveness rests in the fact that it is done in His name and for His glory. The ministry of God’s people (*diakonia*) is always by the mercy of God (2 Cor. 4:1), and it must reflect the spirit of Christ.³⁹

Every believer is called and equipped by God to share in the ministry of the Church. The believer’s ministry involves an understanding of calling, vocation, giftedness, and the importance

³⁸Southern Baptist Inter-Agency Council, “Denominational Definition of a Church,” 9.

³⁹Southern Baptist Inter-Agency Council, “Denominational Definition of a Church,” 11.

of daily work. Each person's ministry involves practical acts, Christians helping Christians who are in need. It also involves the church, individually and collectively, in doing good to all persons (see Gal. 6:10) both through direct efforts and through cooperative efforts with other churches. Following Jesus' example, a church seeks to minister to the whole person. This means a concern for the spiritual, mental, emotional, and physical welfare of persons, both within and without the church (Acts 3:6; 6:1-6; 16:16-18; 19:11-12; Rom. 15:25-27). "Faith working through love" makes us "servants of one another" (Gal. 5:6, 13). This spirit in us leads to "good works and acts of charity" (Acts 9:36). True ministry in Christ's name calls for positive action, not mere verbal exercises (Jas. 2:14-17).⁴⁰

These ecclesiological purposes are to be a regular part of the life and practice of a local Baptist church. The regular activities of a church should include: 1) the worship of God, involving prayer, hymns and spiritual songs, the reading of Scripture, the preaching of Scripture, and the observance of baptism and the Lord's Supper; 2) the edification of believers through corporate worship, regular preaching and teaching of Scripture, and varieties of service through which the commandments of Christ are fulfilled and the gifts of church members are exercised; and 3) the evangelism of the lost and missional outreach to establish churches and build up believers around the world in cooperation with like-minded churches.⁴¹

All endeavors of a Baptist church can be broadly categorized under one or more of these missional tasks. Each of these purposes is equally important and necessary. The task of a Baptist church is to keep these in balance in accordance with the Scriptural emphases placed upon each ministry and in accordance with the gifting of the Holy Spirit for each local church.

⁴⁰Southern Baptist Inter-Agency Council, "Denominational Definition of a Church," 11.

⁴¹"Seven Guidelines for Church Planting which Reflect Baptist Ecclesiology," the Theological Studies Division, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Ft. Worth, Texas, September, 2004.

Summary

Based upon the previous discussion, a Baptist church is defined by the following traits:

- Committed to the authority of Scripture for faith and practice while recognizing that all scripture is God-breathed
- Submitted to the Lordship of Jesus Christ
- Visible, local body that is independent and autonomous
- Composed of members who are regenerated by the Holy Spirit
- Members covenanted together voluntarily for worship of and service to God
- Observes the two ordinances of Christ
 - Baptism of believers by immersion as profession of faith in Christ as initiatory rite for membership
 - Lord's Supper regularly observed by members in good standing as commemoration of the sacrifice of Christ
- Practices congregational polity
- Practices church discipline
- Scriptural officers are men who serve as pastors and deacons
- Invisible, universal body that includes all the redeemed of all the ages

The Genius of Baptist Ecclesiology

The distinctive theological identity of Baptists is enmeshed in their doctrine of the church. Baptists have always been concerned that the church should reflect God's intentions as much as possible. The conviction that a church should rest upon the authority of the New Testament and not upon human tradition is what led those early Baptists to separate from other Christian denominations and to form their own churches. Baptist ecclesiology is the attempt of Baptists to reflect their obedience and submission to biblical authority.

Throughout their history, Baptist churches have enjoyed both uniformity and diversity in expression. With regard to uniformity, Baptist churches normally share the theological distinctives mentioned and discussed herein. Baptists have common theological convictions, and these common convictions are typically found in most Baptist churches. With regard to diversity, each Baptist church is as unique as the individuals who constitute its membership.

Differing contexts and cultures have necessitated that Baptists adapt their methodologies and ministries in ways that best address the contextual concerns confronting them.

This is the genius of Baptist ecclesiology. The distinctive identity of Baptists is dynamic enough to engage any culture or contextual challenge in thoughtful and meaningful ways. At the same time, the distinctive identify of Baptists as expressed in their ecclesiology is stable enough to ensure that all Baptists share the common theological identity that makes them Baptist. In a paradoxical sense, all Baptist churches are alike, yet all Baptist churches are different.

This document was authored by Dr. Stan Norman, Director of the Baptist Center for Theology and Ministry at the New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary. He is the author of the forthcoming book *The Baptist Way: Distinctives of a Baptist Church* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2005), and is passionate about Baptist identity.

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