

The Baptist Faith and Message:

VI. The Church, part I

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.

This section of the *BF&M* addresses Baptist polity. Polity is the term used to describe how a church is structured and governed. In this section, the church is defined in two ways: first, as the local church and, secondly, as the universal church. The Greek word translated as “church” in the New Testament is “ekklesia,” which means assembly. Based on this word, the study of church doctrine has been termed “ecclesiology.” Different ecclesiological views are most responsible for the existence of different denominations. Ecclesiology determines how we govern within the church, who can be part of the church, who and how we baptize, who can participate in communion, who leads the church, what spiritual gifts are available to the church, and our forms and styles of worship. Clearly, the opportunities for differing opinions are manifold. God help us!

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Immediately, the *BF&M* identifies Southern Baptist churches as New Testament churches. In other words, we rely on the New Testament as our authority for faith and practice. A book written by George W. McDaniel and published in 1919 by The Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention says it this way: “The New Testament is the only law of Christianity. The Old Testament is equally the word of God, but it was typical and is fulfilled in the New. It was the schoolmaster to lead us to Christ. Now we have Christ, who is our only law-giver and the only Lord of the conscience. Baptists do not go to the Old but to the New Testament to find the laws of the church and its institutions.”

One’s understanding of the relationship of the old covenant (particularly the ten commandments) to the new covenant has a huge effect on one’s ecclesiology. There are three major ways to view the relationship of the two covenants: covenant theology, new covenant theology, and dispensationalism. Most would say that the first two views have been around since the early church. Dispensationalism, however, is considered by most to be a relatively recent development only having been around since the 1830s. Although not the case in its early years, it is probably safe to say that the majority of SBC churches currently subscribe to the dispensational view of the covenants. Within the last few years, there have been efforts to revise the *BF&M* to establish the dispensational premillennial end times view (i.e., a pre-tribulation rapture of the church prior to “the thousand year reign of Christ on earth”) as the official SBC view.

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I believe that it is in the best interest of the Convention to leave the *BF&M* silent in regard to any particular view of the end times.

Covenant theology sees the new covenant as a new administration of the old covenant, again, primarily the Mosaic covenant. It sees continuity of the old as carried on in the new. Covenant theology tends to produce church governance modeled after Judaism. Local churches are under the authority of higher governing bodies with a ministerial hierarchy. Ministers are appointed, for example, by a synod or a presbytery. Church discipline can be carried out by the governing body in addition to the local body. Also, most denominations born out of the covenant theological understanding believe that the children of church members are automatically part of the church. Therefore, they baptize infants because they equate it with old covenant circumcision of the infant as the basis for admission into the church. Although not so much now, during the Reformation and many years afterwards, covenant theology led to the belief that the church is a national institution and should incorporate all citizens. This led to the church being defined by geographic boundaries such as a diocese or Parrish. It also placed secular government under the authority of the church. For example, if you missed church, the sheriff could arrest you. If you failed to have your baby baptized in a timely manner, the sheriff would come for you. During this time, Christians who had new covenant perspectives were often tortured, maimed, or killed by burning or drowning. The new covenant followers of that time were referred to as Anabaptists (lit., re-baptizers) known for rejecting infant baptism and baptizing only believers. New covenant theology sees the new covenant as separate and distinct from the old covenant with the old having been fulfilled in Christ. It sees a discontinuity between the covenants.

Dispensationalism has the old covenant and new covenant as separate but running concurrently. It sees them as on-going parallel covenants: the old for national Israel and the new for the gentile church. (In this writer's opinion, as well as many other Baptists living or dead, dispensationalism misunderstands the relation of the old and new covenants, which causes it to misidentify who is properly the church and also leads to an incorrect understanding of the Bible's teaching on the end times.)

Local church autonomy (lit., self-governing) is a Baptist distinctive and is grounded in new covenant thinking. Authority to admit members, discipline members, dismiss members, and select its officers resides solely within the local congregation. Although Baptist churches are cooperative, no Baptist church has power over or authority in another church. Neither does the Southern Baptist Convention have any spiritual authority over the churches which voluntarily participate in the convention. It is a secular organization of autonomous spiritual institutions that are answerable only to Christ by the Word. However, like any other organization, the SBC has the right to break association with churches that cease to hold to the core values of the SBC, but this should not be equated with church discipline. Baptists do not look to counsels of men or tradition, but to decide matters of faith and practice and to resolve all disputes, we ask "what sayeth Scripture."

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...baptized believers, associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the gospel;

According to the *BF&M*, a person must be a baptized believer to be a member of a Baptist church. Believer baptism by immersion is the distinctive for which Baptists are so called. Although the *BF&M* does not state it here, the sequence in which belief and baptism occurs is essential to proper understanding of baptism. A “baptized believer” could be a person who believed and was then baptized or a person who was “baptized” at some time in their life and later became a believer. Persons can only be considered baptized when their belief precedes their immersion in water in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. It is only for the sake of discussion with our fellow Christians in other denominations that we refer to anything else as baptism. We associate ourselves around a common faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ. The *BF&M* uses the term “covenant” to point out the seriousness and permanence of our association with Christ and our commitment to each other.

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.

The two ordinances of Christ are baptism and the Lord’s Supper. The latter is also called communion. Note that the *BF&M* does not refer to either ordinance as a sacrament. The two ordinances are treated separately later in Section VII. So, we will not elaborate on these at the present other than to say that the order of their observance is also important. In the NT, baptism appears to precede participation in the Lord’s Supper. However, there is on-going debate whether baptism is prerequisite to be admitted to the Lord’s Table (i.e., partake in the Lord’s Supper). More on that later.

In regard to “His laws,” we are governed by Christ’s laws, not Moses’s laws, not men’s traditions, and certainly not by new revelations. Baptists are careful not to impose on the church any laws that are not clearly taught by Christ. Baptists are often painted with the brush of “legalism.” Care must be taken not to make every phrase that Jesus uttered or action he took into a law. Baptists believe that “all things are legal, but not everything is expedient.” When people live by the Spirit and walk in the Spirit, laws against “bad” behaviors are not needed. Be not drunk with wine, but filled with the Spirit!

Although spiritual gifts are given to individuals, many of the gifts are intended by God to be exercised corporately within the local body. This is clearly taught in Paul’s epistles in which he compares spiritual gifts to various body parts. The greatest right and privilege in the church is participation in the Lord’s Supper. The next greatest privilege is to spread the gospel to the ends of the earth. In keeping with the great commission, all members of Southern Baptist churches are encouraged to spread the gospel wherever they go. In the days of the Reformation, “lay persons” were severely punished for preaching or spreading the gospel. As one example, simply for doing what we now call witnessing, a woman was burned at the stake after first having her tongue screwed to the roof of her mouth. The “church” feared that she would speak the gospel as she burned. Her son sifted through her ashes and found that screw which he saved in her memory. So many things that we Baptists take for granted have come at a tremendous price in human suffering.

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Let us, therefore, hold fast to those biblical principles that our Baptist forebears held with conviction unto death.