

The REVIEW



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POLITY

On Baptist Church Polity

Laurence Brown

Pastor of First Baptist Church, North Conway, NH

There seems to be a growing movement afoot to modify historic Baptist church polity. As Bible-believing Baptists, we have always been considered the “odd man out” by others (Presbyterians, Methodists, Bible churches, etc.). We certainly respect the Christian liberty of all believers to interpret the Word in whatever way seems fit to the individual, the congregation or the tradition. However, the recent development seems to be an oxymoronic Reformed Baptist attempt to meld an erroneous view of eldership with the historic Baptist view on church organization.

Some have suggested that church polity is a “non-essential” in terms of its relative significance. It is true that one need not have an accurate understanding of the Bible’s teaching on church structure for salvation. When I witness to a man about his need for faith in Jesus Christ, I do not care whether he believes in two local church offices or twenty. What he needs is the Lord Jesus Christ as his Savior! However, once I am dealing with a Christian, I care very much what he believes about church polity. I want him to be in the center of God’s will. Matthew 23:23 says, “*Woe to you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others*” (NASB). Polity is not the most critical thing; according to the

words of our Savior, there are both “weightier” matters and “others.” However, both need to be observed for complete Bible obedience. Polity does matter.

The view that a plurality of lay-elders in the church is mandated by the Scriptures seems to be gaining ground among Baptists. This encroachment of Presbyterian polity appears to be taking shape in two general forms. The first is the “traditional” elder-rule arrangement, in which a board or council of elders governs nearly every facet of church life, with almost no congregational involvement. The second is a “modified” elder-rule system in which the congregation is led by a council of elders. In both cases, normally this council is composed of a teaching elder (also sometimes called the “minister” or “pastor”) and ruling elders. The key is that a plurality is mandatory. In fact, I have had an elder-rule proponent tell me that a church which has only one pastor, regardless of whether or not the pastor is fully supported by the congregation, and regardless of its ministry, size, age or outreach, is only a “mission” work – not yet fully a true

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church.

The elder-rule philosophy is associated with several weaknesses in thinking. The first is that it does not abide by the basic hermeneutical principle of the normative text. It is a foundational tenet of understanding Scripture that we use the clear, direct passage to interpret the more obscure, oblique texts. I Timothy, by its own words, was written so

that we might understand how we are to organize ourselves and behave in the church, God’s household. In I Timothy chapter three, we have the normal arrangement for polity: a singular pastor and a plurality of deacons. (All the verbs, nouns and pronouns in the first seven verses, dealing with the bishop, are singular; all the verbs, nouns and pronouns dealing with the deacons in verses eight through thirteen are plural.) The historic Baptist structure has accorded itself with this principle; the elder-rule position must ignore it or do grammatical gymnastics to get around it.

Another flaw in the elder-rule philosophy is the elimination or devaluing of the divine call to the gospel ministry. Appointing lay-elders to the leadership of the church necessitates retooling our idea of God’s vocational call to full-time preaching and shepherding. According to the plurality people, the key ingredient to becoming an elder is not a definitive designation from God to an individual, but rather the desire on the part of the man to lead as a bishop (from I Timothy 3:1). Historically, Baptists have understood that God does indeed call qualified men to the ministry to serve vocationally as shepherds; ordinations have functioned primarily to identify that call in men and secondarily to screen for orthodoxy. Is any man who meets the I Timothy 3:1-7 standards, and who says he desires to serve, permitted to be an “elder”? The elder-rule system says “yes.” Historic Baptist orthodoxy says, “let us see the demonstration of God’s call to full-time vocational service in his life.” The elder-rule paradigm encourages the development of lay-leadership – something many of us yearn for – but it does so at the expense of the God-called undershepherd. His role, value, and authority are minimized.

It should also be pointed out that it is difficult to avoid a de facto three-office polity when the elder rule position is applied. The Presbyterian system of teaching elder, ruler elders and deacons is actually one which appeals to many pastors, this one included. What preacher who loves the

Book wouldn't be thrilled to have other guys to answer the phone, run the programs and discipline the naughty sheep, if he could just study and preach the Word! It sounds like a dream job to me. No wonder Presbyterians don't want to change their polity. The question is not, does it work? Nor is the question, does it appeal to us? The question is, does the Bible teach it? There are two and only two mandated offices in I Timothy chapter three; there are no other ecclesiastical passages that modify our understanding of the two-office system.

Actually, Baptist polity has no problem with plurality of elders as long as it is understood that those elders are also bishops and shepherds. In other words, they cannot be so-called "lay-elders." They must be qualified in, and given responsibilities of, preaching, administration, counseling, living "of the gospel," teaching, leading, etc. We don't mind the historic terminology of "elder," as long as we acknowledge he is not a "lay-elder" but rather an elder/pastor/bishop. Observe also the singular leadership of James, the pastor of the Jerusalem church, in Acts chapter fifteen. In addition, I Peter 5:5 directs that the junior elders should submit to the senior ones. The Bible does teach that a singular senior pastor is correct; a church may choose to have as many pastors as it wants or can afford to support.

Certainly there are other dangers to our historic Baptist polity, and to the health of our local churches. At least as dangerous as what we are here considering is the travesty of tyrannical, self-serving pastors and deacon-board run congregations. Both of these are certainly dishonoring to our Head. But let us beware the creeping shift in polity that may rob us of our Savior's commendation when He calls us home to Himself. I desire for myself, my friends and the flock God has called me to protect, that we obey the Savior's directives in both great matters and small. May the Lord find us faithful.

MODERATOR'S REPORT

Reflections

Jeff Bailey,
Pastor of Grace Baptist Church Attleboro, MA

As I am writing this, I am reflecting on the passing of another Resurrection Day service. If your Church is anything like mine, I am sure that you saw some visitors in the service today. It is also likely that you saw some familiar faces that you do not see very often.

Each Sunday evening I sit and wind down, and often I am quite critical of my ministry during that day: today was no different. I wonder whether or not I could have done just a little bit more to enhance the message, or perhaps I could have been a little more diligent in my evangelistic opportunities. Perhaps then, I would have had a larger crowd during the services, Perhaps then I could consider the day to be a success. Perhaps, but not likely.

Defining success is a very difficult proposition at times. During the last twelve months, Grace Baptist Church of Attleboro has seen God do some tremendous things. We purchased a 60,000 square-foot building on more than nine acres of land for a price that is less than the cost of a single family home in our area. Our church has grown to the point where our Sunday morning and evening services are nearly full. Our Christian school, which began in 2001 with eleven students, already has 110 enrolled for fall 2004. My staff has grown from two to fourteen in the last year. By common measure, I am a success.

Yet it is undeniable that success has nothing to do with any of these measures. Attendance, offering figures, number of baptisms, and decisions are not the measure of our success. These are measures of God's faithfulness, but they do not define His faithfulness. Success, I believe, is found in my faithfulness and adherence to the purpose for which Christ called me into the ministry. Paul said in Romans 1 that his calling was for the purpose of glorifying God in the propagation of the glorious gospel of Jesus Christ. Anything short of that standard is failure whatever the outward signs may say. We cannot measure ourselves by earthly standards, nor can we compare ourselves to others.

Many churches have recently dismissed pastors because of a lack of results in comparison to other works around the area. About two years ago a couple from this ministry departed to another work citing the lack of results. By their own definition, there is no question that we were unsuccess-

If we do not wish our church ministries to be judged on such matters, why do we define success for the IBFNA by the numbers of people that attend our annual conference?

ful in our efforts to reach our community. Shortly after they left, we started to see the results that they were seeking. They were not the cause of the lack of results, but the timing does illustrate that God pours his favors in His own time, in His own way, and for His own glory according to His good pleasure. We all believe this truth and we do not wish to be judged on external features alone.

If we do not wish our church ministries to be judged on such

matters, why do we define success for the IBFNA by the numbers of people that attend our annual conference? Obviously, we would all like to see large numbers of people attending our conference, but large numbers are not a sign of God's approval or our success as a fellowship. We are a unique fellowship. We have chosen to give liberty in the Westcott-Hort/Textus Receptus debate. We do not divide over the issues relating to the Doctrines of Grace. We allow for differences of opinion on any number of issues.

There are some over the years who have wished for us to stand differently, but we resisted those calls. There are some who walk with us no more because of it. We seek to be a voice for Biblical Separation. Those who agree with our positions will identify with us and will attend conferences as they have opportunity to do so. We provide a haven for Separatists to work together in the development of effective ministry and those who wish to participate will do so. We provide a fellowship where Pastors and church members have equal standing in the direction of the movement. We have no self perpetuating board, and our speakers each year at a conference reflect our diversity. In short, this fellowship is and has always been a success because we have not wavered from our original purposes.

I would grant that our administration of the fellowship has not always been as productive as we would like, and there is always room for improvement, but we have managed to maintain the fellowship's identity and focus and have seen the Lord's provision for our financial needs. Our conferences have always been an encouragement to those who have attended, and I anticipate that this year's conference will be no exception. Before we begin to develop a cynical view of what God has done over these years, let us reflect on His grace and bountiful blessing as we have moved forward together.

THEOLOGICAL TREND?

What's on the Line?

Dr. Clay Nuttall,

Publisher of The Shepherd's Staff, April, 2004

My father was a great fisherman - not just good, but great. His father had taught him about fishing, and they were both amazing to watch. As soon as a fish took the hook, Dad could tell what kind it was. Long before I could even see a fin, he would say, "That's a bass"; "Got a big catfish this time"; or "You better have a steel leader on that line, 'cause it's a pike". I never remember his being wrong once. The truth is, both Dad and Granddad knew how a certain kind of fish was most likely to act when hooked.

Theology is like that. You don't have to wait for full-blown Liberalism to appear to know what you have on the line. That is one of the reasons I have written so much about Neo-Liberalism. When a person has chosen to accept some liberal theological positions, you can be sure that, when it gets to the surface, his position will be a liberal one.

Getting to the Point

Let me zero in on the "bur under my saddle". One of the greatest dangers ever to infect Evangelicalism and Fundamentalism is Reformed theology. As I have previously documented, this popular view arises from a very different hermeneutic than that used by a Biblicist. As a result, Reformed theology is not a position, but rather a direction. It begins when the theological fish bites. From there on, this fluid system of interpretation can result in almost anything on its way to Amillennialism; by then whale is in the boat, and it

is sure to sink any movement.

The Reformed hermeneutic begins each interpretation with allegory. It centers on redemptive theology and history, and ends by causing damage to every major doctrine. In contrast, Biblical interpretation begins the same as interpretation of any literature; that is, we expect a passage to be literal unless its content tells us otherwise. Biblical interpretation is self-revealed in the Scripture; it centers on the glory of God, and ends with a natural understanding.

A Prominent Example

The Reformed system is not new, and some of its popular views have gained wide acceptance. One of them has been labeled "Progressive Dispensationalism" in an effort to bridge historical dispensationalism and covenant theology. The professed purpose was to bring scholarship to the table; it has, however, done exactly the opposite. The creators of this fad have postulated that it is merely an adjusted view of historical dispensationalism, but nothing could be further from the truth. The real revelation arises from the fact that the dispensationalism of the past uses an entirely different system of interpretation than does the "new view on the block".

This new position arises from the same roots as the historical use of the Reformed hermeneutic. There is a constant and forceful attempt to make Israel and the church one. Its allegorical use of texts creates a new view of the Davidic kingdom. The famous "now, but not yet" ought to cause any serious Bible student to ask, "How?" In classic Liberalism, we hear talk of "growing the kingdom", "building the kingdom", and "bringing in the kingdom". Biblicists fully understand that God's program for this age is the church. It is not, and never has been, the Davidic or eternal kingdom. What's more, we are not building the church; God is doing that.

Attempts to twist the Scriptures will be noticed in discussions of the "New Covenant", the "people of God", the "inaugurated kingdom", "holistic salvation", and a dozen other pet phrases. A careful review of Progressive Dispensationalism causes us to ask how it can possibly claim to be either progressive or dispensational!

So What Is on the Line?

Let me restate my position. This whole movement is about "another hermeneutic", not a difference of opinion or interpretation. When this position comes to the surface, what you have is the same old system that has historically corrupted theology all the way to the natural end - liberalism.

Despite all its latent dangers, there is still something far worse. I congratulate those who have are pushing Progressive Dispensationalism; at least it is now on the surface, and we know what kind of a theological fish we have there. Of greater danger are people who do not identify with the modern philosophy by name, but hold some, if not many, of its tenets. Though they are still deep in the water, I can tell you what we have on the line and how to identify it.

Every Doctrine Affected

For the sake of time, let me focus on the church. Those who hold and practice a Reformed polity arrived there by using the Reformed hermeneutic. The idea of blending Israel and the church arises from a Reformed hermeneutic. Even the slightest attempt to erase those distinctives is suspect. Texts on Israel and the church speak clearly when viewed first as literal, with consideration given to grammatical, contextual, and historical settings at the time of their writing. The difference between Israel and the church is more than just a "picket fence"; it is a Grand Canyon!

The Reformed system ignores the massive difference

between Israel as the wife of God and the church as the bride of Christ. It ignores the setting of the New Testament text and tries to include Israel as "in Christ". So Christology, pneumatology, eschatology, soteriology, and all the great doctrines are different when they arise from the old, but new, Reformed hermeneutic.

The time of the beginning of the church, the time of the catching away of the church, and the eternal state of the church are all affected by this different system of interpretation. Several ministries of the Spirit relate to salvation and the believer: He draws, convicts, calls, regenerates, seals, infills, endues, guides, etc. There are also specific ministries of the Holy Spirit that relate to the church only, and these are, obviously, for the believer only. His special relationship with, and ministry to, the church began at Pentecost and will be completed with the rapture of the church.

A lot of discussion has centered on the permanent indwelling of the Holy Spirit as it relates to the church. The Reformed position has been that this permanent indwelling belongs to Israel as well. The argument is that, if the saints of the Old Testament did not have that ministry of the Spirit, then those who do not hold the Reformed view must believe in two kinds of salvation. This is where the discussion gets interesting. If that premise is true, then the saved of old would have had to have experienced the baptism of the spirit to place them in the church. If that were true, it would make the church and Israel equal.

One Reformed writer simply dismissed that baptism with a grammatical pretzel. So, which is it? If God chose for the Holy Spirit to have a special ministry to the church, by what authority can anyone say it must be a part of the salvation of all? There is no secret to this; the attempt to join Israel and the church at the hip has to spring from the Reformed hermeneutic.

So what's on the line? If it looks like, acts like, and smells like a Reformed hermeneutic, that is the kind of fish you will get when it comes to the surface. Why is it so dangerous? Let me warn you, if you have never done so - better not try to take a pike off the line the same way as a bass! Thanks, Dad; thanks, grandpa, for teaching me "what's on the line".

EDITOR'S REPORT

Mission Creep

Dave Reinhardt

Pastor of The Baptist Church of Danbury, CT

Jerry Huffman in his April 2004 edition of the *Calvary Contender* mentions an arresting article by John Leo of *U.S. News & World Report* entitled "Why Mission Creep is Really Creepy" (April 12, 2004). Leo defines "mission creep" in the following way: "A group starts out with a clear mandate that commands respect across most of the political spectrum. Gradually it moves to a broader and vaguer agenda, typically heading left." (<http://home.hiwaay.net/~contendr/5-2004.html>). The anti-defamation league, the Southern Poverty Law Center, the American Civil Liberties Union, the Ford Foundation, the Episcopal Church, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), and even the Girl Scouts are illustrative of mission creep in some way in Leo's article.

If "mission creep is really creepy" for the institutions men-

tioned above, what must it be for those who have been identified as fundamental and Bible-believing and have since taken on a wider identity? The list abounds. Among our own constituency as Baptists, Cedarville University, the Association of Baptists for World Evangelism (ABWE), and the General Association of Regular Baptist Churches (GARBC) have been identified as broadening their convictions. The word *creep*, though, conveys a slow, sniggling, inching kind of phenomenon. *Gallop* may more adequately describe the pace of many of those who are moving away from the separatist moorings they once esteemed.

If "mission creep is really creepy" for the institutions mentioned above, what must it be for those who have been identified as fundamental and Bible-believing and have since taken on a wider identity? The list abounds.

Music is an area where mission creep is especially evident. For example on April 1, 2000, Baptist Bible College in Clarks Summit had a Michael Card concert. Apart from the music itself, Card's associations are broad: the venues where he performs are radically divergent from what fundamental Baptists -- in the world but not of it -- have found to be doctrinally sound. "Joyful Noise Music Reviews" by P.J. Littleton from the March-April, 2004, edition of *The Catholic Parent* has the following comment about Card: "Longtime friend of Catholic musicians and the Church, Michael Card is age-qualified for the senior tour of contemporary Christian music." (The capital C in the word *church* above is not a reference to any group of Baptist assemblies of called out ones.) A little later in the same article, Card is linked to a

CCM musician who converted to Romanism: "... his good friend and occasional collaborator, John Michael Talbot..." (<http://www.osv.com/music-movie/view-review.asp?type=music&id=72>). In 1996 Card and Talbot together produced a musical disc – "album" as recordings once were known – entitled *Brother to Brother*. The first song on this collection is "One Faith."

Strange as it may seem, Baptist Bible College states the following under Standards of Conduct on its web page: "One of the greatest dangers to the effectiveness of the separatist program lies in the direction of 'being tolerant of those who are tolerant of unbelief.' While recognizing the liberty of its personnel to minister as and where the Spirit of God directs, the college declares that as an institution it is in sympathy with, and will have fellowship with, only those Christian movements and organizations whose leaders and sponsors are not connected with the apostasy." (<http://www.bbc.edu/standards.asp>). There seems to be a disconnect. Maybe music is outside the "separatist program," the purview of the Code of BBC.

Milo Thompson was the president of BBC when Card presented his program there in April 2000. In the Spring 2000 edition of BBC's *The Journal of Ministry & Theology*, he wrote a piece entitled "Biblical Guidelines To Evaluate Music." (http://www.bbc.edu/journal/volume4_1/Evaluate_Music-thompson.pdf). He develops three points in the presentation. Christian music 1) "should not be worldly", 2) "should be doctrinally accurate," and 3) "should not be offensive." He develops his first point, not to be worldly, from categories developed in Joe Aldrich's book *Lifestyle Evangelism* and affirms that "critical participation in the world" is the right way to go, the right category. So where was the evaluation, a necessary component for critical participation, of Michael Card's theological identity? If separation is a key biblical doctrine as a former president of

BBC, Ernest Pickering, so painstakingly and wonderfully developed in his book *Biblical Separation*, what happened to the doctrinal accuracy prescript? Guideline three about not being offensive seems intrinsically flawed in its form as Thompson plays both ends (legalist versus libertarian) against the middle. That he anticipated or perhaps responded to some people's offense in his writing of the guidelines may be the case.

More significantly is what Thompson leaves out of his treatise. The hue and cry among Baptists involved in discussions on music has been related to whether it is moral or amoral. By not providing a guideline addressing the morality of varying forms of music, particularly in worship, (e.g. rock, jazz, bluegrass) and by relating variations to stylistic preferences, he lends credence to the amoral point of view, at least in this particular piece. Fundamental Baptists have affirmed the moral value of music. Frank Garlock of Majesty Music makes the point well in various publications. Two of his sermons have been available for download on the internet, "Proving What Is Acceptable to the Lord" and "What Kind of Music Does God Want Us To Have": (<http://www.sermonaudio.com/search.asp?sourceOnly=true&currSection=sermonsource&keyword=chapelhour&keyworddesc=BJU+Chapel+Hour&speakerWithinSource=Dr%2E+Frank+Garlock>). Dr. Peter Masters has an interesting treatise with a similar view, "'Worship in the Melting Pot'" (http://www.the-highway.com/worship1_Masters.html). Michael Card was again in concert at BBC on April 2 of this year. Another CCM performer, Phil Keaggy, was there the year before, February 2, 2003. The identification of the music and lifestyle of the Beatles with the world needs no development here. But Keaggy does not seem to notice or affirm the point. A few years before his BBC concert, he met with Paul McCartney of the Beatles. The meeting was so significant to him that he makes it a key part of his biographical sketch on the internet: "In September 1990,

Phil was able to fulfill a childhood dream of meeting Paul McCartney. Phil was asked to play at the wedding of a dear friend, Laura Eastman, who happened to be Paul McCartney's sister-in-law. Phil had some time to present Paul with a specially made Olson guitar, and even got to play a song with him." There is even a picture of him with McCartney. (<http://www.philkeaggy.com/meetphil/bio.html>). BBC's "critical participation in the world" severely lacks credibility.

There is a striking parallel of some of the source material behind John Leo's "Why Mission Creep Is Really Creepy" and the broadening convictions related to music noted above. Leo presents John O'Sullivan's first law in his article in *USN&WR*: "All organizations that are not actually right wing will over time become left wing." In the article that O'Sullivan wrote back in 1989 in *The National Review* he quotes from a collection of essays written by Sovietologist Robert Conquest entitled *The Abomination of Moab*. The subject matter for the quotation was the controversy over the pornographic art of Robert Mapplethorpe. Conquest is distraught that Mapplethorpe had received public funding for his work.

"The Biblical Moabites were the insidious enemies of Israel 'who, from their capital at Shittim, infiltrated temple and harem and set the children of light whoring after strange doctrines.' Today's Moabites have been out in force to defend both Mapplethorpe and a strange doctrine of — unrestrained government funding of the arts. The falseness of their friendship consists of their denial of any distinctions, moral or artistic or political, where Art is concerned." (<http://www.nationalreview.com/flashback/flashback-jos062603.asp>).

Ah, yes, the denial of real distinctions, moral or practical or biblical where CCM is concerned is really creepy.

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