

## **Democratic Congregationalism, A Seventh Baptist Distinctive in Peril**

by Malcolm Yarnell, Ph.D.

The Baptist Faith and Message has become a flashpoint since its careful revision and overwhelming affirmation by the Southern Baptist Convention in 2000. Especially difficult for some sectors in our convention have been the articles on the church, the ordinances, and the Lord's Day. This chorus of discontent with Southern Baptist distinctives has been gaining more proponents making ever bold pronouncements. Our forefathers would find it incredible that the biblical doctrine of the church they defended so ably and against great odds is now under assault by their own descendants! This turn of events is partially explained by the fact that the doctrine of the church has been largely neglected by Southern Baptists for at least the last fifty years. The resultant ecclesial amnesia has encouraged a growing body of evangelical ecumenists in our ranks. "Unity" and "bridge building" are now the preferred mottos of some prominent Baptist leaders, in both the churches and denominational entities (at state and national levels).

Six examples indicate the widespread and growing challenge to Baptist church distinctives, including those explicitly defined in our confession. First, even before the confessional revision, the restriction of the pastoral office to men has been contested by evangelical egalitarians. Second, in more recent years, an increasing number of churches, especially those desiring closer ties with other Calvinists or less-inhibited "church growth," have either contemplated dismissing or have outright dispensed the requirement of Christian baptism for church membership. Third, the ecclesial nature of baptism has been fiercely denounced, even by elements within the International Mission Board. Fourth, the restriction of the Lord's Supper to those having received Christian baptism is also denied, including by a prominent missionary. Fifth, the International Mission Board's decision to limit the hiring of new employees to those who truly believe that baptism means the old life has been permanently buried (i.e. that salvation is permanent) is continually challenged as "a narrowing of parameters," a gross misstatement of the historical record. Sixth, the confession's statement regarding the universal church has been widely misinterpreted, typically by confusing the fictional invisible church of Reformed dogma with the eschatological visible universal church of Scripture.

These problems have received a great deal of attention at the popular level, although only a few scholars have weighed in on the matter. Much of the discussion has generated more heat than light. This is unfortunate because a thorough, thoughtful, and respectful discussion regarding these important matters might help Baptists rediscover and retain biblical ecclesiology. Hopefully, such a discussion will occur sooner rather than later, for we are succumbing to the attraction of worldly ways of "doing church." To put it metaphorically, the barbarians are no longer at the fortress gates, they are already occupying the city walls and are busy about the task of systematically stripping the Southern Baptist Zion of its protective biblical polity. Indeed, as has been eloquently pointed out elsewhere, those pastors and theologians who believe in maintaining biblical ecclesiology are often caricatured as "Landmarkists" while their ecumenical opponents are glibly described as "irenic."

Leaving aside this lesser but important problem of politically motivated and misrepresentative word games, one particular challenge to biblical ecclesiology that has yet to receive much popular attention has been the peril to the Baptist tradition of democratic congregationalism. The Southern Baptist confession is quite clear that we are democratic congregationalists in our polity, but that belief is now under consistent if not widespread assault. It is this seventh Baptist distinctive in peril today that I have been asked by the Biblicists at SBC Today to address. Perhaps the best place to begin the discussion is with the convention's interpretation of scriptural church polity. Article VI of the Baptist Faith and Message states clearly:

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.

Why have most Baptists historically maintained democratic congregationalism? Because they understand that democratic congregationalism is the clear teaching of Scripture. We are not democratic congregationalists because we are historically Baptists, although countering our churches' received tradition should always cause us to pause reflectively. Rather, we are democratic congregationalists because democratic congregationalism is scriptural. There are three aspects of this short statement from article VI that we should consider.

The first aspect to consider is scriptural congregationalism. The Baptist Faith and Message cites six biblical texts that are commonly utilized to defend democratic congregationalism. Recently, Southern

Baptist theologians such as Danny Akin, James Leo Garrett, Paige Patterson, and Samuel Waldron have drawn upon the same biblical texts and add a few of their own in order to defend democratic congregationalism. The clearest texts regarding the establishment of democratic congregationalism in the New Testament churches include Matthew 18:15-20; Acts 6:1-7, 11:22, 13:2-3, 14:27, 15; 1 Corinthians 5:2; and 2 Corinthians 2:6. There are other supportive texts that imply democratic congregationalism, but these are the most important.

The reader is encouraged to read these and other texts with their local church praying for the Spirit's illumination. In summary, it should be noted that in Matthew 18, Jesus Christ gave the authority of discipline and excommunication to the *ekklesia* (i.e. church or congregation) itself and not to any one person or small group within the *ekklesia*. (In Matthew 28, moreover, it should be noted that the Great Commission was given to the entire apostolic gathering.) In Acts 6 and 13, the *ekklesia* was the agent that elected its leaders. In Acts 11 and 14, it was the *ekklesia* that dispatched ministers and those ministers were responsible to report back to that *ekklesia*. In Acts 15, it is the entire *ekklesia*, whether the Jerusalem *ekklesia* (15:22) or the Antioch *ekklesia* (15:30-31), that was involved in decision-making. In 1 Corinthians 5 and 2 Corinthians 2, the apostle Paul instructs the local *ekklesia* that it is responsible for excommunicating and receiving members. The congregational nature of church government thus applies to both church members and church officers, whether receiving them or disciplining them.

Congregationalism is, as a result, correctly identified as the New Testament form of church polity. Conversely, Papalism, Patriarchalism, Episcopalianism, Erastianism, Presbyterianism, and Quakerism lack a substantive New Testament basis and must be rejected as deficient forms of ecclesiology. However, of late, there has been widespread interest among Baptist pastors in non-congregational or semi-congregational structures. The motivating factor behind this phenomenon seems to be experiential rather than exegetical. Having been mistreated or close to a pastor that has been mistreated by a disorderly diaconate or an unruly congregation, the siren song of Reformed church polity has become attractive.

The recent movement to combine Reformed polity with Baptist polity has manifested itself in two primary forms. In this discussion, it is important to make a distinction between unbiblical overlordship and biblical leadership, between Presbyterianism and congregationalism. Some have endangered our Baptist identity by uncritically melding Reformed ecclesiology with their inherited biblical ecclesiology. Perhaps they do not realize that when a Baptist church loses its congregationalism, it loses the biblical pattern. Consider the two different ways to apply the Reformed doctrine of multiple eldership; one form preserves Baptist identity while the other form compromises it.

On the one hand, some have intentionally retained their Baptist congregationalism while replacing the traditional leadership of the pastor and "the deacon board" with the leadership of multiple elders. (Usually, however, even in multiple-elder congregationalism, one elder tends to become the primary leader.) From the Baptist confessional perspective, while representing a minority position, multiple-elder leadership is still recognizably Baptist. It simply prefers a multiple-elder-led congregation rather than a single-elder-led congregation. While I am personally unconvinced regarding the need for multiple elders in a single church, there are solid Baptist pastors and theologians who have sincerely received the model.

On the other hand, some Baptists are compromising biblical congregationalism by adopting the Presbyterian distinction between "teaching elders" and "ruling elders." This distinction, based on Calvin's misreading of 1 Timothy 5:17 in contradiction to 1 Timothy 3:2, endangers congregationalism by placing final ecclesiastical authority in the hands of a small group of men in the church. Even if consulted, Reformed congregations function as little more than rubber stamps for the dictates of an unaccountable elite. The Reformed model "seemingly affords no means of correcting heresy or immorality within a majority of elders," a truly monstrous situation (*Perspectives on Church Government*, 286).

A second aspect of the Baptist confession regarding democratic congregationalism that should be addressed is the concept of being "democratic." The doctrine of democratic congregationalism reflects the biblical teaching that every Christian is a believer called by God, indwelt by the Spirit, and appointed as a participant in Christ's royal priesthood. This is the theological basis of congregationalism and it works itself out in the consensus of the church regarding major decisions, especially those concerning the election of ministers and the acceptance or exclusion of members from communion. It also works itself out in the fact that every member of a church is called to Christian service. Patterson and Waldron have together carefully defined what true church democracy is as opposed to counterfeit democracy (*Who Runs the Church*, 210-12, 238).

A third and final aspect of the Baptist confession regarding democratic congregationalism that should be addressed is the concept of Lordship. Twice in these two short confessional sentences, article VI

refers us back to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. In reality, there is only one ruler of the church, and that is Jesus Christ. He is the church's only Savior, only Lord, and only authority. Gerald Cowen summarizes the situation thus: "Where does authority in the church lie? The obvious answer is that all authority is in Christ, the head of the church" (*Who Rules the Church*, 79). Thus, it should be remembered by all true Baptists: Christ is the only head and lawgiver of the church; the church itself may legislate nothing new, but must be faithful to execute all that her Lord legislated.

Democratic congregationalism under the Lordship of Jesus Christ is a Baptist church distinctive that is currently in peril. May the Lord grant Baptists remembrance that these ecclesiological distinctives were guideposts affirmed by our Baptist forefathers because they are pristinely biblical.

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Bibliographical note: There are seven essays in five books that may help renew your knowledge of the biblical thus Baptist doctrine of democratic congregationalism under the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

Gerald Cowen of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary staunchly advocates biblical church polity: *Who Rules the Church? Examining Congregational Leadership and Church Government* (Broadman & Holman, 2003).

Coordinate essays in a larger compilation by Paige Patterson and Samuel Waldron are worthy of readership, although Waldron's essay suffers from the unjustifiable identification of single-eldership as both deficient yet non-sinful: *Who Runs the Church? 4 Views on Church Government* (Zondervan, 2004).

Coordinate essays in a similar compilation by Danny Akin and James Leo Garrett, Jr. are also worthy of readership. Unfortunately, James White's contribution in the same book betrays a non-Baptist Reformed outlook by its ignorance of congregationalism: *Perspectives on Church Government: Five Views of Church Polity* (Broadman & Holman, 2004).

Finally, please consider two recent introductions to ecclesiology. The first is an extensive essay written by an accomplished pastor-theologian, Mark Dever, and the other is a condensed essay written by the current author. Both are found in collections: *A Theology for the Church* (Broadman & Holman, 2007) and *The Baptist Faith and Message: Critical Issues in America's Largest Protestant Denomination* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2007).