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REFORMING CHURCHES





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TOM NETTLES

Introduction:

Humble Pastors, Reforming Churches, and Godly Cooperation

This issue of the Founders Journal initiates a look at chapter 26, “Of the Church.” We will cover in detail three of the 15 paragraphs, give a running summary of six others, and parse out the others over the next few issues of the Journal. Other articles that we include, however, are pertinent to this subject in particular and to the overall commitment to give an exposition of a confession of faith.

A summary of paragraphs 1-6 seeks to give a concentrated narrative of how an individual congregation is related to the church invisible and catholic and the reality of corruptions and apostasy in visible congregations and church groups.

We include an article on humility by Baruch Maoz who warns us against any kind of doctrinal hubris arising from our convictions about truth. We affirm that we believe Scripture and accept the confession as an excellent synthesis of some of the important themes of Scripture. But lest we think we have achieved perfect understanding and are beyond further instruction, we should heed the pertinent and experienced admonitions given by Baruch in his reflections on scriptural warnings against foolish confidence. Baruch has been unwaveringly involved in contending earnestly for the faith once delivered to the saints and in working toward a spiritual reform of churches according to full confessional doctrinal purity. In light of the intensity of this stewardship and the need to move a congregation from one doctrinal position to another,

it can be a great danger to posture oneself as exhaustively competent and immutably set in doctrinal knowledge. Preachers and theologians who pursue their callings in the context of public proclamation and assertion of truth by means of spoken and written words must look carefully at the warnings of James 1:19 and 3:1,2. Though God has revealed himself as the one true God and has given us an inexhaustible admixture of literary styles in which the web of divine power and wisdom is displayed in a tapestry of propositional truth blending the wonder of creation, the certainty and purpose of providence, the mercy and justice of redemption, and the unwavering clarity of divine knowledge manifest in judgment, we must be careful not to go beyond what is revealed. In fact, we must beware of posturing our ministry in a way that seems to say, “No one can instruct me; I have mastered all the mysteries of revealed truth.” It is true that in every sphere of our lives and even in the reality of our personal existence we can ask, “What do we have that we did not receive?” Baruch’s exposition of humility, arising from careful attention to the Bible as well as years of faithful ministry and caring interaction with fellow Christians, should penetrate our daily call to confession of revealed truth.

Complementary to this urgent and perpetual call for humility, we include an article on the pastoral challenge of church reform. This phenomenon could be seen as humility under fire. The doctrine of the church prompts us to think with grateful submission about the reality that the church belongs to Christ; he builds it, he calls and gives gifts to all its members. He sanctifies it by his Spirit, he determines its professions of truth by his word, and he claims it as his bride, even as his own body. This should give a sobering sense of stewardship to those who are called to be its teachers—those who are called to reprove, rebuke, correct, instruct in sound doctrine with all patience and teaching. The need to be of humble mind and careful in speech does not translate into cowardice or refusal to work with love and patience toward greater holiness and doctrinal knowledge and fidelity in the church. Clarity and courage are needed in shouldering the responsibility of giving an account in the day of judgment for those under our charge. Perhaps such a call should shock us into humble efforts at measuring our stewardship in light of a robust doctrine of the basic principle of regenerate church membership and the position of the church as the “pillar and foundation of the truth” that confesses the “mystery of godliness.” Scott Lee, a pastor in Arnold, Missouri, provides a testimony of how a humble submission to truth, a willingness to suffer unjustly under the assault of malignant accusations, led to reform in his life as a pastor and in the witness of his church. Insights from his diary and the progress of a doctrinally secure but existentially troubled heart brand this account with an authenticity and hopeful spirit from which every lover of Christ’s church can benefit. The challenges that such reform gives to nurturing the combination of love, patience, humility, and truth is shown in living color in this testimony.

Paragraph ten of chapter 26 deals with the work of the pastor and his relationship to the congregation. This relationship is a peculiarly Baptist idea for it is not contained in the Savoy Declaration, the Savoy Platform of Polity, or the Westminster Confession. It speaks of the mutual reciprocal obligations of pastor and congregation including the issue of a proper support for a settled ministry. One who is gifted and called to that all-consuming duty should be able to exert himself to the utmost in pursuit of the distinctive features of pastoral ministry, including the provision of hospitality. David Smith, a seasoned pastor and faithful doctrinal expositor, has produced an excellent exposition of that paragraph. He loves the church, the pastorate, and the charm of human language; his affection for all that comes through in this article. He engages some of the most trustworthy pastors of the past in helping us understand the beauty of this element of the relationship between pastor and people.

The difficult idea of how a local, independent, autonomous congregation can enter into relationships with other churches for the sake of edification and gospel advance without surrendering the duty of self-governance under the Lordship of Christ is treated in paragraphs 14 and 15. The confession emphasizes that to each local church God has given “all that power and authority, which is any way needful, for their carrying on that order in worship, and discipline, which he hath instituted for them to observe” (paragraph 7). Beyond that, moreover, these churches “ought to hold communion amongst themselves for their peace, increase of love, and mutual edification” (paragraph 14). To this necessary, but sometimes delicate, aspect of cooperation between autonomous local churches Tom Hicks gives careful attention. Taking these two paragraphs point by point, he gives a clear exposition, and hearty approval, of the principle of associationalism among Baptist churches. He engages the prooftexts used in the confession and adds helpful discussion from his own expository gifts and relevant experience.

I pray that the reading of this Founders Journal will encourage humility, pastoral conviction and faithfulness, and a biblical spirit of laboring together with other like-minded Christians and churches.



BARUCH MAOZ

Thoughts on Humility from the Book of Proverbs

As is well known, the book of Proverbs is replete with references to humility. We shall not be able to review them all, so I propose to look a bit more closely at some. 1:1-8:

The proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel: To know wisdom and instruction, to understand words of insight, to receive instruction in wise dealing, in righteousness, justice, and equity; to give prudence to the simple, knowledge and discretion to the youth— Let the wise hear and increase in learning, and the one who understands obtain guidance, to understand a proverb and a saying, the words of the wise and their riddles. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction. (Proverbs 1:1-8).

Contrary to modern standards, humility is not only in order to wisdom but is of the very essence of it. It was Socrates who said, “All I know is that I know nothing.” Still better, Paul wrote under inspiration of the Spirit of God, “If anyone imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know” (2 Cor. 8:2). More caution in the way we handle truth is always appropriate. The recognition that our insights, however substantial, are still but pale reflections of reality is necessary for further growth in understanding.

We worship in a church that is both Reformed and Baptist. Reformed Baptists are noted for their firm doctrinal, sometimes overly doctrinaire positions. We love the truth and are determined

to measure everyone by its standards. It would do us all a great deal of good to recognize the validity of the insight of Socrates and the revealed warning from Paul.

The one arises from the common grace of observation and the other an inspired diagnosis of reality. Do we now “have” the truth? All of it? Has God no further light to break forth from his word?

While we affirm all that is revealed and work toward a consistent presentation of it, does not the challenge of the great spheres of mystery in any of our doctrines promote childlike humility even as we affirm the revealed truth we have. Do we truly understand all that we profess to know? Are we able to connect the dots, leap over the gaps of our knowledge and create a full, well-rounded, perfect picture of reality? Do we really know where and how divine sovereignty and human responsibility meet? Are we able to plumb the depths of the incarnation? Can we understand how three are one or how God, incomparably unchanging, repented of his intentions with regard to Nineveh and did not destroy the city?

Sure, we can make seemingly-intelligent affirmations. We can pronounce purported spiritualities. But have we all the truth? No less important is the question, does the truth have us? Are we so touched by the greatness of the truth that we recognize what humility teaches, that we still need to receive instruction?

“Fools despise wisdom and instruction” (Proverbs 1:7). Recognizing our human limitations is a recognition of our creatureliness. Recognizing the infinite extent of truth and our very finite ability to encompass it all is a recognition of the greatness of the God who is the very essence of truth and the source of all truth outside of himself. Pride leads us to despise wisdom and instruction -- unless we are the ones instructing. Humility renders us teachable, removes the tendency to arrogant contention, undermines our desire to be proven right and erodes the human arrogant proclivity to seek visibility or prominence by swimming against the current just to show we are alive.

“Hear, my son, your father’s instruction, and forsake not your mother’s teaching” (Prov. 1:8). Proverbs repeatedly exhorts us to hear, listen, give heed. We are inclined to do so only when we recognize that, however great have been our achievements, we know nothing as we ought to know. Then we are far more inclined to listen than to pronounce, to consider than to controvert, to qualify than to exclaim. Hear is the exhortation. Listen. Don’t talk. Don’t think you have to express yourselves at every point, give an opinion on every matter, offer advice in every circumstance.

“Whoever restrains his words has knowledge, and he who has a cool spirit is a man of understanding.” Why? Because he is wise enough to understand that he does not know it all. Ever since sin came into the world, man has suffered from a tendency to speak up on every matter so as to appear intelligent, or in an effort to control others. The humble have learned that “even a fool who keeps silent is considered wise; when he closes his lips, he is deemed intelligent (Prov. 17:27-28).

“Hear, my son, your father’s instruction, and forsake not your mother’s teaching.” Why is it necessary for the preacher to address the young in such a way, and then go on to warn against the tendency toward immediate gratification? Is this not why Paul exhorts the Corinthians, do not be children in your thinking. Be infants in evil, but in your thinking be mature (I Cor. 14:20). The problem with the Corinthians was not so much with what they knew or did not know, but with what they did with their professed knowledge—with what it did to them. They became smug, self satisfied, pleased with themselves. It is of the nature of immaturity to be arrogant, to think that one knows far more than one really does. How many times have we parents of teenagers heard our children say to us, “I know, I know” when they didn’t really? They are eager to be recognized as wise and knowledgeable, but their efforts to that end display a moral weakness that is the product of pride instead of humility. The immature believe they know. The humble know they do not. Which of them is wiser? Which commands more respect?

How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple? How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing and fools hate knowledge? If you turn at my reproof, behold, I will pour out my spirit to you; I will make my words known to you” (Prov. 1:22-23). Notice the “if” in this promise. It takes sincere humility to admit, “I was wrong” rather than submitting to the captivity of our pride. I have a beloved friend who has become a slave of his pride. He erred greatly in a certain matter and was challenged by the church he served. Unable to accept the fact that he was capable of such moral error and all the more incapable of admitting this to others, he languishes in isolation with his gifts hamstrung by his pride and his honor besmirched in the eyes of many, when all he needed to do is turn at the reproof administered and be restored.

Pride is often an expression of self-indulgence born out of a sense of insecurity. We fear to admit ignorance, relative or substantive, or to own up to sin because we do not want the depth of our human weakness to be revealed. Sometimes we are afraid to see ourselves for what we are. Instead, we lock ourselves in the prison of our pride and lay claim to what we do not have or deny what all can see is true of us. This is when we should hear the words of Prov. 3:5-8: “Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths. Be not wise in your own eyes; fear the Lord, and turn away from evil. It will be healing to your flesh and refreshment to your

bones.” Relying on God rather than the image we manage to project is an act of wise humility. Acknowledging his greatness can only be done in sincerity if we admit our own limitations, and that is the only way to walk the straight path of honesty.

Self-affirmation inevitably involves subterfuge and deceit. If we are willing to see ourselves for what we are rather than being wise in our own eyes, God will loom all the larger and we will have all the more reason to lovingly fear him, turn away from the evil of pride and do others the good to which we have been called. This will be healing to our flesh and refreshment to our bones. Relieved of the necessity for pretense, we shall be able to conduct ourselves with gentleness borne out of a clear conscience before God and man.

In Prov. 8:13 God pronounces, “The fear of the Lord is hatred of evil. Pride and arrogance and the way of evil and perverted speech I hate. The evil of which Proverbs speaks is not that of misinformation. It is how we treat others in the name of truth, how we view ourselves, how we conduct our lives in the presence of God. That is why the fear of the Lord is here contrasted with pride and arrogance, and why the latter two are related to the way of evil and perverted speech. These all are the object of God’s holy hatred. Pride and godliness do not go together.

Arrogance and the fear of the Lord are opposites. In consequence, Prov. 11:20 declares, “Those of crooked heart are an abomination to the Lord, but those of blameless ways are his delight.” Of course, the context points toward moral behavior in society such as kindness, generosity, integrity in commerce. But are the opposite of these not the product of a pride that drives us to view our advantage as more important than others’ welfare because we are ultimately worth more? And is that not the opposite of humility? We sacrifice truth to serve our interests because we consider our interests more valuable than truth, our lives more valuable than the honor of God. We sacrifice the welfare of others for the sake our truth and make believe it is the truth of God.

The truth is that there is no security in pride; our very homes, the places where we relax, put down defenses and enjoy the world, cannot protect us. “The Lord tears down the house of the proud” (Prov. 15:25). but maintains the widow’s boundaries. Widows, of course, are the weakest, the most vulnerable of society. God protects the weak. He reaches out in defense of the vulnerable. If you are prepared to recognize, accept and admit your vulnerability, God will protect you. But if you insist on laying claim to strengths you do not have, you have no grounds to expect God’s protection.

“Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall. It is better to be of a lowly spirit with the poor than to divide the spoil with the proud” (Prov. 16:19-20). Of course, the reason for the former statement is in the latter. To be among the proud who ravish, humiliate and suppress others is an expression of a haughty spirit. We should prefer to be of a lowly spirit even if it means being among the poor rather than to divide the spoil with the proud because we will have God on our side, rather than tearing down our houses. On the other hand, before destruction a man’s heart is haughty, but humility comes before honor (Prov. 18:12), and again: “one’s pride will bring him low, but he who is lowly in spirit will obtain honor” (Prov. 29:23).

If you are like me, these exhortations are immensely relevant. I find myself constantly inclined to pride of one kind or another. I find myself inclined to assert myself in an effort to mask my weakness and present myself as better than I am. I am occupied all too little with being instead of seeming to be. As a Christian, I should be striving after humility: the courage to admit what I am and the hunger to be in fact better than I appear to be.

Thank God for mercy, because I constantly fail.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Baruch Maoz served for thirty-three years as pastor of Grace and Truth Christian Congregation near Tel Aviv and field leader for Christian Witness to Israel. He is senior editor of the Modern Hebrew Bible, coeditor of the Annotated Hebrew New Testament, and founder and former coeditor of Mishkan: An International Theological Forum on Jewish Evangelism.



SCOTT LEE

Reformed by the Word: One Church's Journey

All reformation begins with the Word, because it is the Word that is empowered by God for the work that needs to be done[1]. I was asked to share what God has done in one small church in Arnold, MO. And while we are not a model for anything, we have been the recipients of God's grace that is mediated to His Church through His Word.

Paul tells Timothy that it is the God-breathed Scriptures that equip the man of God for every good wor[1]k[2]. The work of reformation, then, must begin by equipping the preacher with a solid conviction that the Bible is God's Word of truth, that it is powerful, and that it will, indeed, do the work. As Luther said toward the end of his Reformation, "I did nothing. The Word did everything."

I am grateful that my earliest experience of Christianity was forged at the time of the conservative resurgence in the Southern Baptist Convention. I was converted right out of High School in 1981 and disciplined by men who loved the Bible. They instilled in me the beginnings of that same love. I entered Southwestern Seminary in 1985 at the height of the controversy over inerrancy at the Dallas Convention where I worked in the book store. I heard the arguments in the hallways and saw how it rocked our school. Yet watching the whole thing unfold drove deep within me a conviction that the Bible is God's Word without mixture of error and convinced me that at the heart of the pastor's task is a commitment to faithful biblical exposition.

It was during those years in seminary that I fell in love with the faithful resilience of Martin Luther, the passionate intellect of men like Jonathan Edwards, and the deep commitment to Scripture found in so many of our Baptist forefathers as reflected in Tom Nettles and Rush Bush's book, *Baptists and the Bible*. I was drawn to the teaching of men like RC Sproul and John MacArthur, though I didn't know why at the time except that what they taught stirred my heart to love the truth. I'm grateful for that, because other things I received in seminary weren't so helpful. It was the beginning of the church growth movement which emphasized a pragmatic approach to 'building' the church on principles of business management and techniques of psychological manipulation. It was all about getting decisions and increasing the number of attendees by the use of these methods.

As a result, when I graduated seminary and entered the pastorate in 1991, I carried many of these practices with me. The first thing I did was take our deacons through a study called "Equipping Deacons in Church Growth Skills." I showed video clips from movies like *Sister Act* with Whoopie Goldberg to show our people how to contemporize the church and repackage our message to get people interested. We had lots of games and activities, and I guess people liked it, because we began to fill the building. But it was all so shallow. There was little depth. We would run from one new program to another so that I found myself constantly pushing to keep people interested. It was exhausting. My wife said to me one day, "You are angry all the time!" "No I'm not!" I shouted. But I was, because when it's all about you having to manufacture something, it's exhausting! After a couple of years, I was near burnout.

One thing kept that from happening – that deep commitment God had given me to preach His word verse by verse through books of the Bible (though certainly I didn't do it very well). I remember struggling through places like Ephesians 1 thinking, "I know what that seems to be saying, but it can't possibly mean that!" And yet, the Word kept pulling me forward, prompting me to question the things we were doing. I became schizophrenic in my preaching. One Sunday, I'd preach on the sovereign holiness of God, because that's what the text said. The next I would try to entertain with a skit or other 'clever' innovation. But the Word of God would not let go. I didn't know it at the time, but God was working on me. He was doing a work of reformation in my heart and mind; luring me out of my man-centered, programmatic little universe into the wider world of His Amazing Grace. I found that the commitment to preach the Word was beginning to shape the preacher even more than the church.

In 2 Timothy 4:1-2, Paul charges young Timothy "in the presence of God and of Jesus Christ who is to judge the living and the dead . . . preach the word; be ready in season and out of season." As men who dare stand behind the pulpit, we bear a solemn responsibility for what we preach. It is not our pulpit. It is not our church. We don't get to set the agenda. When Paul says, "I charge

you in the presence of God,” he means the God who is present in every church service, every counseling session, every deacon’s meeting, every Bible study and every conversation. He is the Judge before whom we must answer for the way we treat His people and what we teach them. That’s why James 3:1 warns that not many should be teachers, knowing we will incur a stricter judgment! Since we must face this Judge, we must be careful to preach His Word, not our own. [3]

The realization that I was accountable to God for every word I spoke in His pulpit began to have a marked effect on my preaching. He had, after all, given me a Bible rich with truth, treasure and power, and a command to preach it. I was not at liberty to squander even a second on anything less than His unvarnished truth. As Paul told Timothy, I must “be ready in season and out of season.[4]” “Be ready” means “Take your stand!” Stand there and preach whether it’s popular or not, whether it’s received or rejected, whether they applaud you or fire you, but preach the Word. Open the God-breathed Scriptures and trust Him to work through them!

For years I have kept a journal where I record my inmost thoughts and struggles. In November of 1997, as I was working through these things, I wrote the following,

“God speaks when His word is clearly and simply expounded in faithfulness to its Author and Guide. The servant of God has no warrant to seek fame or notoriety, or reputation. His task is to know God, to know God’s word and to speak the truth in love. Let God be God!”

Elsewhere that same month I wrote,

“The theological education of all God’s people is an imperative! It is my imperative today: to study to show myself approved; to teach the true knowledge of God; to train Christians to walk worthy of His calling; to proclaim the sure and ancient Gospel of Christ”

That solemn realization had a big impact on me personally long before it did anything for our church. I now see that the first question we need to ask in the work of reformation is not, “How can I reform my church?,” but “Am I willing for God’s Word to reform me?” Only when it changes me, can it change my church.

As I said, my preaching had become somewhat schizophrenic – an uncertain trumpet sound! But as I kept moving verse by verse through Scripture, trying to let it speak for itself, I began to see things more clearly. Chief among them was God’s sovereignty and how it extended even to salvation. That pesky passage from Ephesians 1:4-5 continued to haunt me, “...even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ according to the

purpose of his will.” I began to scare myself. This wasn’t what I was taught in seminary! I started to wonder if I was slipping into heresy. The Bible seemed to be saying one thing – it’s all about God and His glory – but I had been taught something else – that it depended on me working the right programs. I felt caught between two worlds.

About that time I was asked to teach for Missouri Baptist University and had an interview with Dr Curtis McClain. During the interview he asked if I held to the “Doctrines of Grace?” I told him I believed that doctrine was important and grace was central, but I didn’t know what he meant by “Doctrines of Grace.” He gave me a copy of Dr Nettles’ book, “By His Grace and For His Glory” and as I began to read, I saw how these precious truths of God’s sovereign grace were indeed the teaching of Scripture and the foundation of historic Baptist faith. The more I read, the more I realized I was not slipping into heresy. I was slipping into historic, biblical Christianity where God reigns supreme and saves for His glory through Christ’s finished work! It was like a blast of fresh air. I felt like I’d been born again again! I wrote in my journal for October 21, 1997,

Somehow in Christ, God has chosen to begin a quiet revolution in this sinner’s life. Truth – Gospel Truth – has become clearer as I sit at the feet of the great Reformation Masters these past months and imbibe from the same source as they the waters of the free grace of a Sovereign God in salvation. Penetrate my soul, O God. Renew my mind by your Word. Grant me the same fire and zeal evidenced by Luther, the same clarity of thought seen in Calvin and Augustine, the same faithfulness and spiritual fervor evidenced in Edwards. Let this awakening not be a passing fad, but a deepening and motivating conviction. If it is from you, let it lead where it may. I am your willing servant by grace alone. I am ready to declare myself on the side of truth in the Doctrines of Grace. I am a Calvinist in the line of the reformation and the Gospel preached by the Apostle Paul. Let God be God. Sola Fide; Sola Gratia; Soli Dei Gloria

Suddenly I could see the God-centeredness of God on every page of Scripture! It was liberating! It wasn’t about me! It wasn’t up to me. It was all about God. And I couldn’t wait to tell my people because I knew they were going to love it too. Many, however, did not. As I was soon to discover, reshaping a church from its man-centered assumptions to a God-centered Gospel is rarely done without opposition and pain.

At the end of 2 Timothy 4:2, Paul tells Timothy that his pastoral work must be done with “complete patience.” That proved true in our case. The process that began with me in 1995 wouldn’t bear fruit for several more years. I tried to read everything I could find about the centrality of Christ in preaching, the purity of the gospel, etc. We took it slow at first. I avoided the “C” word, knowing people wouldn’t understand it. We didn’t start with classes on systematic

theology (though they would come later) or frontal attacks against the invitation system (though I did remove the manipulative aspects). More than anything, I wanted our people to know God. So, I kept the focus on God's Sovereignty and man's depravity. Spurgeon said, "Preach up Christ, and preach down man." That's what I tried to do, along with a focus on a biblical understanding of conversion and the new birth. I taught about regenerate church membership and church discipline (which the Reformers said is a mark of the true church). Things seemed to go well at first. I believed our congregation would see the truth of God's sovereign grace from Scripture and embrace it with the same joy I had. I think I under-estimated how deep depravity runs within the human heart.

Immediately after urging Timothy to preach with all patience, Paul warns him in that "the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths." [5] Principle among those myths is that of human autonomy. "They will not endure sound teaching," he says. They won't put up with it because it grates against their autonomy and dethrones their sinful pride.

The words translated "sound teaching" mean "health-giving doctrine." It's where our word "hygiene" comes from, indicating that which brings health. It is the God-centered Gospel of grace focused on the finished work of Christ that brings spiritual health to a church. But that Gospel doesn't leave any room for human pride of accomplishment. So, wherever a man-centered Gospel exists – and that is the gospel of this age – there will be conflict. In my youthful arrogance I didn't understand that. I thought I could bring them along through force of will. I was sure that if I just kept teaching the Bible, they would lovingly embrace these truths.

By January of 1999, questions began to be raised by some in our congregation. In a deacon's meeting, one of our deacons asked if I was a "Calvinist." When I asked what he meant, he really didn't know. He just knew it was something bad. So, I asked specifically what I had taught that concerned him. Again, he didn't know of anything. He'd just heard this word used about me. Clearly there was "talk" going around. I decided the best way to answer his question would be to lead the deacons through a study. Like many Baptist churches, our deacons at that time served as a kind of leadership counsel. So, I bought them a couple of books, "Journey in Grace" by Richard Belcher and "A Southern Baptist Looks at the Doctrine of Election" by Robert Selph. I asked them to read the books and then we would schedule a retreat where we could open our Bibles and study what Scripture says. That was my plan.

Well, "the best laid plans of mice and men . . ." My Journal entry for March 9, 1999 says simply, *"Into the fire."*

The morning my wife saw “Frank”[6] enter the church carrying a Bible and the book on Election, she knew there was going to be trouble. Frank rarely brought a Bible to church, and he wasn’t a deacon, so why did he have that book? I was in my study looking over some things when there was an urgent knock at the door. One of our ladies was in tears. She said she could hear Frank in the men’s class declaring, “The pastor is a heretic. It’s time to get rid of him. Are you with me?!” By the time I got there, a crowd had gathered and accusations were flying. This was not what I had planned! What surprised me, though, was that his biggest concern wasn’t really the doctrine of election, though that’s what all the yelling was about. But as we got into it, it became clear he was most upset about what I had taught concerning biblical church membership, conversion, and church discipline. He had many relatives who, though members of the church, never came and gave no real evidence of conversion. For him, the suggestion that such might not be Christians after all was like stealing their salvation. They’d made a decision. Who was I to question it?! It was then, I discovered, that the real issues people are upset about are often hidden behind the noise of other things. The “presenting” issue might not be the real issue at all. Toward the end of the confrontation, he said, “You know what your problem is, Pastor? You don’t believe every Christian is really a Christian.” I reminded him that Jesus Himself said “not everyone who says to me Lord, Lord, will enter the Kingdom of heaven”[7] (Mat 7:21). But he wasn’t willing to listen. He stormed out promising to take half the church with him. That was the spark.

The next few weeks were chaos! The planned deacon retreat had to be called off, and instead, we invited Frank to meet with us and share his concerns. He refused. Yet, the charge of heresy continued to spread. People who had been close friends wouldn’t even speak to me, including a retired pastor who had once been a great support, but now began to urge people to flee the church. I begged God to let me resign. I didn’t want to go through this! But, as clearly as I’ve ever known anything, I knew we had to stay.

Because things were out of hand, the deacons called a special meeting of the church. I would be given a chance to answer the questions that had been raised and then the church would vote whether I should resign or remain as pastor. As you might imagine, everyone came to that meeting, including some we hadn’t seen for months, if ever! My goal was to lay out the Gospel of God’s sovereign grace as clearly as I could. I began by reminding them that our guide for all truth must be Scripture alone, not “what I’ve always believed.” I warned them that a word like ‘Calvinism’ is a “bag word.” I held up a McDonald’s bag and said, “Will you eat what’s in here?” I then added, “Before you answer, you better check inside – it could be a hamburger, or it could be a tarantula! But let’s open the bag and look inside.” I then explained the Doctrines of Grace using the familiar TULIP, giving special attention to Election and the Nature of the Atonement, since those issues had come to the forefront. When I finished, I handed the meeting over to the deacons, left the room and waited for the vote.

To my surprise, those who voted were unanimous that I stay. But a large group had abstained. Over the next few weeks between a third and half our congregation left, including half the deacons and Sunday School teachers. Many spread far and wide the news that our church had fallen into the heresy of Calvinism. I was a painful time. I wrote in my journal for April 17, 1999,

The bleeding continues as former friends and one-time church members continue what can only be considered a campaign of slander against the Doctrines of Grace and me for preaching them. Each week brings fresh wounds and accusations, yet also, fresh mercies as God continues to uphold and support his servant. I suppose it is the complete ignorance that gets to me. How willing otherwise sane people are to believe the ridiculous and how blind Christian people can be to the clear truth of God's word – and resistant! Our losses have been tremendous, at least 1/3 of our membership so far and half the deacons. My name is slandered throughout the county. Branded a hyper-Calvinist and a liar (that one truly hurts!) Yet Lord, I can do nothing but look to you in faith and throw myself, my reputation, my integrity, my future, my family, my ministry, my all upon you! You will uphold! You will strengthen! You will bring stability! And then move us forward in accomplishing your divine will. You alone do I trust!

What got us through was the conviction that God's word is true and the faithfulness of those who stayed with us. I attended the Founder's Conference that year and shared our struggle. Many prayed for us, and some even followed up with phone calls. That helped, but the Lord got us through. As the smoke cleared, we began to see great freedom. The people who remained at Rockport wanted to be there. They wanted the truth of the Gospel. They wanted reformation. We were able to begin the process, unhindered, of revising our constitution to bring it in line with Scripture. We adopted a new, clearer confession of faith based on the Abstract of Principles that would lay the foundation for biblical eldership and church discipline. Yet, don't imagine it got easy from there! We continued to have struggles. The process of basic reformation took another three years, and really it's still going on.

Like shaping your soul, the work of shaping a church takes years of persistence. You can't do it in a five-year pastorate. It takes a commitment to stay in place, to love your people, to persist when it's painful, to preach the Word with patience, and not give up in the face of opposition. In the fifth verse of 2 Timothy 4, Paul gives four things that must be a part of a reforming pastor's life.

First, he tells Timothy to be "sober-minded." "Don't lose your head!" it means. Don't get swept away by the conflict itself. Don't let it become about you. They'll try to make it about you. That's a given. There will be accusations. Some will even be true, because you're a sinful man. I had to

repent of many attitudes during that time. So, be honest about your failings. “Watch your life and doctrine closely!”[8] Be accountable to other brothers. But keep your focus on Christ! Keep preaching the truth in love.

Second, “Endure suffering,” because there will be suffering. Jesus promised that. If you’re not willing to endure suffering and take some hits, you’re in the wrong business! You will be betrayed by some along the way. You will be slandered. Jesus was. Paul was. You will be, if you are faithful to proclaim the truth. So don’t be surprised when it happens. Don’t be shocked when people turn against you. Because it isn’t about you, not if you’re preaching Christ. So, keep the focus on Christ. Keep pointing them to Christ. And keep close to Christ yourself.

Our work of reformation took another three years to work out. We made lots of mistakes along the way: we mishandled church discipline; we tried to make men elders who weren’t yet qualified; we had to rethink every aspect of worship, evangelism and missions. Everything had to be re-examined. It seemed like we would take three steps forward and two steps back. Going through my journals, I see this dance: a victory here, a win there, followed by a big set-back with all the doubt that can bring. As late as October of 2003, I still wasn’t sure where this was going! At perhaps the lowest point in ministry, I wrote,

I must admit that as a pastor I have been a complete failure! I can preach. I can teach. I can counsel and love people. But setting out a vision and getting people to follow, to “buy in” and give their lives to it – this I just don’t seem to know how to do! I don’t know what my next step will be. I seem to have lost any real vision for Rockport.. Lord, I ask one of two things: Either renew my vision for this church and give me the energy, joy, and stamina to see it through, or remove me. Re-assign me. Let me do something else I’m better fitted to do.

Yet, God worked. He owned His word. Little by little He began to re-shape the hearts of his people, but it took years for a truly healthy fellowship to emerge and begin to see people get it. And we’re still learning! But it has become a church that is a joy to pastor, filled with people who have a real desire to know and walk with Christ.

Third, “Do the work of an evangelist.” Don’t stop preaching the Gospel. Don’t stop emphasizing missions. And, if you’re not doing those things now, get started, especially if you’re known as a Calvinist. You know the accusations: Calvinism kills missions! Don’t let it! Shortly after our fire began, a friend[9] counseled me, “Now that you’ve got a reputation as a Calvinist, make sure your church is the most mission-minded church they know.” He said, it will drive the Arminians crazy, and shut the mouths of a lot of critics! It did! Even though our DOM at the time did not share our theology, he remained a strong supporter of our church over against our

critics. He said the reason he did so was because of what he saw as our biblical commitment to missions and evangelism.

Finally, “Fulfill your ministry.” Pastor, don’t forget to be their pastor. Don’t forget to shepherd your people. If there is conflict, many of them will be hurting as much as you are, perhaps more! Many won’t understand what’s going on, they’ll just know they’re hurting. And don’t forget that your wife and children are hurting too! No matter what you may be feeling, you’ve got to man up and give your attention to their needs. Your people need you to keep loving them, no matter which side of the fence they come down on. Remind yourself often, that even the ones who oppose you, are not the real enemy. Satan is. Lies are. They are not. Some are misinformed brothers and sisters who think they’re protecting something precious, but you’re still their pastor.

Some can be won by your Christ-like love, even if they don’t understand your God-centered doctrine. We saw people leave and then years later come back because they’d been loved. I had one lady knock on the church door years later. She’d said some pretty hurtful things, but as I opened the door she burst into tears, threw her arms around my neck and said, “Oh pastor, I’m so sorry. I said some terrible things back then. But God won’t let me sleep! I know you were trying to lead the church as you thought best! I want to ask you to forgive me.” We cried and prayed together and assured one another of forgiveness in Christ. It was a sweet moment. There have been several like that. And though not everyone will come back, my job is to love them all, no matter what! Because we who believe the doctrines of grace, should be the most gracious people of all. No matter how difficult things get – and they can get really difficult – let them find in you a truly God-centered man who knows and walks with Christ. Let them find in you the most loving, kind, gracious, Gospel-centered person, they’ve ever met. And let them see how it’s rooted in these doctrines of God’s sovereign grace that you cherish and preach.

NOTES:

[1] 2 Timothy 3:16-4:5

[2] 1 Tim 3:16-17

[3] 2 Corinthians 4:5

[4] 2 Timothy 4:2

[5] 2 Timothy 4:3-4 (ESV)

[6] Not his real name.

[7] Matthew 7:21

[8]1 Timothy 4:16 (NIV)

[9]Tony Mattia, Pastor of Trinity Baptist Church of Wamego, Kansas

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DAVID SMITH

The Symbiosis of Good Things

As a young man feeling the call of God to enter the pastorate, I was blessed with good role models who demonstrated that full-bodied work. They taught me the essence of what George Herbert, in *The Country Parson*, said, “A pastor is the deputy of Christ for the reducing of man to the obedience of God.”[1] This was my firm mandate.

When I first met a friend of mine I noticed he carried a black leather-bound book with him, which I assumed was his Bible. I thought, “What a spiritual man, always carrying his Bible.” I soon discovered it was a copy of the 1689 Baptist Confession. I began questioning our relationship. Eventually, he gave me a copy (black, leather-bound, of course) and I have loved it and used it as a guide to Christian ministry ever since. As I studied its chapters, I discovered a wonderfully concise definition of the symbiotic relationship between the pastor and the church.

The Work of the Pastor

The tenth paragraph of chapter 26 of the Baptist Confession provides the church with a nicely crafted definition of the pastor’s duty. “The work of the pastor being constantly to attend to the service of Christ, in His churches, in the ministry of the Word and prayer, with watching for their souls, as they that must give an account to Him.”[2] The pastor is connected by service, ministry of the Word of God, and prayer to a people for whom he cares. For me, this greatly expanded and refined Herbert’s definition.

From generation to generation pastors have developed methods to express their “service of Christ.” For the seventeenth-century minister, Richard Baxter, it meant catechizing whole families. “The first, and main point, which I have to propound to you, is this, whether it be not the unquestionable duty of the generality of ministers . . . to set themselves presently to the work of catechizing, and instructing individually, all that are committed to their care, who will be persuaded to submit thereunto?”[3]

For the eighteenth-century Scottish minister, James Robe, the pastor’s task was to preach evangelical messages and counsel those seeking salvation. Robe’s ministry took place during the Scottish revival of the 1740s. He said of William McCulloch, who pastored at Cambuslang, “The minister of that parish, in his ordinary course of sermons, for near a twelvemonth before this work began, had been preaching on these subjects which tend most directly to explain the nature, and prove the necessity of regeneration, according to the different lights in which that important matter is represented in the holy scripture.”[4]

Both Baxter and Robe have something in common. They are applying themselves to the ministry of the Word, and prayer to the people over which God had placed them. For Baxter it meant catechizing and for Robe it was evangelistic preaching, but both were creatively shaping their duties to fulfill their calling.

Alfred Poirier, writing in the twentieth-century says, “. . . if we are called to the pastorate, we must recapture the full-blooded humanity of Christ’s own pastoral person and ministry, particularly as our great Peacemaker. Failure to train our people and our leaders as peacemakers is a failure in Christology, for peacemaking is Christology.”[5] If we add Poirier to Baxter and Robe we can see the multifaceted nature of pastoral ministry. Each of these expressions fit into the Confession’s summary of the work of the pastor.

No matter how these efforts manifest themselves they all conform to the Spirit’s work for the church through the agency of the pastoral office. The men quoted here are just a few of the voices who down through the ages have watched for the souls of their people. A holy work in the service of Christ.

The Churches to Whom They Minister

The work of the pastor does not stand alone but is dependent upon the congregation served. The Hebrew evangelist expresses this symbiotic relationship, “Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you” (Heb 13:17).[6]

The 1689 Baptist Confession places members' duties in clear terms. It is incumbent on the churches to whom they minister, not only to give them all due respect, but also to communicate to them of all their good things according to their ability, so as they may have a comfortable supply, without being themselves entangled in secular affairs; and may also be capable of exercising hospitality towards others.”[7] The authors of the Confession invested a wealth of thought and practicality into a biblically spiritual statement which reflects the heart of God for the church.

Just as the pastor has a duty to exercise his service of Christ through the ministry of the Word and prayer so the church member has a responsibility, “to give them all due respect.” The Confession references Paul’s letter to Timothy, “Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honour, especially they who labour in the word and doctrine” (1 Tim 5:17).

This idea of showing honor flies in the face of our American form of church life. Joseph Hellerman addresses this in his introduction to *When the Church was a Family*. “We in America have been socialized to believe that our own dreams, goals, and personal fulfillment ought to take precedence over the well-being of any group—our church or our family, for example—to which we belong.”[8] So many pastors have been fired and their reputations ruined by self-serving members inclined to build their own ecclesiastic empire. We as a community of Christ-followers must work against this trend by intentionally honoring men who have served well.

Our intentionality must include “all good things” not just affirmative words. The apostle writes, “Let him that is taught in the word communicate unto him that teacheth in all good things” (Gal 6:6). The reason for the church’s care of their pastor is summed up by the Confession in these words, “without being themselves entangled in secular affairs; and may also be capable of exercising hospitality towards others.”[9] The modern church faces a dilemma at this point. The bi-vocational, co-vocational pastor is a fact of church life. For the pastor’s adequate supply and an ability hospitably to entertain they often resort to secular employment.

Pastors such as myself have looked to the tentmaking example of Paul (Acts 18:3) as an honored tradition for the service of Christ. Men who work in the marketplace give meaning to the word “vigilant” (1 Tim 3:2). Powered by the Spirit of God they maintain a discipline that keeps them from diminishing their holy occupation. This, however, does not excuse the congregation that could do more for their shepherd. Too often today, the ministry is minimized by groups within the church that reduce the pastor’s function to an affordable line item. This is not how it should be.

The Confession's Argument Reasoned from Scripture

The Confession concludes this paragraph with a well-reasoned argument drawn from Scripture. "And this is required by the law of nature, and by the express order of our Lord Jesus, who has ordained that they that preach the Gospel should live of the Gospel." [10] The foundation for this statement is 1 Corinthians 9:6-14 where the apostle established dedicated service by the minister and dedicated care of the man of God by the church. He supports his logic by appealing to the law of nature, the law of Moses, and the teaching of Christ.

The "law of nature" is used as the lowest support for his position. "Who goeth to warfare any time at his own charges? who planteth a vineyard, and eateth not of the fruit thereof? or who feedeth a flock, and eateth not of the milk of the flock?" (1 Cor 9:7). Viewed from this perspective, it is only natural that a man would earn his living from the care of God's tender flock.

A warning is due at this point. It would be unnatural for a man to be provided for in this way who did not serve well. It is required of pastors, all ministers of the gospel, to walk circumspectly remembering that "we must give an account" of our service. Allow me to draw again on Richard Baxter. "Whereas, if we abound in faith, and love, and zeal, how would it overflow to the refreshing of our congregations, and how would it appear in the increase of the same graces in them! O brethren, watch therefore over your own hearts: keep out lusts and passions, and worldly inclinations; keep the life of faith, and love, and zeal: be much at home, and be much with God." [11]

This warning is extended to congregations as well. Would a flock, vineyard, or military assignment willingly withhold fruit or due payment? No. The natural order suggests the answer. If it wasn't for the vine dresser or the shepherd there would be no production. Without the fighting man in the ranks, no war is won. The law of nature makes a powerful argument but lacks the authority Paul is looking for to land his punch.

The argument intensifies as the law of Moses is considered. "For it is written in the law of Moses, Thou shalt not muzzle the mouth of the ox that treadeth out the corn. Doth God take care for oxen?" (1 Cor 9:9). The passage the apostle appeals to is found in Deuteronomy 25:4 to which he adds his own commentary in verses 10-11 and 1 Timothy 5:17-18. He shows that this is meant for the men who serve in sowing, reaping, and laboring in the Word and doctrine. Their care is ordained by God.

Just as in his argument from the law of nature the church is not out of view. The passage in 1 Corinthians is very direct as Paul confronts his audience with their responsibility. "If we

have sown unto you spiritual things, is it a great thing if we shall reap your carnal things?” (1 Corinthians 9:11). This is a rhetorical question. The service in spiritual things, in serving Christ, is much greater than the provision laid aside by the congregation.

The imagery of the temple priesthood leads the reader to the final appeal connecting the law of Moses and the teaching of Christ. “Even so hath the Lord ordained that they which preach the gospel should live of the gospel” (1 Cor 9:13; see also Matthew 10:10 and Luke 10:7). The Confession quotes this passage as the highest authority for both the pastor and the church. Such an ordination should be cherished and honored for the glory of God and the furtherance of his gospel.

In every relationship there is a giving and a receiving; responsibility and privilege. The authors of the Confession expressed it in terms of Christian devotion. “And O that, other contentions being laid asleep, the only care and contention of all upon whom the name of our blessed Redeemer is called might for the future be to walk humbly with their God in the exercise of all love and meekness toward each other, to perfect holiness in the fear of the Lord, each one endeavoring to have his conversation such as becometh the Gospel.”[12]

Paragraph 10 is not simply an ecclesiastical reality written to give the church mutual care instructions. It is means of perfecting holiness, fearing God, and advancing the gospel. When pastors and their congregations show “love and meekness toward each other” then will be fulfilled Christ’s command. “A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another” (John 15:34–35).

NOTES:

[1]George Herbert, *The Priest to the Temple or, The Country Parson* (Amazon.com Services, n.p., 2010), Loc 21, Kindle.

[2]*The Baptist Confession of Faith and the Baptist Catechism* (Port St. Lucie, FL: Solid Ground Christian Books, 2018), 57–58.

[3]Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor*, ed. William Brown (1897; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1974), 41–42.

[4][4]James Robe, *Narratives of the Extraordinary Work of the Spirit of God, at Cambuslang, Kilsyth, Etc., Begun 1742*. Written by James Robe and Others, With Attestations by Ministers, Preachers Etc (Palala Press,

2015), 2.

[5] Alfred Poirier, *The Peacemaking Pastor: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Church Conflict* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2006), 26.

[6] All scripture quotations are from the King James Version of the Bible unless otherwise noted.

[7] *The Baptist Confession*, 57–58.

[8] Joseph H. Hellerman, *When the Church Was a Family: Recapturing Jesus' Vision for Authentic Christian Community*. (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2009), 4.

[9] *The Baptist Confession*, 57–58.

[10] *The Baptist Confession*, 57–58.

[11] Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor*, 61.

[12] *The Baptist Confession*, xiv.



TOM HICKS

Associations Among Baptist Churches

From their beginnings, Baptists have been an associational people. They not only held firmly to the independency of local churches, but they also believed that churches should associate with one another for the benefit of all the churches, to cooperate in any of the commands of Christ that would be impossible for any single church to fulfill by itself, and to reflect the reality that the kingdom of God is broader than any one local church. The early Baptists believed so strongly in associating that they codified their doctrine of association in The Second London Baptist Confession of Faith.

The Second London Baptist Confession, Chapter 26 says:

Paragraph 14. As each church, and all the members of it, are bound to pray continually for the good and prosperity of all the churches of Christ,[27] in all places, and upon all occasions to further every one within the bounds of their places and callings, in the exercise of their gifts and graces, so the churches, when planted by the providence of God, so as they may enjoy opportunity and advantage for it, ought to hold communion among themselves, for their peace, increase of love, and mutual edification.[28]

[27] Eph 6:18; Ps 122:6

[28] Rom 16:1, 2; 3 Jn 8-10

Paragraph 15. In cases of difficulties or differences, either in point of doctrine or administration, wherein either the churches in general are concerned, or any one church, in their peace, union, and edification; or any member or members of any church are injured, in or by any proceedings in censures not agreeable to truth and order: it is according to the mind of Christ, that many churches holding communion together, do, by their messengers, meet to consider, and give their advice in or about that matter in difference, to be reported to all the churches concerned;[29] howbeit these messengers assembled, are not intrusted with any church-power properly so called; or with any jurisdiction over the churches themselves, to exercise any censures either over any churches or persons; or to impose their determination on the churches or officers.[30]

[29] Acts 15:2, 4, 6, 22, 23, 25

[30] 2 Cor 1:24; 1 Jn 4:1

Paragraph 14 provides a summary statement of the Baptist doctrine of association, while paragraph 15 goes into greater detail about how associations should function.

Informal Association Among All True Churches

Paragraph 14 of the confession says, “As each church, and all the members of it, are bound to pray continually for the good and prosperity of all the churches of Christ” (emphasis is mine). In saying that each church should pray for “all the churches of Christ,” not just for other Baptist churches, the early Baptists showed that they were not sectarian, but catholic. They understood that they were in an informal association with non-Baptist Churches. Their convictions were rooted in a strong doctrine of the universal church (2LC 26.1).

The early Baptists linked the Bible’s teaching about the “body” of Christ to the universal church, which in turn fed their doctrine of both informal and formal associations. For example, in writing about the doctrine of informal association among all true churches, the Abingdon Association (established in 1652) declared, “For the churches of Christ do all make up but one body or church in general under Christ their head as Eph 1:22f, Col 1:24, Eph 5:23ff, 1 Cor 12:13....”[1] Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12 teach that all the parts of Christ’s body need each other. This certainly applies within a particular local church. But it also applies among all true churches. Individual churches may lack important parts of Christ’s body, which is why they need each other to be strengthened according to the particular gifts God has given them. Romans 12:45 says, “Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.”[2]

God's providence limits the ability of churches to do good to every other church, since there are so many churches in the world, but churches should do so, when they have the providential opportunity for it. It's often easier to seek the good and prosperity of churches in a particular geographic area. Consider the churches of Galatia (Gal 1:2); Judea (1:22); seven churches of Asia (Rev 1:4).

The confession says that churches should serve one another according to their "places and callings." In today's English, we normally think of the word "place" as referring to geographic location. But the Oxford Dictionary defines "place" as "A position or standing in an order of estimation or merit. Specifically, a person's social rank or status, the duty or rights appropriate to a social rank."^[3] In other words, as they have opportunity, church members should serve other churches in ways that are suited to their office or position in the church. Pastors should do good to other churches according to their capacities for teaching, preaching, and leadership. Deacons ought to serve other churches in ways suited to their office. The confession also speaks of "gifts and graces," which calls to mind passages in the Bible about the body of Christ, the universal church, in which believers are told to care for one another according to the gifts bestowed upon them by the Holy Spirit. This applies first within local churches, but secondarily, it applies to the universal church. Christ desires love and oneness for His people, not just in one church (Jn 13:24-35; 17:11, 21-23).

There are various ways churches can apply this doctrine of informal association among all true churches. They might pray in their worship services and prayer meetings for other churches in their city or town, even those that are not within their own denomination or formal association. This would show love and unity and might help counter any spirit of competition or superiority. Pastors might reach out to other pastors in their area, form friendships, and consider ways they can serve and help each other. Deacons from several churches might join together to give aid to the community in a time of crisis, or to meet other needs, as long as their responsibilities to their own churches are met. For the sake of unity in the body of Christ, churches should be thinking of ways to work together and serve each other that don't violate their confessional and ecclesiastical commitments.

Formal Association Among Baptist Churches

The second half of paragraph 14 then moves to consider formal association among Baptist churches. It says, "so the churches, when planted by the providence of God, so as they may enjoy opportunity and advantage for it, ought to hold communion among themselves, for their peace, increase of love, and mutual edification" (2LCF 26.14).

James Renihan, scholar of Baptist history, has shown through extensive research that the phrase “hold communion” was a technical term among the early Baptists, referring to formal associations.[4] It did not merely intend informal fraternal relationships. One example of the technical use of the language of holding communion can be seen at the founding of the Abingdon Association. The messengers approved the following language as part of the basis of the establishment of their association:

“Whereas the Lord hath made it appear unto us by the holy Scriptures that true churches of Christ ought to acknowledge one another to be such and to hold a firm communion with each other in point of advice in things remaining doubtful to any particular church or churches as also in giving and receiving in case of the want and poverty of any particular church or churches and in consulting and consenting (as need shall require and as shall be most for the glory of God) to the joint carrying on of the work of the Lord that is common to the churches” (emphasis is mine).[5]

Such examples could be multiplied. It is evident from the quotation above that the Baptists used the words “hold communion” to refer to a formal association in which churches could (1) give advice to each other, (2) provide financial support to needy churches, (3) consult each other, and (4) jointly carry on the work Christ has commanded.

Renihan notes that an objection has sometimes been raised against his historical argument that “holding communion” refers to formal associations.[6] It has been suggested that since the language of The Second London Baptist Confession in paragraphs 14-15 is borrowed from The Savoy Platform of Polity, the Baptists must have believed what the Savoyans did at this point, and the Savoyans often did not establish formal associations. Instead, they met in synods and councils to resolve matters, and then they dissolved those synods and councils when their business was completed. There were often no standing formal associations. Thus, the argument goes, that paragraphs 14-15 of The Second London Baptist Confession must not require Baptist churches to be in formal associations, since the confession adopts the language in The Savoy Platform of Polity, and the Savoyans didn’t always have formal associations.

Renihan answers this argument in several ways. First, he notes that while the language of the confession is borrowed from The Savoy Platform, it must be understood in context of the more narrow Baptist usage at the time. Second, he shows from their writings that the Independents were not all opposed to formal associations, and many of them favored them. Third, and I believe most importantly, he points out that the Baptists changed the language of The Savoy Platform at a key point.

The Savoy Platform reads: “That many churches holding communion together, do by their messengers meet in a Synod or Council, to consider and give their advice...” (emphasis is mine). [7] The Second London Confession, on the other hand, dropped the words “in a Synod or Council,” showing that they did not approve of mere temporary councils. It says, “That many churches holding communion together, do by their messengers meet to consider and give their advice...” (2LCF 26.15). The Baptists, therefore, intended to confess the practice of formal associationalism, which was already well established among Baptists by the time they compiled, edited, and adopted The Second London Baptist Confession. Renihan writes:

“Since in some cases the Independent method of holding communion included the occasional convening of synods or councils, and this was not part of the Baptist practice, the deletion of this phrase argues for a peculiarly Baptist understanding of the words ‘holding communion.’ In their recension of the Savoy material, they recast the statement to reflect the well-established polity already in place. By adopting this language, they confess their commitment to the pattern existing among their churches. The final portion of chapter 26, paragraph 15 must be read carefully. The Baptist polity, expressed in formal organizations, is the basis for the resolution of differences and giving advice. The participle ‘holding communion’ implies a present and established state of communion, and this established state provides the forum at which these issues may find resolution. They did not need to hold occasional ‘synods or councils’ because they already had in place the means by which to settle matters: association meetings.”[8]

Therefore, the language in the second part of paragraph 14 and all of paragraph 15 should be understood to be referring to formal association. Notice that it says the churches “ought to hold communion among themselves” (2LCF 26.14, emphasis is mine). There is an “oughtness,” or obligation, to formal association in the confession. This does not mean that every Baptist church will be in a position to be in faithful association, only that every Baptist church should be seeking such an association, or perhaps, working to build one “as they may enjoy opportunity and advantage for it” (2LCF 26.14).

The purpose of formal associations is “for their peace, increase of love, and mutual edification” (2LCF 26.14). The Baptists believed that associations help to preserve peace through their potential to resolve differences and settle questions together, to increase love through the natural and fraternal relations that are fostered within them, and to mutually edify the churches by working together to obey the commands of Christ. Associations of churches can work together to perform a number of important tasks, including obeying the great commission by planting churches with a shared confession of faith, supporting theological seminaries that are accountable to the churches of the association to assist them in training pastors and missionaries, publishing

useful books and other materials for the churches, providing a means for financial assistance to churches in need, helping to resolve conflict between churches and within them, and giving advice about how to answer both theological and practical questions that arise within the churches.

The Baptists grounded their doctrine of associationalism in the Scriptures. For example, The London General Assembly of 1689 provided the following Scriptural support for their formal association.

Acts 15

They said that this chapter shows that churches should gather to give “advice after serious consultation and deliberation in matters and controversies remaining doubtful to any particular church.” At least two churches participated in the Jerusalem council: the church of Jerusalem and Antioch.

Romans 15:26

“For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make some contribution for the poor among the saints at Jerusalem” (Rom 15:26). The London General Assembly said this shows that churches should give and receive “in case of poverty and want of any particular churches.” The churches of Macedonia and Achaia pooled their financial resources to give to the church in Jerusalem. See also 2 Corinthians 9:12-15

Acts 11:22

“The report of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch” (Acts 11:22). Churches should send “their gifted brethren to use their gifts for the edification of the churches that need the same,” according to the London General Assembly. Here in Acts 11:22, the Jerusalem church sent Barnabas to the church in Antioch.

2 Corinthians 8:19

“And not only that, but he has been appointed by the churches to travel with us as we carry out this act of grace that is being ministered by us, for the glory of the Lord himself and to show our good will” (2 Cor 8:19, emphasis is mine). Note that a singular individual was appointed by a plurality of churches. This strongly implies an association of churches. 2 Corinthians 8:16-24 as a whole is an important passage to demonstrate associations in the early church. “As for Titus, he is my partner and fellow worker for your benefit. And as for our brothers, they are messengers

of the churches, the glory of Christ. So give proof before the churches of your love and of our boasting about you to these men” (2 Cor 8:23-24, emphasis is mine).

1 Corinthians 12:12

“For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ” (1 Cor 12:12). The churches are all members of the same body of Christ. And they’re all responsible to each other “for good in respect of purity of doctrine, exercise of love and good conversation.”

So, in all these ways, the London General Assembly of 1689 argued that formal associations are biblical.[9] But more could be added. Some Baptists argued that Colossians 2:6, 19 and 4:16 teach an association of churches. “Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him . . . holding fast to the Head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together throughout its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God” (Col 2:6, 19). Compare that to Colossians 4:16, which says, “And when this letter has been read among you, have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans and see that you also read the letter from Laodicea.” These verses seem to imply a formal relationship between two local churches. They are to walk together in Christ and grow together in Christ.[10]

To all these biblical grounds could be added the biblical warrant for supporting of gospel workers from other churches (Rom 16:1-3; 3 Jn 8-10; 2 Jn 5-11) and frequent correspondence among the churches (Col 2:1; cf. 1:3-7; 4:7, 12). Consider also how the Bible speaks of groups of churches according to their geographic regions. This seems to imply some form of association among those churches. Scripture addresses the churches of Galatia (Gal 1:2), the churches of Judea (Gal 1:22), the churches of Hierapolis, Colossae, and Laodicea (Col 4:13-16), and the seven Churches of Asia (Rev. 1:4). According to some, the angels of the churches in Revelation may even be associational messengers.[11]

Difficulties and Differences Among Churches in Formal Associations

After laying down a summary of the biblical doctrine of associationalism in paragraph 14, the confession turns to address the proper function of associations in paragraph 15. It begins to discuss how associations should function by laying down various kinds of difficulties and differences that might arise among the churches who hold communion together.

The confession speaks of “cases of difficulties or differences, either in point of doctrine or administration” (2LCF 26.15). “Difficulties” refer to hard and possibly confusing questions that need to be worked through and resolved biblically among the churches. “Differences” are

points at which the churches or members of churches have settled different beliefs or practices. Difficulties and differences can occur in two different areas, according to the confession. They might occur in matters of “doctrine” or they might occur in matters of “administration.” Renihan helpfully writes, “We have four things that are set before us. There are four possibilities that associationalism addresses: 1) difficulties in doctrine; 2) difficulties in administration; 3) differences in doctrine; 4) differences in administration.”[12]

Consider some historical examples of these differences and difficulties. With respect to doctrine, early Baptists had to work through the difficult question of how to answer the doctrine of eternal justification. Those who subscribed to The Second London Baptist Confession were united in opposition to it, but they did not all know how to refute it biblically and theologically. This is a difficulty of doctrine. The hymn singing controversy is an example of a difference of doctrine, which was not codified in the confession of faith. The churches of the London Baptist Association had different perspectives on this question. Some believed congregations should sing hymns, while others did not, and that difference caused a great conflict, which the association tried to help resolve (though it ultimately failed).

The same can be seen in matters of administration. The churches did not all agree about how to pay their ministers. The association endorsed an anonymous work by Benjamin Keach, *The Gospel Minister’s Maintenance Vindicated* in order to help churches resolve this difference of administration. As it pertains to a difficulty in administration, churches might have problems in trying to do something, such as sending a missionary, or training or supporting pastors. As an example of a difficulty of administration, James Renihan provides a personal example related to church offerings. He writes that in his association, “I proposed a question to the assembly about whether or not pastors ought to be aware of the amount of money their people give in their offerings. That was a genuine question on our part because we wanted to hear the wisdom of others. I was really helped by that conversation.”[13]

The confession also outlines three places where these difficulties and differences might occur. It says they might occur in (1) “the churches in general” or (2) in “any one church,” or (3) with respect to “any member or members of any church.” The confession is saying that in some way, it would be fitting for an association to weigh in and give advice on matters not only between member churches, but within the independent churches themselves. There may arise a situation where one member in a church believes one thing and another member believes another, such that there is an impasse threatening to cause division and the elders are unable to resolve it. There are also cases in which the elders of a church have a doctrinal dispute, which is difficult to resolve within that local church. The confession is saying that in cases like these, it is fitting for a local church to seek advice from its association.

The association can also provide recourse to individual church members who believe they have been wronged through improper application of church discipline or censure. It says that when “members of any church are injured, in or by any proceedings in censures not agreeable to truth and order” (2LCF 26.15), they may seek help from the association.

How Difficulties and Differences are to be Resolved in Formal Associations

The middle section of paragraph 15 outlines a process by which formal associations of Baptist churches should resolve difficulties and differences. 2LCF 26.15 says, “it is according to the mind of Christ, that many churches holding communion together, do, by their messengers, meet to consider, and give their advice in or about that matter in difference, to be reported to all the churches concerned.” There are three parts of the formal mechanism by which associations are to address difficulties and differences.

First, the messengers of the association are to “meet to consider” a matter. That is, the matter being considered should be clearly known and understood by all the messengers of the association. While nothing in these words prevents the association as a whole from voting to appoint a smaller committee to study and consider the matter in question, the results of the study must be made known to all the messengers of the association, and not merely known by a smaller committee. That is the only way that the messengers of the churches can “consider” a matter as the confession requires.

Second, the messengers of the association are to “give their advice.” It’s important to understand that the association is given no power whatsoever to give any sort of binding directives or orders to churches or individuals. Rather, its sole power in matters of difficulty and difference is to give advice. The advice given by the association should never come from an official in the association, or a small group of messengers, such as a committee without the knowledge and consent of all the messengers of the association. While a committee approved by the messengers might recommend certain advice in a particular situation, the confession clearly says that the messengers of the association are the only ones who are permitted to give that advice to the parties concerned. The advice must be deliberated in the general assembly and voted upon and approved by all the messengers of the association before it can be given to the parties concerned.

Third, the advice given by the messengers must be “reported to all the churches.” This means not merely that the messengers receive a full report of the advice given, but the members of all the churches of the association must receive a report of the advice given in a particular situation. The association should publish a report of its advice to all the members of all the churches in

the association, since every individual member of an associational church is a member of the association as a whole.

The biblical ground cited by the confession for this associational practice is Acts 15:2, 4, 6, 22, 23, 25. The messengers of the Jerusalem council met to consider whether all Christians ought to be circumcised. They discussed the matter openly in the general assembly. They discussed and formulated their advice together. And a letter was sent to all the members of all the churches, giving their advice.

Limitation of Power in Formal Associations

The final part of chapter 15 says, “these messengers assembled, are not intrusted with any church-power properly so called; or with any jurisdiction over the churches themselves, to exercise any censures either over any churches or persons; or to impose their determination on the churches or officers.” These words impose four limitations on formal associations.

First, associations have no “church power, properly so called.” That means, the decisions, pronouncements and advice of associations have no authority to bind local churches, requiring them to do anything. Local churches are independent of any hierarchy of organization. Nevertheless, associations may put a strong informal pressure upon churches by their decisions, pronouncements, and advice.

Second, associations have “no jurisdiction over the churches themselves.” That means associations have no right to rule over or impose judicial decisions upon the churches or within the churches. The congregation of a local church alone has sole jurisdiction over that church, under the authority of Christ.

Third, associations may not “exercise any censures either over any churches or persons.” Benjamin Keach explained the meaning of “censure.” He wrote, “Now as to church-censures I understand but two besides suspension: (1.) withdrawing from a member that walks disorderly and (2.) casting out, or (excommunicating).” [14] Thus, the prohibition on censure forbids the association from exercising church discipline over anyone. For example, the association may not withhold the Lord’s Supper or remove members from church membership.

Fourth, the messengers of the association may not “impose their determination on the churches or the officers.” This means that while the association may certainly make determinations, which is absolutely necessary for giving advice in matters of differences and difficulties, it has no authority to “impose” its determination upon any church or officer of a church. If local churches

want to impose the association's advice, they may do so. Local churches may also reject the association's advice.

Finally, it must be stated that these limitations on associational authority in no way prohibit the association from coming to conclusions about differences and difficulties (since that would contradict the previous part of the confession) or from identifying heretics and unrepentant sinners in the churches, and publishing its findings about such matters to all the churches. The association must possess this authority in order to have any grounds for removing member churches for their failure to deal faithfully in such matters.

To give one example of an association identifying "sins" in a local church and even calling for "repentance," but never usurping local church authority, James Renihan writes:

"In 1696, a dispute arose in the Bromsgrove, Worcestershire church between the pastor, John Eckells, and the people of the church consisting of charges of disorderliness against Eckells and his family. The contention dragged on for 4 years. In 1697, the church sought the help of the association, and sent a long letter explaining the circumstances. The association responded with an equally long and detailed letter specifically addressing the problems and sorting out the sins of the various individuals concerned. They called for repentance and asked all of the churches in the association to observe a day of prayer and fasting. . . . [later] They addressed the specific issues involved, urged a course of action to take, and protested when others became involved." [15]

This Baptist association never usurped the authority of the local church because it never forced the church to do anything. All it did was consider the matter, give its opinion on the matter, and finally urge a course of action. Certainly, this is an informal kind of influence over the churches, but it is not churchly authority properly so-called.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Second London Baptist Confession of Faith says that Baptist churches should be in formal association when they have means and opportunity to do so faithfully. It further outlines the proper workings of an association and limits associational power so that it may never usurp the authority of local churches which are independent of all outside human authorities.

NOTES:

[1] B.R. White, ed., *Association Records of the Particular Baptists of England, Wales and Ireland to 1660*, 3 vols (London: The Baptist Historical Society, 1971-74), 128.

[2] See Conrad Mbewe, *Foundations for the Flock: Truths About the Church for All the Saints* (Hannibal, MO: Granted Ministries, 2011), 215-220.

[3] See also James Renihan, *Associational Churchmanship* (Palmdale, CA: RBAP, 2016), 46.

[4] James M. Renihan, *Edification and Beauty: The Practical Ecclesiology of the English Particular Baptists, 1675-1705* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2008), 154-183.

[5] White, *Association Records*, 129.

[6] James M. Renihan, "A Reformed Baptist Perspective on Associations of Churches," in *Denominations or Associations?* (Amityville, NY: Calvary Press, 2001), 62-78.

[7] James M. Renihan, ed., *True Confessions: Baptist Documents in the Reformed Family* (Owensboro, KY: RBAP, 2004), 175.

[8] Renihan, *Edification and Beauty*, 173.

[9] White, *Association Records*, 20-21.

[10] Renihan, "A Reformed Baptist Perspective," 45-46.

[11] For a helpful discussion of associations and their biblical warrant and purposes, see Samuel E. Waldron, *A Modern Exposition of the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith*, 5th edition: revised and corrected (Grand Rapids, MI: EP Books, 2016), 385-387.

[12] Renihan, *Associational Churchmanship*, 58.

[13] *Ibid.*, 59-60.

[14] Benjamin Keach, *The Glory of a True Church* (1697; reprint, Conway, AR: Free Grace Press, 2015), 37.

[15] Renihan, *Edification and Beauty*, 180-181.

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