



THE DOCTRINE OF THE CHURCH

Mark A. Snoeberger, Ph.D.

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY 7: THE DOCTRINE OF THE CHURCH

Institute for Church Leadership: Community Bible Church, Trenton, MI
Instructor: Mark A. Snoeberger (msnoeberger@dbts.edu)

Introduction

I. The Meaning of “Church”:

The doctrine of the church is formally known as “ecclesiology” (from the Greek *ekklesia*—church or assembly; *ology*—doctrine or study of). The English word “church” likewise comes from the Greek *kuriokos*, which means “belonging to the Lord.”

The church in Scripture is not to be confused with a building; in fact, church buildings did not become popular until after Christianity received toleration status from the Roman Emperor Constantine in A.D. 313 and particularly after he proclaimed Sunday a perpetual holiday in A.D. 321. The term “church” as reference to a building first emerged in the fifth century when thieves of church property became known as “robbers *kuriokos*,” or robbers of what belongs to the Lord.

The church in Scripture should also not be confused a civil or denominational structure (e.g., The Roman Catholic Church or “Church and State”), even though these are popular understandings of the term today.

Instead, the Scriptural term for church (*ekklesia*) has reference to a group of people who have been “called out” of the world by means of Spirit baptism for function in the body of Christ, whether in its local or universal expression.

Too much emphasis of the idea of “calling out,” however, can be detrimental to our thinking. Like many Greek terms, *ekklesia* has both a general and technical meaning. For instance, all people who follow are not technically “disciples,” all people who are sent are not technically “apostles,” all words that are written are not technically “Scripture,” and all books are not “Bibles.” The term *ekklesia* is similar to these terms. The term can mean generically any group summonsed for assembly (the term is used to reference Israel dozens of times in the Septuagint and even in the NT—Acts 7:38; Heb 2:12), but technically denotes THE NT assembly of believers in most of its uses in the NT.

II. The Usage of *Ekklesia* in the NT:

The term *ekklesia* is used twice of an ethnic assembly (Acts 7:38, Heb 2:12), thrice of a civil assembly (Acts 19:32, 39, 41), and 109 times of the NT assembly of believers. Of these 109, 11 reference the whole body of Christ in all ages (Eph 1:22; 3:21; 5:23, 24, 25, 27, 29, 32, Col 1:18; 1 Tim 3:15; Heb 12:23), 8 reference the whole number of Spirit-baptized believers living during a particular period of history (Acts 9:31; 1 Cor 10:32; 12:28; 15:9; Gal 1:13; Eph 3:10; Phil 3:6; Col 1:24), and the other 90 reference local churches. The emphasis of Scripture is reflected in the percentage of material dedicated to the universal and local church in this syllabus.

III. The Importance of the Study of the Church:

The two chief values of the study of the doctrine of the church are *dispensational* and *practical*. The dispensational value of this study will be seen primarily in the first section of this syllabus: God is working differently during the period of the NT Church than he was previously during the period of OT national Israel living under the Mosaic Law. The practical value of this study is found primarily in the second section of this syllabus: since God has entrusted his entire program of witness and service on earth during this dispensation to the institution of the church (1 Tim 3:15), much of the NT is given to a discussion of how the visible expression of this institution (the local church) is to function.

IV. Bibliography:

- Allison, Gregg R. *Sojourners and Strangers: The Doctrine of the Church*. Wheaton: Crossway, 2012.
- Anyabwile, Thabiti. *What Is a Healthy Church Member?* Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008.
- Bauder, Kevin. *Baptist Distinctives and New Testament Church Order*. Schaumburg, IL: Regular Baptist Press, 2012.
- Brand, Chad Owen, and R. Stanton Norman, eds. *Five Views on Church Polity: Perspectives on Church Government*. Nashville: B&H, 2004.
- Clowney, Edmund P. *The Church: Sacraments, Worship, Ministry, Mission*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995.
- Cowan, Steven B., ed. *Who Runs the Church? Four Views on Church Government*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004.
- Dagg, J. L. *Manual of Church Order*. Reprint of 1858 ed. Harrisonburg, VA: Gano Books, 1990.
- Dana, H. E. *A Manual of Ecclesiology*. Kansas City, KS: Central Seminary Press, 1944.
- Dargan, Edwin Charles. *Ecclesiology: A Study of the Churches*. 2nd rev. ed. Louisville, KY: Charles T. Dearing, 1905.
- Dever, Mark. *The Church: The Gospel Made Visible*. Nashville: B&H, 2012.
- _____. *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004.
- _____. *What Is a Healthy Church?* Wheaton: Crossway, 2007.
- Dever, Mark, and Jonathan Leeman. *Baptist Foundations: Church Government in an Anti-Institutional Age*. Nashville: B&H, 2015.
- Dever, Mark, ed. *Polity: A Collection of Historic Baptist Documents*. Washington: Center for Church Reform, 2001. Digital version available at <http://wwwFOUNDERS.org/library/polity/>
- DeYoung, Kevin, and Greg Gilbert. *What Is the Mission of the Church? Making Sense of Social Justice, Shalom, and the Great Commission*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011.
- Graves, Allen W. *Principles of Administration for a Baptist Association*. Nashville: Broadman, 1978.
- Hammett, John S. *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches: A Contemporary Ecclesiology*. Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2005.
- Hiscox, Edward T. *The New Directory for Baptist Churches*. Philadelphia: Judson Press, 1894.
- Jackson, Paul R. *The Doctrine and Administration of the Local Church*. Revised ed. Schaumburg, IL: Regular Baptist Press, 1980.

- Jamieson, Bobby. *Going Public: Why Baptism Is Required for Church Membership*. Nashville: B&H, 2015.
- Laney, J. Carl. *A Guide to Church Discipline*. Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 1985.
- Leeman, Jonathan. *The Church and the Surprising Offense of God's Love*. Wheaton: Crossway, 2010.
- _____. *Church Discipline: How the Church Protects the Name of Jesus*. Wheaton: Crossway, 2012.
- _____. *Church Membership: How the World Knows Who Represents Jesus*. Wheaton: Crossway, 2012.
- Maring, Norman H., and Winthrop S. Hudson. *A Baptist Manual of Polity and Practice*. Revised ed. Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1991.
- Merkle, Benjamin L. *40 Questions About Elders and Deacons*. Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2008.
- Newton, Phil A., and Matt Schmucker. *Elders in the Life of the Church*. Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2014.
- Radmacher, Earl D. *The Nature of the Church*. Hayesville, NC: Schoettle, 1996.
- Saucy, Robert L. *The Church in God's Program*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1972.
- Schreiner, Thomas R., and Matthew R. Crawford, eds. *The Lord's Supper: Remembering and Proclaiming Christ Until He Comes*. Nashville: B&H, 2011.
- Schreiner, Thomas R., and Shawn D. Wright, eds. *Believer's Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ*. Nashville: B&H, 2007.
- VanDrunen, David. *Living in God's Two Kingdoms: A Biblical Vision for Christianity and Culture*. Wheaton: Crossway, 2010.
- Vlach, Michael J. *Has the Church Replaced Israel? A Theological Evaluation*. Nashville: B&H, 2010.
- Wills, Gregory A. *Democratic Religion: Freedom, Authority, and Church Discipline in the Baptist South, 1785-1900*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.

PART 1: THE DOCTRINE OF THE UNIVERSAL CHURCH

I. The Definition of the Church Universal

A. Formal Definition

The universal church is the total number of true Christian believers, whether in heaven or on earth, who have been Spirit-baptized into the body of Christ.

Other definitions expand the idea of the church to include all regenerate believers from all ages. This understanding, while common, is inadequate, because it assumes (1) that every body of saints in human history were part of the church, (2) that God has furthered his divine agenda in the same way at all points in history, and (3) that entry into the church is by mere regeneration rather than by Spirit baptism. In this section all three of these assumptions will be examined and rejected.

B. Clarification of the Term “Universal”

The term “universal” draws attention to the fact that it includes *all* believers between Pentecost and the Rapture. Other designations include the “invisible church,” which draws attention to the fact that it is never physically (visibly) assembled as a complete body until Christ returns. Perhaps a better designation is the “body church” or the “body of Christ,” which draws attention to the fact that is mutually exclusive of other bodies of believers (e.g., OT saints). These designations are interchangeable in this syllabus.

II. The Distinctions of the Universal Church

A. The Universal Church is distinct from the nation of Israel.

Covenant theology, in an effort to protect the immutability of God’s character and decree, detects a seamless continuity between Israel in the OT and the Church in the NT as *the one redemptive* community of God: Israel is the “church in the OT” and the Church is the “new Israel.” While sympathetic with the need to protect God’s immutable character and decree, this course argues that these doctrines do not demand that Israel and the Church be *typologically associated*, much less *synonymous* bodies. Note the following:

1. The immutability of God does not demand that God be changeless in his *programs and actions*, but in his *character and decree*. While Israel and the Church are both God’s elect people, their election is not identical. Israel is an elect *nation*, a socio-political community through which God chiefly manifested his civil character; the Church is a regenerate community through which God has manifested the fulness of his redemptive character. While God’s purposes for ethnic Israel will never change (see Romans 9:6; chap. 11), the prominence of ethnic Israel in God’s comprehensive program is presently diminished as God gathers to himself a redeemed people from among the nations, which are not his people in any sense.

2. The Church is distinct in *character* from Israel.

a. Its components are distinct.

Jews and Gentiles are on a plane of equality in the church. The OT allowed Gentiles into limited fellowship with the nation of Israel, but never extended equality of standing to them. Racial and ethnic barriers limited the extent of Gentile participation in the levitical ritual and excluded them even from entry into some of the Temple precincts. The church, however, knows no racial or ethnic barriers.

Galatians 3:27—For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed your-selves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

Ephesians 2:11–16—Therefore remember that formerly you, the Gentiles in the flesh, who are called “Uncircumcision” by the so-called “Circumcision, which is performed in the flesh by human hands—remember that you were at that time separate from Christ, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who made both groups into one and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall, by abolishing in his flesh the enmity, which is the Law of commandments contained in ordinances, so that in himself he might make the two into one new man, thus establishing peace, and might reconcile them both in one body to God through the cross, by it having put to death the enmity.

Ephesians 3:4–6—The mystery of Christ, which in other generations was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit; that the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

Cf. Mark 7:27—Now the woman was a Gentile, of the Syrophenician race. And she kept asking him to cast the demon out of her daughter. And he said, “Let the children be satisfied first, for it is not good to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.” But she answered and said to him, “Yes, Lord, but even the dogs under the table feed on the children’s crumbs.”

b. Entry into the respective communities is distinct.

One becomes an Israelite by physical descent, and are formally confirmed in the community through circumcision. Believers are placed into this “one new man” (Eph 2:15) by means of Spirit baptism. This function of the Spirit is both *new* (Matt 3:11; Acts 1:5) and universal among all believers in the present era, whether they be *Jew or Gentile* (1 Cor 12:13).

1 Corinthians 12:13—By one Spirit we were all baptized into one body...and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

cf. Eph 1:22–23—God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body.

3. The Church is distinct in *time* from Israel.

The time of the origin of the church is a matter of significant debate. Some begin the church with Adam, others with Abraham, others with John the Baptist, others with Jesus, others with Pentecost, and still others with the inclusion of the Gentiles under Peter or Paul. Significant parameters may be drawn, however, to precisely identify the origin of the Church.

a. The establishment of the Church is *after* the ministry of Christ.

Matthew 16:18: Upon this rock I *will* build my *church* (the first NT use of the term).

Question: What is the “rock” upon which the church is built?

Because Roman Catholics view this as Christ’s appointment of Peter as the first pope of the church, many Protestants have shied away from the “rock” being Peter, choosing instead to identify the rock as (1) Christ himself (Christ the chief cornerstone as opposed to Peter the little stone), (2) Peter’s confession, “You are the Christ the Son of the living God,” or (3) the disciples in general, e.g., “I will build the church on you (and on other apostles like you).”

However, if it were not for the Roman Catholic abuse of this verse (papal succession, infallibility, absolute authority, etc.), reference to Peter would be the normal understanding. As the first to fully embrace Jesus’ messiahship, Peter was given a place of honor in the early church. That Peter is the subject of Christ’s words is clarified in the next verse, “I will give *you* (singular) the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatever *you bind* (singular) on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever *you loose* (singular) on earth shall have been loosed in heaven.” In the early church, we see Peter as the earliest leader, presiding over the 120 (Acts 1:15), speaking at Pentecost to the nations represented in Jerusalem (Acts 2:14ff), bringing the gift of the Holy Spirit to Samaria (Acts 8:14), securing the first Gentile convert (Acts 10), etc. It appears that in this sense, he was using the “keys” entrusted to him to open for the first time new doors for the Gospel in various stages—Jerusalem, Judaea, Samaria, and the uttermost part of the earth. Peter was not the *only* foundational stone (cf. Eph 2:20), but he appears to be the first stone laid chronologically after the chief cornerstone, and in this sense, all the others rest on him. But this is FAR from saying that he was the first pope!

Question: What does Jesus mean by saying, “The gates of Hades will not overpower the Church”?

Many postmillennialists take this verse to mean that the Church is to “storm the gates of hell” and take over the world for Christ, not only in the sense of evangelism, but also in an attempt to capture the political and social structures of the world so as to create a “Christian state.”

However, we should note that it is that the “gates” that is the advancing force. The understanding here is that although the Church will seem at times to be in jeopardy of collapse due to the persecution and death of believers, Christ will ensure the survival of the Church, even at its bleakest hour: the gates of Hell will never close on the Church in the sense of snuffing out her existence.

Acts 1:5–8: You *will* be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now....

It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by his own authority; but you *will* receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth (see also the future tenses employed in Matt 3:11; Luke 3:16).

b. The Establishment of the Church occurs after the Crosswork of Christ

- (1) Ephesians 2:20–23: Christ is the cornerstone of the Church, the apostles are the foundation stones, and entry into the church is by spirit baptism into Christ, identifying with his *death* and *resurrection* to new life.
- (2) Christ’s death was essential for the ordinances of the Church (baptism and communion) to have any meaning: they are symbolic of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, events unknown to OT Israel.
- (3) Ephesians 1:20–23: Christ’s *headship* of the church demands his ascension to the right hand of God.
- (4) Ephesians 4:7–12: Christ’s *gifting* of the church demands his ascension to the right hand of God.

c. The establishment of the Church is *during* the ministry of Paul.

Ephesians 3:3–6, 9: By revelation there was made known to me the mystery,... which in other generations was not made known to the sons of men, as it has *now* been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit; that the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

Generations before that of the “holy apostles” knew nothing of the Church, and the official and full disclosure came through the apostle Paul. Paul was not, of course, alone in revealing the new organization, but was its official herald. The church began, of necessity, during his lifetime.

d. The conclusion of the Church is at the Rapture.

That the church is removed at the Rapture (Rev 3:10; 1 Thess 4:16–17; 2 Thess 2:7), never to be seen again on earth (see Revelation 4ff) suggests that its existence is not coterminous

4. The Church is distinct from Israel in terms of their *origin, purposes, and destiny*.

a. They have distinct origins.

Israel	The Church
Began as an ethnic group with the call of Abram, and as a political entity with the giving of the Law.	Began on the day of Pentecost as a spiritual body without ethnic or political distinctions.
One joined the covenant community by natural birth and circumcision, without respect to spiritual condition.	One joins the church by experiencing the new birth as pictured in water baptism by immersion.
Israel had geographic boundaries.	The church is universal.

b. They have distinct purposes.

Israel	The Church
Israel's influence on the world was national and corporate	The Church's influence on the world is individual.
Her purposes were realized in her political structures	Her purposes are realized in her missionary/evangelism endeavors.
Israel had no missionary mandate.	The church has no political mandate.

c. They have distinct destinies.

Israel	The Church
Israel will take her place as the head of the nations, where she will serve as a kingdom of priests (Isa 61:4–6)	The church will share in the Messianic reign as the bride of Christ and first in rank in the kingdom (Heb 12:23)

5. The New Testament distinguishes Jews and Church Saints, suggesting persistent distinctions.

1 Corinthians 10:32: Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God.

No Jew has ever been excluded from Israel (the designation *Israel* always carries with it racial and ethnic overtones), but Paul makes it clear that not all Jews belong to the Church of God.

Acts 3:12— When Peter saw *this*, he replied to the people, “Men of Israel, why are you amazed at this,..?” (cf. 4:8, 10; 5:21, 31, 35; 21:28).

6. The New Testament also distinguishes Jews and Gentiles within the Church.

Galatians 6:15–16: For neither is circumcision anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation. And those who will walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God.

Paul here places a dual blessing upon (1) Gentile Christians who resist Jewish pressure to conform to the Law of Moses and conform instead to the new “rule”—the Law of Christ and (2) Jewish believers (the “Israel of God”), who perpetuated the patterns of the Law of Moses as an ethnic/cultural tradition.

7. The New Testament explains the suspension of God’s dealings with ethnic Israel and announces his intention to restore them.

Romans 11 makes no sense unless Israel and the Church are separate groups. Paul argues that Israel had not attained what they sought, excepting a small elect remnant (v. 7). This opened the door for non-Israelites to be grafted in—not into Israel, but into God’s redemptive program. This is made clear by the fact that the vast majority of Israel remains *outside* this arrangement and becomes envious, resulting in a grafting of “all Israel” into God’s redemptive purpose in a glorious eschatological moment in which “All Israel will be saved” (v. 26).

B. The Universal Church is distinct from the Kingdom of God.

For centuries, the nation of Israel functioned as a theocratic kingdom with a human king reigning as a vice-regent for God. Throughout the OT, anticipation grows for the arrival of the Messiah, the great King who was himself God, who would reign over the geo-physical earth (Isa 40:4) in a literal, biological/zoological (Isa 35), political (Isa 32:1) kingdom. This kingdom is still future.

1. The Kingdom occurs after the church age.

Galatians 5:21—these “will not inherit the kingdom of God.”

2 Timothy 4:18—The Lord will rescue me from every evil deed, and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom.

2 Peter 1:10–11—Therefore, brethren, be all the more diligent to make certain about his calling and choosing you; for as long as you practice these things, you will never stumble; for in this way the entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ will be abundantly supplied to you.

See also 1 Corinthians 6:9–10; 15:50; Ephesians 5:5; 1 Thessalonians 2:12; 2 Thessalonians 1:5; 2 Timothy 4:1; James 2:5.

3. The Church does, however, sustain a relationship with the Kingdom

a. Church saints are regarded proleptically as participants of the Kingdom.

Colossians 1:13—“He rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son.” Cf. Eph. 2:6

- b. The church will be co-regent with Christ during the Millennium, serving as part of the royal family and as administrators in the highest echelons of millennial rule.

2 Timothy 2:12—If we endure, we will also reign with him.

1 Corinthians 6:2—Do you not know that the saints will judge the world?

Revelation 3:21—To him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne.

Note here that the Church does not exist in a sphere that is separate from Israel, but it does have a distinct role within that sphere. Israel will have a place of priority, too (see, e.g., Isa 61:4–6), but theirs is apparently not a *regal* role.

A similar indication of rank and position in the Kingdom is found in the marriage proceedings at the close of the Tribulation period:

- The Church is the Bride (Eph 5:32 cf. Rev 19:7–9; Matt 25:1–10)
- OT saints, represented by John the Baptist, are the “friends of the Groom,” who attend him as modern-day groomsmen (John 3:28–29),
- Tribulation saints, represented by the virgins who await the return of the bride and groom in Matthew 25:1–10.
- Those shut out of the festivities are the unredeemed (Matt 25:10–13).

III. Participation in the Universal Church

A. Position 1: Denial of the Universal Church View

There is no earthly organization that one can join to be part of the universal church (contrary to Roman Catholicism). For this reason some reactionaries (Landmark Baptists) actually deny that a universal church exists: *all* references to *ekklesia* in the NT are to the local church. There are several problems with this position:

1. There are several uses of *ekklesia* that cannot possibly refer to a local church.

Ephesians 3:21 and Hebrews 12:23 speak of the church that extends into heaven.

Ephesians 1:22–23: Christ is not the head of *the* local church, but of all NT believers.
2. The local church, despite our best efforts, will always include some unbelievers (Jude 4). Membership in a particular local church cannot assure being part of the bride of Christ.

3. The anti-universal-church position, ironically, creates an exclusivism that resembles the very universal church that they are attempting to deny.

Since only *true* local churches are the bride of Christ, Landmark Baptists create a very exclusive list of true churches based on the idea of “Baptist successionism” along the “trail of blood” (the idea that true Baptist churches must have a direct link to the very first church). This is not only historically ridiculous, it is also dangerously exclusivist—believers not a part of this elite group of churches are not part of the bride of Christ, but merely guests at the marriage.

CONCLUSION: The body of Christ cannot be identified with any earthly denomination, single local church, or exclusive collection of local churches.

B. Position 2: The Regeneration View

This view considers all regenerate individuals, from Adam to the present, a part of the universal church. However, as we have seen, this blurs the distinction between Israel and the church and denies the clear teaching of Scripture that the Church was “new” (Matt 16:18; Eph 3:3–6, 9). See below.

C. Position 3: The Spirit Baptism View

This view recognizes that only those who are truly *Spirit-baptized* are part of the universal church. This limits the universal church to individuals who lived after this unique work of the Holy Spirit began at Pentecost.

1 Corinthians 12:13–14: For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. For the body is not one member, but many.

This view also demands that, in order for believers to be “baptized into Christ,” Christ’s crosswork had to be complete.

Galatians 3:27: For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.

Ephesians 5:23: Christ is the head of the church, he himself being the Savior of the body.

Ephesians 2:14–15: For he himself is our peace, who made both groups [Jews and Gentiles] into one and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall, by abolishing in his flesh the enmity, which is the Law of commandments contained in ordinances, so that in himself he might make the two into one new man, thus establishing peace, and might reconcile them both in one body to God through the cross.

PART 2: THE DOCTRINE OF THE LOCAL CHURCH

I. Introduction

The concept of the local Baptist church has evolved (or perhaps devolved) dramatically over the centuries. A historical survey of Baptist polity, especially in 20th-century American life, reveals sweeping changes:

- the democratization of church polity and the rise of the ruling deacon;
- the near elimination of church discipline;
- a curbing of entry standards for new and transferring members;
- an astonishing decrease in baptismal ages;
- the reduction of the Lord’s Table to an exclusively individual rite;
- the introduction of the altar call;
- ambivalence toward biblically regulated worship; especially,
- the decline of the sermon and doctrinal confession;
- changes in individual churches’ relationship to associations and conventions; etc.

Ignorance of historical theology is largely to blame for many of these changes. Baptists in general have failed to develop a robust “tradition” that binds them (whether doctrinal, liturgical, or governmental), and have even discarded lesser principles (e.g., Baptist “distinctives”) that perpetuate the Baptist identity. More significantly, Baptists in general have failed to recognize the implications of safeguarding these distinctions.

Historical theology is not, however, the final court of appeal in questions of ecclesiology. Indeed, the first Baptist distinctive, historically, has been that of biblical authority. The question we must answer at every point in this syllabus is not one of tradition, prevailing cultural norms, utility, or convenience (though these issues may be discussed); instead, it is what the Bible has to say about the function of the local church. In its pages lie the binding “regulative principle” for the acceptable organization and practice of the New Testament church.

II. The Definition, Purposes, and Functions of the Local Church

Edward T. Hiscox defines the local church as “a company of regenerate persons, baptized on a profession of faith in Christ; united in covenant for worship, instruction, the observance of Christian ordinances, and for such service as the gospel requires; recognizing and accepting Christ as their supreme Lord and Lawgiver, and taking His Word as their only and sufficient rule of faith and practice in all matters of conscience and religion” (*New Directory for Baptist Churches*, p. 20). Upon dissection of this definition, we discover the following:

A. The Elements Requisite to a Local Church

1. Genuine believers in the Lord Jesus Christ,

Acts 2:41: Those who had received his word were...added.

Acts 2:47: The Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

1 Corinthians 1:2: To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, saints by calling, with all who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

So also the salutations in Romans, 2 Corinthians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians; also 1 Peter 2:5, 9.

2. Who have been immersed publicly upon profession of faith in Christ,

Acts 2:41: Those who were baptized...were added.

Matthew 28:19–20 also appears to be a progression: “Disciple...Baptize...Teach.”

3. Who confess a fixed and common corpus of biblical doctrine,

Acts 2:42: They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching.

See Romans 6:17; 16:17; Titus 1:9; Jude 3

4. Who share a common purpose (function/mission):

Gathering for corporate prayer, reading, confession, instruction, singing, fellowship, and dispersing to carry out the Great Commission.

5. Who observe the two ordinances,

Acts 2:41–42: They were baptized...and devoted to...the breaking of bread.

6. Who possess independent, corporate autonomy,

The argument here is largely one from silence—there is no biblical evidence for a hierarchy of ecclesial authority. Even the apostles operated under the auspices of local churches (Acts 13:2; 15:3–4, 22; 1 Cor 16:3). The multiple “one another” passages in the epistles also suggest that the churches were equipped to govern their own affairs without necessary assistance from other churches. This does not mean that individual churches sustain no relationship at all with other churches, cannot receive formal counsel from other churches, cannot partner with other churches for the sake of the Gospel, or cannot accept help (human/material resources) from other churches (all these may be demonstrated from Scripture), but no church must yield to a source of authority beyond Christ and the Scriptures alone in the carrying out of its ecclesiastical functions.

7. Who own the Bible as their only and sufficient rule of faith and practice,

1 Peter 1:3: His divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and excellence (cf. v. 12, 19–21 for the source of this true knowledge).

To these elements, we might add the following:

8. Who are organized with biblical officers,

1 Timothy 3:1–13

Question: Must a church have pastor(s) and deacons in order to *be* a church?

It would seem that that the office of pastor must be occupied by at least one pastor for a church to be “in order.” There is no clear example in Scripture of a church lacking a pastor. This not to say that a church ceases to exist when it has no pastor; however, such a church is (temporarily) “out of order.” See below on plurality of eldership.

In view of Acts 6:1–6, it appears that deacons were added when the one essential officer (the pastor) became too encumbered with administrative affairs to properly devote himself to his primary function of the ministry of the Word. For this reason some suggest that a very small church could organize without deacons. However, note the following: (1) It is difficult to conceive of a situation where administrative assistance would not be a relief to the pastor; (2) the accountability provided by deacons is practically advantageous to prevent fiscal abuse or other corrupting elements attendant to absolute pastoral power; (3) it has been reasonably suggested that the prototypical “deacons” of Acts 6 were themselves incidental officers, but after this incident, deacons became fixed, necessary components of a church “in order.”

9. Who meet together at regular and stated times.

Acts 20:7: On the first day of the week we were gathered together to break bread.

1 Corinthians 16:2: On the first day of every week each one of you is to put aside and save, as he may prosper, so that no collections be made when I come.

Some argue that Paul is merely suggesting that believers simply set aside money on a given arbitrary day (perhaps payday?). However, the context indicates that weekly *collections* are in view, collections conducted, ostensibly, when the church assembled.

Question: Is it mandatory for a church meet on the first day of the week?

This perennial question is not easily answered. Passages such as those listed above suggest that the normal practice of the early church was to meet regularly on Sundays. In fact, there is good evidence (albeit disputed) to suggest that the practice had become so widespread that Sunday had become known as the “Lord’s Day” (Rev 1:10) as early as the close of the first century.

That the day is part of the command, however, is less than clear. It may simply reflect a first-century circumstance of the elements of worship (communion and collections). Romans 14:5 gives conclusive evidence that the day was *not* mandatory: “One person regards one day above another, another regards every day alike. Each person must be fully convinced in his own mind.” See also Col 2:16.

The idea of mandatory Sunday worship likely derives from an honest attempt to find application of the fourth commandment (to observe the Sabbath) for our dispensation. However, note the following:

(1) Since the Mosaic Law has been set aside, it is not necessary to ascribe direct application of the Law to the present day. While it is true that the other nine commandments have been reiterated in the NT, we obey them because they are a part of the Law of Christ, *not* because they are a part of the Law of Moses.

(2) The Creation week Sabbath, the Jewish Sabbath and the Christian Lord’s Day have significant dissimilarities:

	The Creation Sabbath (Gen 2:2–3)	The Mosaic Sabbath (Exod 20:11)	The Christian Lord’s Day
Day	The Seventh Day	Usually the Seventh Day (though there were certain fixed dates for festal Sabbaths that could fall on any day of the week—see Leviticus 23)	Usually the First Day (though this is not mandated)
Frequency	Once	Weekly, with additional festal Sabbaths	Weekly
Reason	Unstated	Commemoration of the perfect rest enjoyed by God and his creation in Genesis 2 and a forward look to the promised restoration of that rest.	Commemoration of the Resurrection?
Purpose	Divine Rest/Reflection	A sign of the covenant drawn between God and Israel (Exod 31:12–17).	Corporate Worship

(3) Searches for an underlying, transdispensational “principle” for the Sabbath have proved elusive. Some see a “one-in-seven *rest* principle” for physical rest or mental reflection; others see a “one-in-seven *worship* principle.” However, there does not seem to be a purpose that firmly ties together all of the expressions in the chart above. It seems most satisfactory to say that the biblical Sabbath began as a commemoration of the creation rest (Exod 20:11) and anticipates the promised rest to be provided by Christ (Heb 4). Since that rest has already been realized in part, the force of the symbol diminishes with the arrival of what is symbolized.

Having said all this, we must note that while a specific day of worship is not demanded in the NT, the Bible demands regular and frequent worship (Heb 10:25), and that, of necessity, on days upon which *the whole church* can agree. Early Christian practice (as well as our own social structure) suggests that Sunday remains the most logical day for worship in American society. It is especially imprudent, I would suggest, to adjust the pattern of regular worship for trifling reasons.

B. The Elements of Worship in the Gathered Church

1 Timothy 4:13 (Bill Mounce): Until I come, be devoted to **the reading** of Scripture, to **the exhortation**, and to **the teaching**.

Acts 2:42—They continued to meet together in the temple courts, devoting themselves to **the apostles’ teaching** and to **the fellowship**, to **the breaking of bread** and to **the prayers**.

The question of the elements of Christian worship have long been a matter of contention. Baptists have historically held to the *regulative principle of worship*, viz., that “the acceptable way of worshiping the true God, is instituted by himself, and so limited by his own revealed will, that he may not be worshiped according to the imagination and devices of men, nor the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representations, or any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scriptures” (from the London Baptist Confession).

This principle, which contrasts with the “normative principle” (viz., that the Church may include in its worship anything that the Bible does not explicitly forbid), suggests that the two key verses above (and others like them) do not merely describe what the early church did, but also prescribe what the church must do. Specifically, they define the *elements* of worship, or the fixed parts of the liturgy that must appear in the course of regular worship. In our texts, the elements of worship appear uniformly with the definite article (not visible in all modern translations):

- The reading
- The exhortation
- The teaching
- The fellowship
- The breaking of bread
- The prayers

Note 1: While the Scriptures identify the *elements* of worship, they do not identify all of the *circumstances* of worship (e.g., should we sit/stand/kneel as we do these things; should we be led in prayer or pray aloud in unison; should we sing or recite our doctrine; etc.). These circumstances are left undefined in Scripture, and the Church has a measure of liberty implementing them.

Note 2: The elements of worship here discussed are matters of corporate liturgy. They speak to the function of the gathered church (when they “were together” [v. 44], when they “met together” [v. 46], with “all the people” [v. 47]). They do not speak to individual Christian conduct or even to the mission of the church toward those outside their number (i.e., evangelism). Rather, they identify what the gathered church must do week by week. Indeed, the first element on our list might rightly be **the assembly**, or the act of assembling together as a whole body (Heb 10:25; cf. Acts 15:22; 1 Cor 11:33; 14:23; etc.).

1. The Reading

The first item on Paul's list is **the reading**. This is the totality of the words reflected in the original, but nearly every modern translation reflects the understanding that Paul is referring not to reading in general, but to the universal practice of the *public reading of the Scriptures*. This tops Paul's list because it is the most rudimentary function of public worship—to expose people to the Bible. In the history of the church, the reading has traditionally been substantial, including a chapter from each testament weekly. The whole Bible can be read in about ten years with this schedule.

Reasons for the decline of the public reading of Scripture include (1) a (misplaced?) confidence that modern believers have their own Bibles and will read them privately, (2) the tortured reading skills of some public readers, and (3) the perceived unintelligibility or irrelevance of some texts. None of these, however, should derail the practice of publicly reading of the Scriptures.

2. The Exhortation (e.g., the Sermon)

The definite article suggests more than that we are to be a people who consciously exhort one another. We should be that, but that's not what this verse is saying. Rather, it communicates an expectation that the young minister Timothy be “devoted to *the sermon*.” The implication here is that the sermon was a prominent element of every regular worship service. This element of worship exceeds the mere reading of Scripture to include close examination, explanation, and application of the text to all of life.

3. The Teaching

Of all elements of worship, the “teaching” receives by far the greatest attention in terms of the testimony of the whole NT. This is, perhaps, a great surprise, especially in view of the fact that we don't normally have a block in our liturgy called “The Teaching.” It is important to note that Paul is not conflating preaching and teaching into one element here. He's identifying a distinct element of Christian worship.

The term used in 1 Timothy is the familiar term *didaskalia*, and is synonymous with Luke's phrase, the Apostles' *didache*. The latter term was adopted by the early church as the title of one of its most influential writings, and while this work is not itself Scripture, it gives us an idea of what the early church would have understood the term to mean. *The Didache* was a dense doctrinal summary of the essential beliefs of the early church—what we might call in modern parlance a *confession of faith* or *creed*.

The early practice of first developing and then either *singing* or *reciting* creeds and confessions is well established, originating in the Scriptures themselves. Perhaps the best known of the biblical creeds appears in 1 Corinthians 15, where Paul lists for his readers several matters of “first importance,” namely that “Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the Scriptures.” Another creed is found in Philippians 2, where the self-emptying and exaltation of Christ come to us with a polished cadence that suggests it

was memorized and recited/sung in the early church. The well-worn passage detailing the procedure for the Lord's Table (1 Corinthians 11) has similar features. In all, we have no fewer than eight NT creeds, and as many as thirteen.

So how should “the teaching” manifest in modern worship?

- a. The use of creeds and catechisms (a staple of Christian worship in nearly every era but our own) may be revived.
- b. The adoption of careful doctrinal summaries in song is also a well-worn method of communicating “the teaching.” Many, in fact, understand the term *hymn* (e.g., Eph 5:19) to communicate exactly that. In any case, both Paul and Luke are commanding churches to collectively give attention to the preparation and regular review of the theological essentials that bind the faith and practice of the church.

The practice of learning by rote has fallen on hard times in modern education, and the church has been injured by this trend. The biblical expectation is that believers commit to memory not only biblical prayers/psalms, but also creedal summaries (recited or sung), and even catechisms and covenants that bind generations of Christians together. Failing to do this jeopardizes the *tradition*, the loss of which, I would suggest, is almost incalculable in scope.

4. The Fellowship.

The term *fellowship* is a common one in the NT, and has as its basic meaning that of “sharing.” This could reference of interpersonal conversation that we have before or after the worship service. But the pattern here seems to identify “the fellowship” as an element in the formal liturgy. It is extremely interesting that in the NT, fully a third of the uses of this term (*koinonia*), and almost all of the uses of this term with the article, refer to the sharing of *resources*. In Romans 15:26, 2 Corinthians 8:4 and 9:13, and Hebrews 13:16, this construction appears in English translation as “the collection” or “the contribution”—a weekly “sharing” that equates to the modern practice of taking up an offering. If that is the case, then Luke is not referring primarily to edifying conversations between church members (though we certainly should have these), but to formal *resource* sharing.

Question: Does the church have a responsibility to provide for the needs of those outside the church?

There is no mandate given in Scripture for the Church *as a body* to improve society through civil charity. We do, however, have a duty *as individual Christians* to be neighborly, a quality that almost certainly should manifest in benevolence and generosity. Even in our charitable giving, however, individual Christians are encouraged to privilege those who are of the “household of faith” (Gal 6:10).

5. The Breaking of Bread

This element almost certainly exceeds the eating of common meals, and refers to the *Lord's Table*. The Lord's Table, as we shall discover below, is one of two formal rites assigned to the church (the other is baptism), and the primary function of both is to define and celebrate the community. It is true, of course, that both ordinances have a vertical dimension (i.e., they speak of the believer's individual relationship to God in Christ), but the horizontal dimension takes pride of place in the NT Scriptures: baptism is an initiation rite into the ecclesiastical community (we are baptized into the body); communion is a continuation rite by which community is both policed and celebrated (note the emphasis in 1 Cor 11). That baptism is not mentioned in our key texts as an element of *regular* worship is likely explained by the fact that baptism occurs incidentally, that is, only when new believers are admitted. The Lord's Table, however, is to be practiced regularly.

We will unpack at length the significance of the ordinances of the church below.

6. The Prayers

Again the article suggests that there existed a very well-known and firmly established practice of *focused* prayers that were universally a part of the liturgy of the apostolic church. That modern churches have retreated from this practice is dismaying and without credible precedent, biblical or historical. Churches have always been a place of public prayer. Why this practice is in decline is difficult to ascertain (is prayer, perhaps, too protracted, repetitive, or boring?). In any case, churches need to devote themselves to prayer and, to the point, to *the prayers*.

C. The Mission of the Scattered Church

Unlike the functions of the gathered church, which are manifold, the mission of the scattered church is simple and singular: we are to go out and seek conversions among those who do not know Christ (Matt 28:18–20; etc.). The NT model of evangelism is primarily a “go and tell” model rather than a “come and see” model.

Question: Isn't evangelism also a purpose for the gathered church?

In evangelical life, it is often assumed that one of the major functions of the church service is to attract and evangelize the lost. This is unfortunate, as this understanding tends to hobble the preacher's goal of preaching the whole counsel of God, rob the worship service of benefits unique to believers, and color the content/mood of the service away from that commended in Scripture in order to make unbelievers “feel at home.”

That unbelievers will sometimes be “among us” when we gather is, of course, conceded (1 Cor 14:24–25), but the idea of constructing the worship service for the approval of unbelievers has little biblical precedent. Evangelism best takes place in churches as an incidental benefit of carefully implemented, biblically regulated worship.

III. Membership in the Local Church

Despite the fact that a regenerate church membership is the primary distinctive of the Baptist church (so Hammett, 82ff), the idea of local church membership has fallen on hard times in Baptist and especially *American* Baptist life. Many eschew the need for membership entirely; others view it as optional, favoring instead an individualistic, eclectic approach to church attendance. Most who do favor membership regard membership as strictly voluntary, to be pursued, transferred, or abandoned at the pleasure of the individual rather than at the will of the body. This ambivalence runs contrary both to biblical descriptions of and also to theological reasons for church membership.

A. The Fact of Church Membership

The concept of the “unchurched believer” is foreign to the New Testament. Salvation and baptism *de facto* placed one into the local, baptizing body. The letters of the NT were written in large part to churches. The “one another” injunctions demand continuing, formal Christian relationships. In fact, a significant portion of NT revelation cannot be applied apart from the life of the church.

Hiscox notes that the local church is sometimes called a “voluntary society,” that is, no force can compel a person to seek membership in a given church or to remain in it. However, this is not to say that church membership is itself optional, but mandatory under the law of Christ (*New Directory*, pp. 61–62). We might further add that, once the body acts to receive a member, he ceases to have “volunteer” status, but obliges himself to the will of the church and to certain responsibilities to the church (see below).

1. A membership roll was maintained.

Acts 2:41: 3000 were *added*.

Acts 4:4: The number of the men came to be about five thousand.

2. Membership standards were enforced with church discipline

Matthew 18:17: If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.

1 Corinthians 5:13: But those who are *outside*, God judges. Remove the wicked man *from among yourselves*.

2 Thessalonians 3:14: If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of him. Do not associate with him, in order that he may feel ashamed.

3. Church decisions assume a membership.

Acts 6:2: Select *from among you* seven men of good reputation...

Acts 15:22: The apostles and elders, with the whole church, decided to choose *some of their own men* and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas.

4. The church even maintained sub-lists of specific members.

1 Timothy 5:9: A widow is to be put on the list only if she is not less than sixty years old, having been the wife of one man,...

5. Many other NT passages make no sense apart from a local church membership.
 - a. That the *whole* church could *all* be gathered *together* (Acts 2:1, 44; 14:27; 15:30; 1 Cor 11:33) implies that it is a fixed body of known persons.
 - b. The many “among you” passages indicate that one is either in or out of the assembly; furthermore, someone (even poss. a believer) may even be “in the midst” of a “whole church that has gathered together” (1 Cor 14:23), but still not be *among* them (v. 25; cf. 1 John 2:19).
 - c. The many “one another” injunctions cannot work apart from carefully defined and observable Christian identity markers.
 - d. Christian leaders are shepherds of particular and identifiable flocks (1 Pet 5:2), and correspondingly, church members have particular and identifiable leaders (Heb 13:17).
6. As we shall see below, the ordinances of the church make no sense apart from a carefully defined local church membership.

B. The Theological Purposes of Church Membership

1. Church Membership establishes for all inquirers the identity of those who are “in” (believers in good standing in a local assembly) and those who are “out” (including both unbelievers *and also* believers who are either [a] not in good standing or are [b] merely visiting). In Leeman’s words, church membership is “the declaration [by an authorized examining body] that a professing individual is an official, licensed, card-carrying, *bona fide* Jesus representative” (*Church Membership*, 79). It answers the question “**Who are we?**”
2. Church Membership serves as a covenant or contract of believers with one another for mutual welfare, fellowship, and discipline. Again, citing Leeman, “Church membership is a formal relationship between a local church and a Christian characterized by the church’s affirmation and oversight of a Christian’s discipleship and the Christian’s submission to living out his or her discipleship in the care of the church” (64). It answers the question, “**To whom and for whom am I responsible?**”
 - It identifies the flock for which pastors must give an account (Acts 20:28; Heb 13:17; 1 Pet 5:2).
 - It specifies whom the church must include in its fellowships, both formal and informal (1 Cor 11:33).

- It supplies all the requisite parts that must cooperate to do the work of the ministry (Eph 4:11–16; 25–32).
 - It establishes the perimeters of the church’s sphere of discipline, whether instructive or punitive. The church is concerned with those who are “inside” but not those who are “outside,” that is, in God’s sphere (2 Cor 5:13).
 - It identifies the household of faith that is the special object of good deeds (Gal 6:10).
 - It establishes a beachhead for Christian apologetics (John 17:20–23; Eph 3:10; 2 Pet 2:9–12).
3. Church Membership also identifies, specifically in a Baptist context, who may legitimately participate in decision-making aspects of the local church. It answers the question, “**Who speaks for us?**”

C. The Prerequisites of Church Membership.

1. Regeneration

Of all the “Baptist distinctives,” a *regenerate Church Membership* is the most essential to the Baptist system, and arguably the most uniquely “distinctive” item on the list. In most Christian denominations (Catholic and Protestant alike), the church is a place for nurturing individuals into faith. As such, infants, catechumens, and other seekers are welcomed into a kind of communion with believers that anticipation of their conversion, confirmation, and “full” communion. This model is incorrect.

Excursus on the “Baptist Distinctives”:

It is common in Baptist circles to create a rather crude acrostic of the word “B-A-P-T-I-S-T-S” in order to identify the “distinctives” of the Baptist faith. These are:

- **Biblical Authority:** *The inerrant Scriptures alone (not the church’s creeds, councils, or confessions) are the Church’s final authority in all matters of faith and practice.*
- **Autonomy of the Local Church:** *No religious body or structure outside the local church may dictate a church’s beliefs or practices.*
- **Priesthood of the Believer:** *No human mediator need stand for the believer in the performance of sacred rites, worship, prayer, or the reception of the Scriptures.*
- **Two Ordinances:** *The Local Church has but two valid ordinances, Baptism and Communion.*
- **Individual Soul Liberty:** *No person, believer or unbeliever, may be coerced to assent to religious dogma with which he does not agree.*
- **Saved or Regenerate Church Membership:** *Local Church Membership is restricted to those who can offer credible testimony of their faith and have publicly testified to that faith by submitting to the rite of baptism.*
- **Two Offices:** *Baptists recognize two offices in the church: pastor/elder and deacon. While some variation exists as to the roles of these officers, admission of additional offices is not permitted.*
- **Separation of Church and State:** *God has appointed two spheres of operation in his universe—a civil and ecclesial sphere—and neither sphere can dictate participation in the other.*

Of course, as one looks at this list, one notes immediately that many of these items are not unique to Baptists and several are not even unanimous among Baptists. One might say that these eight features, if observed collectively, render a church a “Baptist Church,” but the list does not properly offer to us a uniform list of ecclesiastical features that are of equal import in establishing the Baptist identity.

As we look at the list, certain of these “distinctives” also emerge as more important than the others. And the one that has been most vitally contested, tenaciously defended, and most dear to the Baptist identity in the short history of the Baptist faith is the idea of a regenerate church membership: one is not permitted to enter the membership of a Baptist church on any basis less than a credible profession of faith—that’s the only way in. This sharp line of demarcation is the hinge upon which the rest of the distinctives turn. It is because of this distinctive that the *ordinances* are so vital to us: they stand as the means whereby the church affirms who is regenerate and who is not. It is because they are regenerate that the members are granted *liberty*—each member has the “mind of Christ” (1 Cor 2:14–16) and an “anointing” from the Spirit (1 John 2:20, 27) to individually understand and apply the Christian Scriptures. And relative to this course, a regenerate church membership is the capital reason that the church can entrust the rule of the church to its local *membership*. Note the following representative comments to this effect collected by John Hammett (101):

- A regenerate church membership is “the cardinal point of Baptist ecclesiology, and logically, the point of departure for church polity” (Justice Anderson, “Old Baptist Principles Reset,” *SwJT* 31 [1989]: 8).
- Congregational polity is possible and preferable because it alone “takes seriously the principle of the priesthood and spiritual competency of all believers” and the “promise that the indwelling Spirit will guide all believers” (Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 1096).
- “If churches are composed only of such as give credible evidence of having been taught by the Spirit of God, they may be safely entrusted with the management of their own interests” (J. L. Reynolds, “Church Polity or the Kingdom of Christ,” in *Polity*, 345).
- A regenerate church membership is what allows “the entire company of believers [to] discern Christ’s will for his people” (Stanley Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God*, 724).

a. The regeneration of church members is broadly assumed in Scripture.

Acts 2:41: Those who had *received his word* were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls.

Acts 2:47; 4:4: The Lord was adding to their number day by day *those who were being saved*.

Acts 5:41: More *believers* in the Lord, multitudes of men and women, were constantly added to their number.

Acts 11:23 assumes that the church is comprised of people who had made “commitments” to which they needed to remain true (cf. also 14:23).

Acts 20:28—Be shepherds of the *church* of God, *which he bought with his own blood*.

1 Corinthians 1:2: Paul is writing “to the *church* of God in Corinth, to those

sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ,” as he does in his letters to Ephesus, Philippi, Colosse, and Thessalonica (cf. also 1 Cor 14:33 and above 60 references in which the church is identified as a body of *saints*).

Ephesians 5:25–27: Christ loved the church and *gave himself up for her* to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to *present her to himself as a radiant church*, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.

1 Peter 2:5: Peter describes the church as a collection of “*living stones* that are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood.”

- b. The regeneration of church members is also *theologically* necessary.
- (1) Membership in the local body is symbolic of the believer’s actual union with Christ (Rom 6:4; 1 Cor 12:13): the church is the community of those “in Christ.” This cannot be reduced to those who have come near by way of mere curiosity or willingness to fraternize with believers, but those who have been made “partakers of the divine nature” and all that this entails (2 Pet 1:3–4).
 - (2) The reception of instruction in the church is incumbent upon the adoption of a Christian worldview that comes only with the impartation of the new nature in regeneration. In fact, the entirety of the epistolary corpus of instruction and exhortation is predicated on the fact that the churches to which they were written “are elect,” “have been chosen,” “have received Christ Jesus the Lord,” “are children of light, etc. (Rom 1:6–7; 1 Cor 1:26; 15:1; Gal 1:2, 4, 6; Eph 1:11, 18; 4:1, 4; Col 2:6; 3:12; 1 Thess 1:4; 2:13; 2 Thess 2:14; **1 Pet 1:1–4**; 15; 2:9–10; 2 Pet 1:2, 5, 10; 1 John 3:1; Jude 1).
 - (3) Not only are the “spiritual” duties of church members out of reach of unbelievers, but also their ecclesiastical duties. Unbelievers are in a position to adjudicate neither the spiritual *worthiness* of church officers nominated for office nor the spiritual *unworthiness* of wayward members who are in danger of being disfellowshipped. Even mundane questions of financial stewardship (i.e., building projects, choice of missionaries, purchase of teaching aids and curriculums, etc.) are never spiritually neutral, but extensions of ministry philosophy into the practical realm. To concede such decisions to the unregenerate in a congregational model would be disastrous. Unbelievers simply cannot be stimulated to make such decisions biblically.
- c. Historical attempts to maintain an unregenerate membership have met with disastrous ends.
- The Roman Catholic Church deteriorated into little more than a syncretistic cult.
 - The Halfway Covenant in New England Congregationalism led to the sudden and nearly absolute collapse of that denomination into theological modernism.

Question: How Did Regenerate Church Membership Fall into Disfavor?

The following factors had primary contribution to the decline of regenerate church membership:

- (1) *The rise of sacramental views of the Eucharist and the introduction of infant baptism*: Based in part on unsustainable exegetical extrapolations from “household baptisms” in Acts (Acts 10, 16 [2x], 18; 1 Cor 1:16 with 6:15), but more substantially on sacramental aberrations about the function of baptism, the church became dominated by the idea that one could join the church not as a result of faith, but for the purpose of cultivating faith.
- (2) *The persistent influence of Judaizing tendencies to identify the NT Church with OT Israel*. Clearly, one might join the OT community of God as an unbeliever and even successfully complete its forms to the satisfaction of that community. But as Paul so clearly tells us, circumcision is nothing (1 Cor 7:19; Gal 5:6, etc.), not because it has been replaced with a similar form, but because the unique theocratic community to which circumcision introduced a person *no longer exists as such*. Unlike the theocratic community in which civic and spiritual functions were amalgamated as one, the church is a new and wholly spiritual community of God.
- (3) *The combination of a powerful bishopric and of state religion*. Once the church fell under the control of powerful bishops and even secular government, the need for a regenerate church membership to govern the church’s identity, philosophy, and mission disappeared.
- (4) *Matthew 13:24–30 allegedly supports a mixed ecclesiastical community*. As we’ve noted, the decline of a regenerate church membership into disfavor is not of exegetical but a theological origin. Nonetheless, appeal by opponents of regenerate church membership, over all others, to this one supporting pericope renders an answer particularly necessary. Augustine (and many since) argued that this parable, in which the *wheat* and the *tares* are together part of a single *field*, is proof that the Church is to be a mixed assembly until Christ returns. The chief error with this understanding is, of course, that the field is specifically identified in v. 38 as the *world*, and not the *church*. As such, the application is that believers and unbelievers are to mingle in the world (the civic kingdom) but not in the church (the ecclesiastical “kingdom”).

2. Water Baptism by Immersion

The critical importance of water baptism as both a *church* ordinance and as an *entry rite* into local church life will be discussed in detail below. For now, it is sufficient to say that immersion is symbolic of the believer’s union with Christ *and* his union, after due examination, with the local body of believers. This is the clear pattern of Scripture:

Acts 2:41: So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls.

3. Christian Department

A doctrinally credible profession of faith is normally accepted at face value by the “judgment of charity.” However, one’s conduct and beliefs should conform to his profession. Since there are legitimate grounds for exclusion from membership, it naturally follows that no one whose conduct is such that a church would be obliged to summarily exclude him is eligible for admission into membership.

1 Corinthians 5

Question 1: Some churches require additional qualifications for membership, such as adherence to a creed/covenant or maintenance of specific and often *non-biblical* behavioral standards (e.g., no use of alcoholic drinks as a beverage). Is this biblical?

This question is complex, and seems to pit two points of Baptist polity against one another (individual soul liberty and local church autonomy). On the one hand, it is troubling to exclude a potential member on extra-biblical grounds or for disagreement over doctrinal non-essentials, especially if there are no other acceptable alternative churches. On the other hand, there is a very real sense that, once joined to a church, the member has relinquished his own will to the will of the body, and has submitted himself to the church’s biblical mandate to maintain doctrinal/missional unity and order (1 Cor 14:40). So long as one’s conscience is not violated by submitting to the will of the church (in which case the member would be compelled to seek membership elsewhere), it is acceptable for a church to ask individual members to make concessions and to sacrifice personal preference in order to preserve the unity of the body in the bond of peace.

We all do this in less controversial areas. For instance, individual members submit to the will of the church concerning scheduled service times, financial decisions, the election of officers, etc., even if they do not personally agree with the decisions. It should be a small thing to relinquish our liberties for the sake of the unity of believers and the concerted advancement of the cause of Christ (Rom 14; 1 Cor 9:19–23; 10:23–24; 10:32–11:1).

Still, churches probably should, as a general rule, exclude doctrinal non-essentials and behavioral *adiaphora* from their requirements for membership. New believers often lack the maturity or knowledge to respond properly in such cases, and should not be excluded for their ignorance or immaturity. The church is the God-ordained means for correcting ignorance and immaturity, not for excluding the ignorant and immature.

Question 2: If unity on non-essentials is not to be pressed at the membership level, may it be implemented on some other level, say, in a “workers’ contract” for teachers and other leaders in the church?

Again, this is a complex question. On the one hand, there is a danger that such a contract could create a kind of “two-tier” approach to membership that distinguishes the cognoscenti from the unenlightened majority—a practice that can be devastating to the progress of sanctification in the church; similarly, such a practice might serve to generate

the very kind of “clergy/laity” distinction that Baptists have so carefully excised from church polity.

On the other hand, prudence seems to demand that there be pedagogical unity relative to the doctrine, mission, and “public face” of the church. Further, since Scripture itself demands higher standards for its officers (1 Tim 3), it stands to reason that the dangers proposed in the previous paragraph are not necessary ones.

An Alternative Proposal: It is suggested here that the church together document (in addition to the clear and non-negotiable essentials of doctrine and obedience essential for a credible profession) the missional, doctrinal, and behavioral initiatives around which it desires to publicly unite. These need not be regarded as standards for membership, but rather as a concordat from which the whole church, irrespective of personal preference or conviction, agrees not to publicly diverge and over which it agrees not to generate schism.

4. The vote of the body

- a. It is the responsibility of the *whole church* (not the individual, the pastor, or even a committee) to approve the fitness of candidates for membership.

Romans 14:1: *Accept* the one who is weak in faith, but not for the purpose of passing judgment on his opinions.

Note: Some deny that this “acceptance” amounts to formal acceptance into membership, and instead restrict the phrase to mere social acceptance. However, as Schreiner notes, it is nearly impossible to distinguish “formal admission into the community and informal acceptance in the various circumstances of life” (Schreiner, *Romans*, p. 716).

- b. Likewise, the responsibility of the church to *exclude* members (Matt 18:18; 1 Cor 5:9–13; 2 Thess 2:6, 14) presupposes the responsibility of *including* them in the first place.

Question: Must a vote to receive a member be unanimous?

Most Baptist polity manuals specify that a vote to receive members be unanimous, and these notes concur. If an existing member objects to the inclusion of a given candidate, the vote should be postponed until the concern is resolved (otherwise, the sequence begun in Matthew 18 would commence immediately). If, after further examination, the candidate is exonerated, but the objecting member persists in his objection, the accuser should be disciplined and the candidate accepted.

D. Means of Admission for Church Membership

1. By Profession and Baptism

This is the only valid means for new believers to initially become members. It follows the pattern established in Acts 2:41–47.

2. By Letter of Transfer

a. Clarification of the Letter of Transfer:

The Letter of transfer is commonly called a *Letter of Recommendation*, but this designation has historically been used for (1) a letter of good conduct given to believers who are changing denominations; (2) a letter of good standing given to “transient” or “occasional” communicants who wish to partake of the Lord’s Supper in a church other than their own (rarely if ever used today). The letter of transfer is also known as a *Letter of Dismission*; however, this is a poor designation because a believer is not technically “dismissed” when a letter of transfer is issued, but when he actually takes up membership in another church. If a member is actually “dismissed” when a letter is issued, he is for a period “unchurched,” and thus without accountability. This is unacceptable.

b. Explanation of the Letter of Transfer

Because of our mobile society, church members often relocate great distances from their churches. In such cases, the receiving church should request a letter of transfer to ascertain the good standing of the transient member. In this way, the matter of Christian deportment (point 3, above) can be effectively ascertained. This is an effective way of discovering habitually disgruntled and schismatic candidates who are seeking only to avoid accountability or trying to escape the embarrassment associated with confession of sin and restoration in another assembly. The practice of using letters between churches is well established biblically:

Acts 15:23, 30

Acts 18:27

Romans 16:1–2

2 Corinthians 3:1–3

Colossians 4:10

Question: Should a church receive one into membership on the strength of a letter of transfer from a church of dissimilar faith and practice?

Since letters of transfer affirm conformity to the “like faith and practice” of the previous church, it is necessary to examine the candidate personally in these circumstances. In this case, a letter affirming the good conduct of the candidate may be requested, but the candidate will ultimately be admitted on the strength of his profession and baptism.

Question: May a church receive into membership one whose former church refuses to send a letter of Transfer?

Each church is autonomous, and no other church may dictate whom another accepts or excludes. However, such a refusal should not be taken lightly. Usually,

such a refusal stems from serious sin, doctrinal deviance, schismatic tendencies, or other generally disgruntled demeanor in the candidate that has not been resolved. Candidates should be encouraged to return to the previous church to resolve all differences before applying for membership in another church.

In rare cases, the new church may determine that the candidate has clearly and irreparably been wronged by the previous church or that the previous church has embraced aberrant doctrine or practice, and may choose to accept the candidate for membership without a letter of transfer. This practice should be extraordinarily rare. Some early Baptist manuals, in fact, regarded a church's refusal to grant a letter to its members so grave an issue that they categorically denied the right of any other church to receive these members into fellowship under any conditions.

3. By Experience

In the event that a candidate for membership is transferring from a church of dissimilar faith and practice, from a church does not honor the practice of letters of transfer, from a church that has closed its doors, or or who is returning in repentance to a church that has formerly dismissed him on disciplinary grounds, he may apply for membership on the grounds of his previous professions and immersion, evidence of a regenerate life, and, in the case of a disciplined former member, a clear statement of repentance and evidence thereto (see below).

Question: What is the Right Hand of Fellowship?

Some Baptist churches formally induct members by having the pastor grasp the hand of or place his hand on the head or shoulder of the new member before the entire church. In other Baptist churches, the entire congregation files past the new member to welcome him with a handshake (see Rom 15:7). Still other understandings of the "right hand of fellowship" are the formal commissioning of a new minister (Gal 2:9), the restoration of disciplined believers (2 Cor 2:7-8; Gal 6:1) or the common practice of circulating during a service to shake the hands of numerous fellow-members.

In view of the wide variety of understandings of this phrase, it is probably best to take the phrase as metaphorical rather than literal, and not a necessary element of Baptist (or biblical) polity.

E. Removal from Church Membership

1. Three Occasions for Removal from Church Membership

- a. By the Death of the Member
- b. By Letter of Transfer

(1) This practice is generally reserved for (1) members who take up a new residence a great distance from their church or (2) members who are

commissioned to another local work for ministry (whether for a church planting effort or pastoral position). Letters may be requested and granted for philosophical/theological differences, but only rarely should a letter be granted for someone who simply wants to migrate to another church in the same geographic locale. Membership creates a family/community that should not be abandoned lightly; encouragement toward perseverance in one's covenant community should be the norm.

- (2) Letters of transfer are typically granted by the full and unanimous vote by the membership. This practice ensures that members are not seeking escape from some interpersonal conflict or grievance that they refuse to address biblically.
- (3) Hiscox allows the church to issue a letter of good conduct and to “withdraw without censure” from individuals who develop minor doctrinal and philosophical differences with the church, but whose demeanor remains gracious and non-schismatic. This practice is not without its flaws, but probably is the best way for a church to preserve its responsibility to guard the spiritual welfare and behavior of its members while allowing for individual soul liberty.

c. By Discipline (see below)

NOTE: Scripture makes no provision for members to resign or withdrawing from membership. Withdrawing from one assembly without immediately joining another is tantamount to apostasy (Heb 10:25). Members are inducted by a vote of the full membership, and are released the same way (either by transfer in good standing or by dismissal for discipline). Maintaining “inactive” roles or “dropping names from the roles” is likewise unbiblical, and constitutes a breach of a church's responsibility to guard the spiritual welfare of its members.

F. Excommunication: Ensuring Congregational Purity by Enforcing the Discipline of the Church.

See esp. Jonathan Leeman, *The Church and the Surprising Offense of God's Love: Reintroducing the Doctrines of Church Membership and Discipline* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010).

1. Introduction

Because church discipline has gone terribly out of vogue in the modern church, the topic of discipline, if it is discussed at all, is usually studied as something exceptional to “normal” ecclesiology, a rare and desperate procedure to be used only in the most extreme of circumstances for the remediation of grossly sinful church members. Many Baptists have never even seen the procedure invoked.

This has not always been the case. As part of his doctoral dissertation research, Greg Wills of Southern Baptist Seminary examined 2,732 association records in America for the years 1781–1860 and discovered that during this period, nearly 4% of all Baptist church members nationwide were publicly tried and disciplined *every year* and 1.45% disfellowshipped, most for neglect of duty (see both his *Democratic Religion*

and summary article in *Polity*). Remarkably, this 80-year period is also, by a wide margin, the greatest period of growth in the whole history of American Baptist life.

Many Baptists today would be unsettled by such practice were it revived today, preferring an individual, private, and even anonymous expression of religion, free from any accountability to the community. This deferring approach is regarded as the most “loving” possible approach to public religion. As Leeman has successfully argued in the argument (and title) of his recent book, however, ignoring sin is not only (1) ruinously unloving to the undisciplined, but also (2) crippling to Christian witness, and (3) destructive of the very viability of congregational polity.

2. The Meaning/Purpose of Church Discipline

If the function of church discipline could be reduced to a single idea, it would be *to maintain a pure community by means of catharsis*. That is, it is designed (1) to excise sin from the professing believer and so purify *him*, and failing that, (2) to excise the wicked member from the body so as to purify *it*. Much like the ordinances, church discipline has two major purposes, one individual and the other corporate.

- a. **Individually**, church discipline is designed to shame and terrify the offender into repentance and to restore/remediate him to communion with the body.

1 Corinthians 5:5: Deliver such a one to Satan *for the destruction of his flesh*, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.

Exegetical Note: The “destruction of the flesh” here is debated. If the word *flesh* (σαρκ) is taken in a literal, physical sense, then the intent here could be the removal of God’s protection from physical bullying by Satan. It is unclear, however, how (1) material devastation would contribute to immaterial profit (the saving of his spirit) or (2) why expelling a believer from the church would encourage Satan to attack him. It is more likely that the term *flesh* should be understood in its more common, metaphorical sense of the *sin nature* (so NIV 1984). As such, Paul is advocating the removal of the erring brother from God’s realm (the community of saints) to Satan’s realm (the world), so awakening the erring brother to the horror of his condition and stimulating him to rekindle the progressive eradication of his sin nature. This, in turn, contributes to the “saving of his spirit” in the Day of the Lord (Rom 6:22; Heb 12:14).

Matthew 18:15–18: The goal throughout the discipline process is to *win your brother*. Even his ultimate treatment as a “pagan” (an unbeliever) is not to be understood ultimately as punitive, but as cathartic—it is designed to make him consider the horror of his condition and to consequently purify himself.

2 Thessalonians 3:14: Do not associate with him, *so that he will be put to shame*.

- b. **Corporately**, church discipline is designed to eradicate sin and thus preserve the purity and testimony of the church.

1 Corinthians 5:1: It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that does not occur even among pagans: A man has his

father's wife. And you are proud! Shouldn't you rather have been filled with grief and have put out of your fellowship the man who did this?

Exegetical Note: Fueling Paul's incredulity about the Corinthian situation is the fact that the Christian community is to be set apart as *better than* the world so that when we offer answers for the hope within there is no room for the world to dismiss us for living inconsistently with our message (cf. 1 Pet 3:15–16). But by failing to practice discipline in the Corinthian assembly, the church had reversed the norm, effectively scuttling their apologetic effectiveness.

1 Corinthians 5:6–8: Don't you know that a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough? *Get rid of the old yeast that you may be a new batch without yeast*—as you really are. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. Therefore let us keep the Festival, not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and wickedness, but with bread without yeast, the bread of sincerity and truth.

Exegetical Note: While restoration is clearly a part of Paul's concern (v. 5), the heart of the passage centers on the purification of the body of Christ. The purpose of church discipline is not only that *the offender* might be restored, but that *you may be a pure batch*, that is, not one laced with impurities that inevitably contaminate the whole, but one marked by virtue.

1 Corinthians 5:11–13: Stop associating with him...judge him...remove the wicked man from your midst.

Exegetical Note: To see restoration as the primary concern here is to ignore the tenor of this passage. It is virtue through *excision* that dominates 1 Corinthians 5, not virtue through *remediation*.

Matthew 18:18: I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.

Exegetical Note: The proximity of this verse to vv. 15–17 is debated. Some suggest that Christ is introducing a new topic in verse 18; however, it is more likely that this verse completes the pericope begun in v. 15. If so, Christ seems to suggest that the church, by adjudicating its membership through discipline, has the extraordinary responsibility of adjudicating who will and who will not be in heaven. Obviously this is not true in an absolute sense, but the language gives us to believe that the church in some sense speaks for God in this matter.

Question: Does church discipline ever have a punitive function?

We have noted that church discipline has both (1) remedial and (2) cathartic purposes. Some also suggest that church discipline also has the function of *punishing* disobedient believers. This is suggested, ostensibly, in Paul's advocacy of "shunning" in 1 Thess 3:6 and in his reference to the "punishment of the majority" in 2 Corinthians 2:6.

There is a sense, of course, that community confrontation and the loss of communion is a kind of punishment for erring believers such that, when an erring brother is subjected to this painful loss during the third step of the discipline process, it is a penalty of sorts. Paul

is not, however, advocating for a collective administration of reparations or penance for erring brothers who have repented. Likewise, Paul's point in 1 Corinthians 2:6 is not that the church could now stop demanding such reparations, but that once sin has been confessed, ecclesiastical censure should end immediately.

Nothing short of the nature of divine grace is at stake here: God doesn't demand penance or exact reparations as conditions of forgiveness, and neither should the church.

3. The Occasions for Church Discipline

a. Private Offenses—Any sins privately observed within the body.

Matthew 18:15: If your brother sins [against you], go and show him his fault.

Exegetical Note: A significant textual question affects the interpretation of this verse. The preponderance of Greek texts include the phrase εἰς σέ (“against you”), and this majority tradition is accepted in many modern translations (NKJV, ESV, NIV1984, NRSV, NLT). The phrase is absent, however, in both Vaticanus and Sinaiticus, prompting other translations to omit these words (NASB, NET, NIV2011).

While not a *necessary* conclusion of the majority reading, some employ that reading to limit the situation in view rather narrowly to offenses (1) within the body or possibly, to offenses (2) that one party or the other seeks help to resolve. This approach, however, creates loopholes in the model that destroy its genius altogether. It is far more likely that *every member* is called upon to confront *any* sin that he observes a fellow-member commit. The point here is not simply to maintain an uneasy harmony in the church, but to do one's part to eradicate sin in the body.

Question: Doesn't 1 Peter 4:8 (“Love covers a multitude of sins”) suggest that members should prefer *covering* to *confronting* sin in the body?

There are three possible harmonizations of 1 Peter 4:8 and Matthew 18:15:

- Some suggest that 1 Peter 4:18 is best applied when believers *ignore* sinful behavior in the body and especially when they silently *endure* sins precipitated against them personally. As such, believers harmonize these two passages by determining to “cover up” sins in the body rather than resorting to confrontation.

Response: It is true, of course, that Scripture encourages believers to patiently endure ill treatment from outsiders (1 Cor 4:12; 1 Pet 2:20; etc.); however, nowhere does Scripture commend a “loving disregard” of sin in the body for the sake of unity. How, it may be asked, could a believer truly manifest love toward his brother by allowing that brother to remain in sin?

- Others suggest, more plausibly, that 1 Peter 4:18 is best applied when believers develop a “thick skin” in relationships within the local church. That is, they cultivate tolerance so as not to be easily insulted. As such,

believers harmonize the two verses by (1) resolving always to assume the best of fellow-believers when they speak or act out of turn, and, as a result, by (2) not rushing to judgment and confronting in haste or for petty reasons.

Response: That Scripture commends such a mindset is surely true (see e.g., 1 Cor 13:5). This harmonization of Matthew 18 and 1 Peter 4, however, does not seem to capture the force of either text. Both Matthew and Peter are speaking not to petty offenses but to *sins*. It is surely true that Christians should not be hasty in accusing one another over petty concerns, but this does not seem to be the point in view here.

- A still better harmonization of these texts is seen when a believer against whom a sin has been committed successfully confronts the offender, “gains his brother,” and *afterward* refuses to “keep a record of wrongs” (1 Cor 13:5) or to embarrass his repentant brother by divulging the details of the situation to others. As such, believers are called upon to cover, whenever possible, *sins that have been amicably resolved*.

- b. Public Offenses—Offenses that are widely known, particularly gross in nature, or that involve broad offenses against civic or ecclesiastical structures.
- (1) *Gross Crimes*: These include sins such as incest, immorality, idolatry, slander, drunkenness, or swindling—the kinds of sin that are not tolerated even among unbelievers (1 Cor 5:11 cf. v. 1). It is possible that the list in the following chapter—adultery, prostitution, homosexuality, and thievery (6:9–10)—is to be regarded as a continuation of this original list.
 - (2) *Heresies*: These include blasphemy (1 Tim 1:20), a false gospel (Gal 1:9), or any doctrinal aberrations that threaten the integrity of the central message of Scripture (2 Thess 3:6; Rom 16:17; 2 John 9–11).
 - (3) *Schism*: Active division of the body for personal advancement (1 Tim 6:3–5; 3 John 9, 10)
 - (4) *Neglect of Duty*: Church discipline in Baptist churches today is typically reserved for those who *commit* the most egregious of crimes. Historically, however, Baptists were also active in disciplining those who *omit* their Christian duties (see 2 Thess 3:6–14). Chief among these were the failure to attend church regularly and especially to attend the celebration of the Lord’s Supper; however, this category could be expanded to include other matters of neglect such as the failure to maintain private or family devotions or to give to the support of the church.

Summary: It is safe to say that *any* sin can potentially be a catalyst for church discipline. In most cases (some would argue in *all* cases—see below), however, the process of church discipline is immediately suspended if the sinning member repents. As such, it might be said that church discipline in most cases rests not so much on the sin itself, but on the failure of the believer to repent of his sin.

4. The Need for Church Discipline

- a. Church discipline is necessary to the role of the pastor/church in “guarding souls.”

Hebrews 13:17—Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They *keep watch over you* (ἀγρυπνέω) as men who must give an account.

Cf. Ephesians 6:18, where the same term is used of the church’s collective responsibility to “*be on the alert* with all perseverance and petition for all the saints.”

We have argued with Leeman above that “church membership is a formal relationship between a local church and a Christian characterized by the church’s affirmation and oversight of a Christian’s discipleship and the Christian’s submission to living out his or her discipleship in the care of the church.” This being the case, it would be unthinkable for a church or its pastors, who are charged with this oversight, to simply allow a church member to engage in unrepentant sin or simply to drift away from the fellowship without imploring them to return.

- b. Church discipline is necessary to maintaining a pure membership.

There are three biblical means whereby one may leave the membership of a local church: (1) death, (2) transfer of membership, or (3) disciplinary expulsion. The Scriptures make no provision for individual members *resigning* or *withdrawing* from membership. To resign or withdraw from an assembly without immediately joining another is tantamount to apostasy (Heb 10:25).

Members are inducted by a vote of the full membership, and are released the same way (either by a good-standing transfer to another body or by dismissal for disciplinary reasons). The practice of maintaining “inactive rolls” or “dropping names from the rolls” not only has no biblical precedent, it also constitutes a tragic breach of a church’s responsibility to guard the spiritual welfare of its members.

- c. Church discipline is necessary, specifically, to prevent the corruption of the government of the church.

Churches that fail, by the exercise discipline, to “clean out the leaven,” eventually cede the government of the church to a membership dominated by apostates, thus expanding the horrors of individual apostasy to engulf the whole church.

5. The Practice of Church Discipline

Question: Is there more than one procedure for enacting church discipline?

Baptists have long been divided over the procedure for church discipline. Some see a single procedure that governs all situations. Others discern two distinct procedures in Scripture, one for private offenses and the other for public offenses. Still others suggest that there is one basic procedure, but that in particularly egregious cases the process may be accelerated by skipping some of the steps.

The question derives from a comparison of two primary texts on church discipline in the NT. Matthew 18:15–17 calls for extraordinary patience in its detailing of a four-step process, each step separated by a gap of time to allow for the offender to repent. In 1 Corinthians 5, however, Paul calls for an immediate expulsion of the offender without any apparent delay.

These notes suggest (with a majority of historic Baptists) that the approach a church takes in discipline should be directly tied to the peculiar urgency of the offense to the church's welfare. If, by virtue of the egregiousness of the offense, the church's testimony with outsiders is threatened (1 Cor 5) or its stability ravaged by heresy or schism (Gal 1:9; 3 John 9, 10), then immediate action is to be taken. In all other cases (e.g., private offenses, sins of omission, or any matter that does not immediately threaten the stability or testimony of the church) the longer process described in Matthew 18 is to be employed.

a. The Procedure for Private Offenses—Matthew 18:15–17

If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that “every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.” If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector. I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.

(1) Personal, Private Confrontation (v. 15)

Ideally, the whole church need never be consulted in matters of private sin. Instead, repentance may be amicably secured by a concerned member who observes the crime. without arousing the defiance, defensiveness, and resentment that often attends group confrontation.

Note: One might quibble over whether a private confrontation is technically “church” discipline. It certainly does not involve, of course, *whole* church discipline; however, it does involve one member confronting another member in the context of local church life. As a result, most manuals describe it as such.

(2) Private Conference (v. 16)

If the initial confrontation fails to restore the erring brother, two or three witnesses are invoked to assert additional pressure on the offender so that he repents. Several matters of debate surround this conference: What is the purpose of the witnesses? What do they witness? Who are the witnesses? Two major options emerge:

- (a) Some suggest that the witnesses are personal eyewitnesses of the initial sin that prompted the personal confrontation. The purpose of these witnesses, in this scenario, is to confirm in the context of this makeshift “court” that

this is not a petty, groundless charge, but that a *bona fide* sin truly has been committed (so Glasscock, Keener, Hendriksen). Those who hold this view allow for the witnesses to be church officers, church members, other Christians, or even unbelievers. The critical issue is that they are eyewitnesses of the sin who can corroborate that a sin has incontrovertibly occurred. In favor of this view we note that:

- Contextually, Christ appeals to Deuteronomy 19:15 (cf. Num 35:30), a text that clearly involves eyewitnesses of sins of which a person is accused. The parallel usage of this verse in 1 Timothy 5:19 is even more emphatic in making this point, appealing to Deuteronomy 19 in the context of an accusation made against an officer of a local church.
- Practically, failure to require eyewitnesses would reduce church discipline to so much unsubstantiated finger-pointing, slander, and character assassination—serious issues deleterious not only to individual members, but also to the testimony of the whole church.

(b) Others suggest that the witnesses are personal eyewitnesses of the recalcitrance of the offender when he refuses to repent of established sin. Their purpose in this scenario is to confirm “every word” of the private conference so that, if necessary, they can be called upon to confirm this recalcitrance in the public hearing before the church (step #3, below) (so Carson, Blomberg, Osborne, France, Luz, Broadus). Those who hold this view restrict the witnesses to *Christian* witnesses, usually members or officers of the accused’s church. In favor of this view we note that:

- Exegetically, the witnesses in Matthew 18:16 are called upon to establish, literally, the *words of the confrontation* (πᾶν ῥῆμα, so NKJV, NLT, NRSV). While the interpretations “every matter” (so NASB, NIV, HCSB) or “every charge” (ESV) fit within the semantic range of the term, the point seems to be that the witnesses are affirming what the accused is *saying* as much as what he *did*.
- Ecclesiologically, the ultimate occasion for excommunication is not personal sin, *per se*, but the failure to repent of it. As such, the lack of repentance is a key piece of information that the church must have documented in order to render a verdict. As such, Christ may be referencing Deuteronomy 19:5 not to prove, within the context of a private conference (which is not a legal setting), that the crime has occurred, but rather to prepare a testimony for the “court hearing” about to occur in verse 17.
- Also ecclesiologically, and most significantly, this model restricts the “witnessing” to fellow church-members who are competent to contribute to the resolution. This fact is essential, it is argued, to honoring the spirit of 1 Corinthians 6:1–11, where Paul implores the Corinthians not to disclose church matters to the unbelieving public.

- Practically, in answer to the primary charge that this model results in the collapse of church discipline into so much groundless finger-pointing, slander, and character assassination, we note that this model assumes from the outset that the sinful deed has incontrovertibly been committed and even that the accused has acceded to it. If this is not the case, then church discipline cannot proceed.

Conclusion: It must certainly be asserted that proof of wrongdoing must be unambiguously established (by witnesses, if necessary) in order for church discipline to proceed. That this is the function of the witnesses in Matthew 18:16, however, is not so certain. While good men differ on this issue, the ecclesiological concerns raised above prompt me to prefer the latter interpretation, viz., that the witnesses are *church-members* called upon to lend weight to the initial confrontation and, as necessary, to prepare a testimony as to the non-repentance of the accused that is subsequently presented at the church hearing that ensues.

Question: What should a church do in the case of a “he-said/she-said” tiff in which guilt cannot be definitively established?

If guilt cannot be definitively established, the church simply cannot proceed with discipline no matter how serious the accusation. In such a case, the church must advise the accuser to desist until proof can be secured; otherwise, the church may well need to exclude the accuser himself as schismatic for the sake of ecclesiastical unity.

(3) Public Hearing Before the Church and Public Plea for Repentance (v. 17a; cf. 1 Thess 3:14–15)

After the previous two steps are exhausted, the matter becomes a matter of *public record*: the church as a corporate structure has been invoked and its unity and purity threatened. The church as a whole hears the case, establishes guilt, and entreats the accused to repent under peril of exclusion.

The parallel account in 2 Thessalonians suggests that this window of entreaty may be extended: the church is to establish a period of time during which it will “not associate with him, in order that he may feel ashamed. *Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother*” (3:14–15). If the accused does not repent during that period, the church moves to the last step, at which time the church no longer treats the accused as a *brother*, but as an *unbeliever*.

(4) Exclusion by the Church (v. 17b)

Membership is revoked by the body, normally just prior to the church’s regular celebration of the Lord’s Supper. After this final step, the church then treats the guilty party as an unbeliever so that he is convicted of his sin and even caused to question his own status as a believer (Heb 10:19–39).

b. The Procedure for Egregious or Public Offenses—1 Corinthians 5:45, 7, 11, 13

When you are assembled in the name of our Lord Jesus and I am with you in spirit, and the power of our Lord Jesus is present, hand this man over to Satan, so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord.... Get rid of the old yeast that you may be a new batch without yeast.... You must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat.... Expel the wicked man from among you.

Explanation: When a believer commits a highly visible, public offense or one of a particularly scandalous nature, preservation of the integrity of the whole church becomes more urgent than the restoration of any of its members. Since the sin is already a matter of public record, some argue, the shortened process begins with step #3, above. Paul's response in 1 Corinthians 5, however, seems more urgent than even this. He urges the immediate expulsion of the erring member as soon as the congregation can assemble (vv. 4–5). Baptists are historically united on this swift and decisive response to egregious sin in the body (see, e.g., the various historical essays in *Polity*; also Strong's *Systematic Theology*, pp. 924–25).

Should the expulsion proceed in the case of egregious/public offenses if the guilty member repents immediately?

This question is widely debated. Some suggest, arguing from Matthew 18 and from the opinion that repentance/restoration is the primary or even the sole function of church discipline, that the process is automatically suspended if the accused repents. Others, however, suggest that since Paul offers no exceptions for repentance in the scandalous circumstances of 1 Corinthians 5, the expulsion should invariably proceed for the sake of the integrity of the church. This does not mean that repentance is not to be sought; however, the integrity and reputation of the church trumps all other concerns in the immediate aftermath of a scandalous violation.

In the absence of clearer guidance, we may conclude that the church is sovereign in making this determination.

Conclusion: Church Discipline is necessary because it is the “Baptist remedy...for those who at one time gave visible evidence of regeneration and joined the church but later by their actions betrayed their profession of faith.... It was necessary if regenerate church membership was to be an ongoing visible reality, and not just a theory” (Hammett, 106).

Church discipline is ugly and unpleasant, but it is as necessary to the successful practice of congregational church polity as is the Gospel itself. It is little surprise, then, to find that Baptists of bygone generations “placed discipline at the center of church life.... Not even preaching the gospel was more important to them than the exercise of church discipline” (Wills, *Democratic Religion*, 8).

G. The Duties of Church Members

Historically, Baptist churches and manuals made significant emphasis on the duties of members. Today, however, virtually no emphasis on the duties of membership is made in many Baptist circles. This de-emphasis is terribly unfortunate, because (1) it makes members believe that they have no responsibilities to the body, causing them to be neglectful and even flippant about church life, (2) it feeds the perception that the church exists to meet the needs of its members rather than members the needs of the church, and (3) it denies any standard of conduct by which to measure the beliefs and behavior of members to ensure spiritual growth (and the converse, to prevent and correct spiritual deviance or apathy).

1. Duties to Pastors and Leaders

- a. To pray for their effectiveness in the gospel (1 Thess 5:25; Eph 6:19; Col 4:3; Heb 13:18) and protection from attack without and within (2 Thess 3:2).
- b. To obey them in any matter that falls under his official capacity (Heb 13:17).
- c. To visibly honor, esteem, and reward them, not as charity, but as debt (1 Cor 9:3–14; Gal 6:6; Phil 2:29; 1 Thess 5:12–13; 1 Tim 5:17).
- d. To actively support him and resist those who would discredit him (1 Tim 5:19; 2 Tim 1:16; 4:16; 3 John 9, 10).

2. Duties to Fellow-Members

- a. To assemble regularly for mutual edification and stimulus to good deeds (Heb 10:24–25; 1 Thess 5:11), and particularly to celebrate regularly the believers' union with Christ as observed in the Lord's Supper (1 Cor 11:17–34).
- b. To pray for one another (Jas 5:16).
- c. To support fellow-members in grief, financial trouble, and sickness (Gal 6:10; 1 John 4:7–11; Jas 1:27; 2:15–16)
- d. To actively discover the cause of interpersonal tensions and admonish fellow-members observed in sin (Matt 5:23–24; 18:15–18; Rom 15:14; 1 Thess 5:14; Heb 3:13).
- e. To prevent disunity by the exercise of self-sacrifice, prayer, confrontation, and refraining from meddling and gossip (Rom 15:1ff; 1 Cor 13:7; 2 Cor 12:20; Gal 6:1–2; 2 Thess 3:11; 1 Tim 5:13; 6:4; Jas 3:18; 4:11).

IV. The Government of the Local Church

The government of Baptist churches is one of several ecclesiastical government types. It is

neither hierarchic/monarchic (papalism), oligarchic (episcopalianism), nor presbyterian; instead, authority rests with the totality of the membership under the leadership of elders: **elder-led congregationalism**. In so defining Baptist polity these notes reject the ideas of *pure democracy* on the one hand, and *elder rule* on the other. They also reject board-led congregationalism.

Congregationalism is that form of polity in which final authority rests in the collective will of the gathered local assembly alone. The term has two basic senses: (1) Primarily it means that the *whole* congregation (and not merely the officers) are charged with the governance of the local church. This is what I will discuss as the **congregational principle**. (2) It also means that congregational churches are *autonomous* or *independent* in nature: individual assemblies answer to no norming authority external to the local church. This is what I will discuss as the **principle of autonomy**.

Below is a defense of both the congregational principle and the principle of autonomy, to which are appended descriptions and critiques of three distinct expressions of congregationalism.

A. The Congregational Principle:

1. The Congregational Principle Delineated

a. The congregational principle does *not* mean that...

- Christ is not the Chief Shepherd of his Church.
- the regulative role of Scripture may be discarded.
- every decision made in the church must be made democratically.
- duly appointed elders of the assembly have no authority to lead. The church vests a level of authority in its pastors who “rule” the church (1 Tim 5:17; Heb 13:7, 17), “exercise oversight,” and “shepherd” (1 Pet 5:2).

b. The congregational principle *does* mean that **final human authority in the life of the church rests in the whole gathered assembly of the local body**. As such, the congregational principle allows the church to

- appoint men to offices with *intrinsic* authority, understanding that while a church cannot legitimately diminish the authority of the office, she does retain the right to withdraw her appointments to that office.
- delegate to her officers or other named representatives some of the church’s own authority.

It does *not*, however, allow the church to delegate, even to her own officers, responsibilities that, if lost, would objectively threaten the congregational principle itself. Chief among these are matters of

- membership/discipline and
- the selection of officers.

2. The Congregational Principle Defended

- a. The NT was written in large part to *churches*, that is, groups of *saints*, not to a hierarchical body of church leaders. Among other grammatical constructions, there are at least 55 “one another” or “each other” references in the epistles, 46 positive and 9 negative. These demonstrate that the church as the totality of its individual members, is responsible for policing its own conduct and program.
- b. The church has collective responsibility to guard “the Faith.”
- 1 Timothy 3:15—The *church of the living God* [not its patriarchs] is the pillar and foundation of the truth.
- Jude 3: Contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the *saints*.
- c. The church has collective responsibility to elect its own officers, messengers, and missionaries.

(1) Pastors/Elders

1 Timothy 3:1–13—Qualifications for elders are listed so that the *people* know how to properly execute church order (v. 15).

Acts 14:23—Paul and Barnabas “appointed elders in every city” (cf. Titus 1:5)

Note: At first blush this verse appears to contradict the congregational principle: the apostles appointed elders. But as we look more closely, it appears that this was no fiat appointment; rather, Paul and Barnabas were overseeing the appointment and installation of elders in the churches. The term used, χειροτονέω, means elsewhere “to select by vote” (cf. 2 Cor 8:19). In fact, the etymology of the word might possibly supply a window into the exact process—the use of the word χειρ/χειρος, *hand*, as a part of this term, *may* (and I emphasize *may*) indicate selection by a hand vote.

See also the Didache xv for evidence that the very earliest post-apostolic assemblies chose their bishops congregationally from among themselves.

(2) Deacons

Acts 6:1–6—The twelve summoned the *congregation* of the disciples and said, . . . “Brethren, select from among you seven men . . . whom we may put in charge of this task.” . . . The statement found approval with the *whole congregation*.

(3) Missionary-Church Planters

Acts 13:2—While [the *church at Antioch*] were ministering to the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” Then, when they had fasted and prayed and laid their hands on them, they sent them away.

2 Corinthians 8:19—[Titus] has also been appointed by the *churches* to travel with us in this gracious work.

(4) Other Messengers and Legates

Acts 11:22—The *church* at Jerusalem sent Barnabas off to Antioch.

Acts 15:3–4—Therefore, being sent on their way by the *church*, [Paul and Barnabas] were passing through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and were bringing great joy to all the brethren. When they arrived at Jerusalem, they were received *by the church and the apostles and the elders*, and they reported all that God had done with them.

Acts 15:22—Then the apostles and elders, with the whole church, decided to choose some of their own men and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They chose Judas and Silas, two men who were leaders among the brothers [to deliver the findings of the Jerusalem Council].

1 Corinthians 16:3—When I arrive, whomever *you* may approve, I will send them with letters to carry your gift to Jerusalem.

- d. The church has collective responsibility to receive members.

Acts 10:47—Surely no one can refuse the water for these to be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we, can he? Cf. 11:18.

Romans 14:1—Accept the one who is weak in faith, but not for the purpose of passing judgment on his opinions.

- e. The church has collective responsibility to settle disputes and to enforce church discipline.

Matthew 18:16–17—If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to *the church*; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

Romans 16:17—I urge *you, brethren*, keep your eye on those who cause dissensions and hindrances contrary to the teaching which you learned, and turn away from them.

1 Corinthians 5:2, 4–5, 12—*When you are assembled* in the name of our Lord Jesus, hand this man over to Satan;... Expel the wicked man *from among yourselves*.

Cf. 2 Cor 2:6 where this event is called the “judgment of the majority.”

- f. The church has the collective responsibility to manage its own financial concerns.

Acts 11:25ff

1 Corinthians 16:1–4

2 Corinthians 8:1–5, 19, 23; **9:5**

Philippians 4:16ff

- g. The doctrine of the priesthood of every believer through Christ (1 Tim 2:5; Heb 4:16; 13:15; 1 Pet 2:5, 9) renders a clergy class not only unnecessary, but also

deleterious to the New Testament order. By virtue of this priesthood, all members of the distinctly NT people of God (the church), being regenerate, are afforded the competency, privilege, and right to contribute to the governance of the church. Every believer, by virtue of his priesthood, is personally accountable to God, but more to the point, he is also responsible to be vigilant for the faith community of which he is a part. Such responsibility cannot be delegated in its entirety to the eldership of the church (see Timothy George, “The Priesthood of All Believers and the Quest for Theological Integrity,” *Criswell Theological Review* 3 [1989]).

- h. Practically, involving the congregation in decisions gives a voice to all believers, generates unity, fosters the “ownership” of the church and its ministries, and encourages mutual participation and edification (Eph 4:11–13).

3. Objections to the Congregational Principle

- a. Congregational churches often lose sight of the fact that the church is not a democracy, but a democratic republic of sorts, complete with the regulative principle of Scripture and offices who *rule* with intrinsic authority.

Answer: While this can happen, it is not a necessary problem.

- b. Membership matters are handled much more effectively, discreetly, and without threat of litigation when they are conducted in committee rather than in public tribunals. Furthermore the biblical injunctions to leave restoration to “those who are spiritual” (Gal 6:1) and to appoint “two or three” to adjudicate in church discipline (so Matt 18:16) points to a duty of ministers, and not of the collective church.

Answer: While private action is “safer” and more discreet, God has designed (after due process involving a private conference of two or three *witnesses*) for the process to become public for the sake both of those within (Acts 5:5, 11) and those without (1 Cor 5:1ff). It should be noted, further, that the “spiritual” are not a special class of super-Christians or elders, but all obedient believers.

- c. The NT places great emphasis on the contributions of *elders*, *overseers*, and the *mature* in governing the church.

Answer: True, but that does not change the fact that God expects the whole church to participate in its own government.

- d. Practically speaking, autonomous congregationalism is highly inefficient, plagued by redundancy, and ill-equipped to accomplish great things for God (ministerial education, foreign missions, etc.).

Answer: While this can be true, two observations are in order: (1) efficiency tends to be the enemy of participation and (2) congregationalism does not prohibit connectionalism, just top-heavy connectionalism.

B. The Principle of Autonomy

1. The Principle of Autonomy Delineated

- a. The autonomy of the local church does *not* mean that
- churches can disregard the regulation of the Christian Scriptures.
 - churches are unavoidably isolated from one another or prohibited from voluntary cooperation for joint projects.
 - elders of likeminded assemblies cannot meet to offer and receive mutual advice, share expertise, make mutual resolutions, resolve disputes, and even censure heterodox persons/assemblies.

“Although the particular congregations be distinct, and several bodies, every one as a compact and knit city within itself; yet are they all to walk by one rule of truth; so also they (by all means convenient) are to have the counsel and help one of another, if necessity require it, as members of one body, in the common faith, under Christ their head.”

—London Baptist Confession, xlvi.

- b. The autonomy of the local church *does* mean that **individual assemblies answer necessarily to no norming authority external to the local church** in matters of faith, practice, resource stewardship, etc.

2. The Principle of Autonomy Defended

- a. The fact that the local church collectively is given the various responsibilities and authority detailed above leaves no need or place for additional authority.
- b. That Peter is given the “keys” is balanced by the facts that the other apostles were viewed equally as foundation stones of the church (Eph 2:20) with similar authority to “bind and loose” (John 20:23), that James was regarded as Peter’s equal (Acts 15), and that Paul rebuked Peter publicly (Gal 2:11). Further, even if the keys *are* uniquely Peter’s, there is no reason to believe he passed them along to his successors.
- c. That a church “council” convened in Acts 15 is tempered by the facts that (1) it was temporary, (2) it corrected an internal conflict within the Jerusalem assembly (v. 24), (3) apostles exercised oversight in the meeting (vv. 2, 4, 6, 22), and (4) the decision rendered was attributed to the whole Jerusalem church (v. 22), not a presbytery of elders. Furthermore, the decision of the council was rendered in extraordinarily deferring terms that suggest they were non-binding (vv. 28–29).
- d. Excluding the five uses of the term in reference to an ethnic/civil assembly, the majority of 109 uses of the term ἐκκλησία in the NT are addressed to local churches (90). The balance reference the church universal (11) and the whole Christian church of a given generation (8). No uses of the term can be construed as references to a regional presbytery or synod.
- e. That churches worked together during NT times is clear (Acts 15; 1 Cor 8:19; Col 4:16); however, that these amounted to formal denominations is not.

Question: To what degree may Baptist churches “connect” without abandoning the principle of autonomy?

There are many connectional models practiced by Baptists, some of which are more favorable to ecclesiastical autonomy than others:

- *Councils* are temporary organizations convened to counsel or advise local churches. They are called at the behest of the local church, convene as temporary and autonomous bodies, render a specific judgment, and disband. The most common examples of these are ordination and recognition councils, but they can be called for any number of reasons.
- *Fellowships* are informal and voluntary organizations of likeminded pastors who band together for mutual edification but who exercise no oversight over the constituent churches represented.
- *Associations* involve more structured but still voluntary memberships of local church “messengers” (usually elders, but not limited thereto) in formally constituted and regularly meeting assemblies convened for mutual fellowship and action. While they cannot dictate the actions of constituent churches, they do facilitate cooperative initiatives that cannot survive apart from mutual participation of the churches from which its messengers hail.
- *Ad hoc para-church organizations* are perhaps the most frustrating mode of connection. While these often provide valuable services to the church (Bible colleges, interchurch Bible studies, biblical counseling centers, independent missions agencies, Bible camps, Christian publishing houses, etc.), the lack of ecclesiastical oversight renders these organizations especially vulnerable to error and to encroachment upon the purview of the church. The symbiotic relationship of church with parachurch offers some informal accountability; still, organizations with more self-conscious ecclesiastical oversight are to be preferred.
- *Conventions* and *Conferences* are more formal still, and involve the membership not only of convening messengers but also of their churches. While technically still voluntary, the effective introduction of fees and dues in return for independent services/benefits creates a symbiosis of church and convention that can practically threaten the autonomy of local churches.
- *Denominations* supply significant external ownership of and oversight over the polity, mission, and resources of local churches within their purview. Many Baptists, for this reason, resist description as a denomination. In common parlance, however, the term *denomination* often has a much looser connotation.

CONCLUSION: Formal cooperation between churches and pastors is legitimate to the degree that that cooperative agency does not intrude upon the autonomy of its churches.

3. Objections to the Principle of Autonomy

- a. Apart from formal organization through presbyteries, conventions, etc., the work of missions and ministerial education defaults to powerful para-church organizations that are not accountable to the churches that support them.

Answer: That this has occurred is evident; that this must occur is not. Further, the denomination/convention model has historically proven no more effective in preserving accountability and orthodoxy.

- b. Autonomy tends to isolationism, disunity, and doctrinal aberration.

Answer: This does not follow in any necessary sense. Furthermore, autonomy ensures that the heterodox many cannot stifle the voice of the orthodox one.

V. The Officers of the Church

A. Proposed Offices of the Universal Church

A favorite tack of proponents of non-congregational and especially episcopal systems of polity is to note the existence of offices of the universal church. The following is an examination of this claim following the purported listing of these “offices” in Ephesians 4:11— “[Christ] gave some to be **apostles**, some to be **prophets**, some to be **evangelists**, and some to be **pastors** and **teachers**, to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up.”

1. On the Difference Between *Office* and *Function*

An office, as defined by Webster, is “a special duty, charge, or position conferred by an exercise of governmental authority and for a public purpose.” As such, an office involves (1) a formal *election, appointment, or commission* and (2) a *position* from which authority or function flows. It is with this preliminary definition in view that we ask whether Ephesians 4:11 formally introduces five *offices of the church*, or some other category of ecclesiastical function

- a. Because the five items in this list appears as parallel nouns, it is sometimes assumed that all five terms must have parallel function in the church. Three options emerge:
 - (1) John Calvin (*Institutes* 4.3.4) understood the passage to be detailing five *offices* in the church: three extraordinary and temporary (apostle, prophet, and evangelist) and two “ordinary” and permanent (pastor and “doctor”).
 - (2) A movement traceable to Dallas Seminary and connected with the fixation on spiritual gifts during the 1950s–1980s suggests, contrarily, that the passages details five spiritual gifts that exist irrespective of an office.
 - (3) A mediating position for those who can accept neither extreme is that this passage was detailing “gifted men”—not necessarily *officers*, but more than just another routine list of gifts. As Schreiner opines, the list here is a suggestion that there are “some gifts that were a regular feature in the lives of

some persons” (*Theology of Paul*, 356).

- b. In the end, it is probably not exegetically necessary to conclude that the five ideas in Ephesians 4:11 are absolutely parallel. In fact, there may be good syntactical reason to suggest that the ideas are not parallel in function:
- (1) Some maintain, based on appeals to the Granville-Sharpe rule, that the anarthrous construction of the last term (teachers) connects it with the preceding term (pastors), resulting not in *five*, but in *four* terms: Apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastor-teachers.
 - (2) Dan Wallace has definitively demonstrated both exegetically and contextually that this understanding is incorrect. Not only (1) does the Granville-Sharpe rule not apply here, but (2) the Scriptures regularly refer to teachers who are not pastors (*Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, 283–84). This does not mean, however, that the ideas are to be regarded as totally distinct. Instead, the likeliest understanding of this construction is that the first term (pastors) is a subset of the second (teachers), thus giving us a translation of “pastors and *other* teachers.”
 - (3) While the same construction (article/plural noun/καί/plural noun) does not appear elsewhere in 4:11, we do find two of the constituent terms in this exact structure in 2:20, where the foundation for the church is listed as “the apostles and prophets,” or most likely, “the apostles and *other* prophets” (so Wallace, 284–86; also Radmacher, 259).
 - (4) It is suggested therefrom that some of the terms in Ephesians 4:11 refer to general function in the church, while others refer to “official” function: There are ordinary teachers but also official teachers appointed to formal positions (pastors); there are ordinary prophets and also official prophets appointed to formal positions (apostles).

It is with these observations, then, that we take a look at the balance of the terms introduced in Ephesians 4:11.

2. Apostles

We have suggested in the preceding that apostles are, by definition, officers of the church. This does not conflict with the Baptist distinctive of “two offices,” however, because (1) they are not officers of any one *local* church, and because (2) the office is, by nature of its defining features, a temporary one.

a. The Origin, Nature, and Qualifications of Apostleship

As an *office*, apostleship is carefully tied to a list of qualifications that are detailed in the NT Scriptures

(1) An Apostle had to be personally commissioned by Christ.

- According to Ridderbos, an apostle is one who has been “given the legal power to represent another” so as to be “as the man himself,” an

astonishing authority that the early church regarded with extreme sobriety. In keeping with the practice of the period, apostleship could only be awarded *directly by the one whom the apostle represented*—in this case, by Christ himself. Great emphasis is placed on Christ’s appointment of the apostles.

Mark 3:14—He appointed twelve—designating them apostles—that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach and to have authority.

Luke 6:12–13—After spending the night praying to God, when morning came, [Jesus] called his disciples to him and chose twelve of them, whom he also designated apostles.

Cf. also Acts 1:2; 10:41.

- Even Paul, the “abnormal” apostle (1 Cor 15:8, NIV), was insistent that his apostleship could not have been had by any indirect agency.

Galatians 1:1—Paul described himself as an “apostle,” i.e., one “sent not from men nor by man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead.” Cf. also his careful explanation in vv. 15–20.

- (2) An Apostle had to be an eyewitness of the earthly ministry and Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Mark 3:14 (see above).

John 14:26; 15:26–27—The Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will *remind you of everything I have said to you*.... You also must testify, *because you have been with me from the beginning* (cf. also 15:24; 16:4, 12–15).

Acts 1:21–22—When the disciples assembled to replace Judas, they are insistent that “it is necessary to choose one of the men who have *been with us the whole time the Lord Jesus went in and out among us*, beginning from John’s baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up from us. For one of these must become a *witness with us of his resurrection*.”

1 Corinthians 9:1—Again, even the abnormal apostle Paul regards this factor as necessary to the proof of his apostleship, asking, “Am I not an apostle? *Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?*” Cf. also 15:7–9; Gal 1:15–20.

- (3) An Apostle is invested with miracle-working power as proof of his authority.

2 Corinthians 12:12—Paul’s authority, he affirms, rests on the fact that miracles had been accomplished in conjunction with his ministry as “signs of an apostle,” or proof of his apostolicity.

b. The Function of an Apostle

- (1) The apostle functioned in a temporary or foundational role.
- The apostles and prophets are described as *foundational*, that is, as introductory or preliminary offices (Eph 2:20).
 - That apostles are “first” (1 Cor 12:28) is likely not a statement of rank or priority (though this is true), but of temporal priority. They were given first, at the beginning of the church, and then gave way to permanent functions of regular church officers.
 - The very prerequisites of apostleship restrict the office to the first century.
- (2) The apostle spoke infallibly and authoritatively for God during the uncertain period of incomplete revelation during the church’s first generation.

John 14–16, esp. 15:26–27 (see above)—Christ’s pre-authentication of the NT Scriptures.

Luke 1:1–4—Luke undertakes to “draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us *by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word*. Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, *so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.*”

1 John 1:1–4—That which was from the beginning, which we have *heard*, which we have *seen with our eyes*, which we have *looked at* and our *hands have touched*—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. The life appeared; we have *seen* it and **testify** to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has *appeared to us*. We proclaim to you what we have *seen* and *heard*, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. We **write** this to make our joy complete.

Acts 10:39–43—We are *witnesses of everything he did* in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a tree, but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen. He was *not seen by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had already chosen—by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead*. He commanded us to **preach** to the people and to **testify** that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.

3. Prophets

a. The Origin, Nature, and Qualifications of Prophetism

Unlike the apostolic and pastoral offices, the New Testament offers no extended descriptions or lists of qualifications for prophets. This is apparently because (1) the prophetic function was already well established, and (2) responsibility for their appointment is never given to the church. Note the following.

- (1) The prophetic function owes its origin to the Old Testament period, and cannot rightly be reduced a strictly *church* function. As such, we may rightly turn to the OT to introduce the idea (Grudem and others notwithstanding). Note the following key text that introduces us the biblical idea of prophetism:

Deuteronomy 18:9–22—When you enter the land the Lord your God is giving you, do not learn to imitate the detestable ways of the nations there. Let no one be found among you who sacrifices his son or daughter in the fire, who practices divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft, or casts spells, or who is a medium or spiritist or who consults the dead. Anyone who does these things is detestable to the Lord, and because of these detestable practices the Lord your God will drive out those nations before you. You must be blameless before the Lord your God. The nations you will dispossess listen to those who practice sorcery or divination. But as for you, the Lord your God has not permitted you to do so. The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers. You must listen to him. For this is what you asked of the Lord your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly when you said, “Let us not hear the voice of the Lord our God nor see this great fire anymore, or we will die.” The Lord said to me: “What they say is good. I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers; I will put my words in his mouth, and he will tell them everything I command him. If anyone does not listen to my words that the prophet speaks in my name, I myself will call him to account. But a prophet who presumes to speak in my name anything I have not commanded him to say, or a prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, must be put to death.”

(2) The Idea of a Prophet

(a) Two Major Misunderstandings About Prophecy

- Because of the English association of prophecy with *foretelling* the future, some restrict the idea of prophecy unnaturally to authoritative futuristic pronouncements and give little attention to the NT function as relatively minor and of little significance. This idea is incorrect.
- Others, correctly noting the more expansive quality of prophetism, have erred conversely expanding the idea to include *forthtelling* or preaching in its scope. As such, preachers and other proclaimers of God’s truth are said to engage in prophecy when they herald God’s truth in a mediated, homiletical sense. This idea is likewise never reflected in the Scriptures.

(b) A Biblical Definition of Prophecy

Instead, a prophet is consistently depicted in both testaments as a *divinely appointed and immediate spokesman for God*, that is, an inerrant conduit for some divine message, irrespective of whether his pronouncements involve prediction, imperative, or simple declaration. Note the following:

- Prophecy is *by divine appointment*. One of the central points made in the extended passage above is that genuine prophecy is received by revelation and never “sought” or “conjured” by various means. Further, unlike sermons, prophecies were not the product of human origin, development, and manipulation (2 Pet 1:21).
- Prophecy is *immediate*. The prophet did not receive a message from God and then reconstruct that message according to his own fallible understanding. His message was subjected to no human mediation. Rather, “I will put my words in his mouth, and he will tell them everything I command him” (v. 18). Cf. Amos 3:7–8 and the various “Thus saith the Lord” statements that dot the OT Scriptures.
- Prophecy is *inerrant*. Flowing from the fact that prophecy is immediate revelation from God is the necessary conclusion that it is without error, and thus was as authoritative for the hearers as was the inscripturated Word of God. As such, prophets who presumed to speak for God and were discovered to be in error were to be immediately executed (vv. 19–20, 22)

Note: In view of the foregoing, there is little reason to suggest that prophecy in the church is to be radically redefined as “simply a very human—and sometimes partially mistaken—report of something the Holy Spirit brought to someone’s mind” (Grudem, *Gift of Prophecy*, p. 18). This idea guts prophecy of two of its three cardinal features, and threatens with mortal peril a whole class of self-proclaimed “prophets” in the church today. Grudem’s theory, while laudable for its intent of preserving the primacy of Scripture in the modern church, does so at the expense of a very sacred concept.

b. The Function of a Prophet

- (1) Like the apostle, the prophet functioned in a temporary or foundational role (Eph 2:20).
- (2) Specifically, the prophet was tasked with supplementing the incomplete revelation of the day (Deut 18:18) with new and necessary information:

Ephesians 3:2–5: Surely you have heard about the administration of God’s grace that was given to me for you, that is, the mystery made known to me by revelation, as I have already written briefly. In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God’s holy apostles and prophets.

The prophetic task continued until “everything necessary” had been captured in the Christian Scriptures (2 Tim 3:16–17; 2 Pet 1:3–4, 19–21).

Question: Were *Any* of the Prophets Officers of the Church?

This question is not an easy one to answer. While many of the NT references to prophecy can be chalked up to general gifts (Rom 12:6; 1 Cor 11:4–5; 13–14 *passim*) or to occasional, even one-time events (Acts 19:6; 21:9), there are a few cases where we find what seem to be “regular” or permanent prophets in the early church (e.g., Agabus in Acts 11:27–28 and 21:10; see also 13:1 and 15:32).

In that these “regular” prophets of Scripture seem to have a position and are by definition appointed to their roles by God, they technically meet the definition of an office (albeit temporary) in the early church, and many regard them as such. Since, however, the idea of prophetism exceeds the confines of the church and involves no regular seat of authority, it is probably best to refrain from describing any of the prophets as officers of the church.

4. Evangelists

See esp. William W. Combs, “The Biblical Role of the Evangelist,” *DBSJ* 7 (2002): 23–48.

a. The Idea of an Evangelist (εὐαγγελιστής)

The function of the evangelist is the most disputed of the functions mentioned in Ephesians 4:11, in large part because in neither this text nor the other two verses where the NT term is found (Acts 21:8; 2 Tim 4:5) do we find ample information about the selection, qualifications, and duties of the evangelist. The literature of the early church proves equally fruitless—virtually nothing concerning this “office” has survived. Further heightening our uncertainty is the fact that this term appears in Ephesians 4:11 at the “hinge” separating broad and foundational gifts (apostles and prophets) from local and permanent ones (pastors and teachers). As a result, a great many theories have emerged:

- (1) Many (such as Calvin, cited above, but with him a great many others) see the evangelist as a preliminary class of (supernaturally-equipped?) gossellers who operated as temporary officers in the church universal who were charged with introducing the gospel to new regions until local churches matured enough to adopt the “normal” missionary structures seen today (2 Tim 4:5).
- (2) Others see the evangelistic role as a permanent *office* of the Church with significant authority over multiple churches and answerable to none. These argue that the ordering of the functions in Ephesians 4:11 and 1 Cor 12:28 indicate not temporal priority (which we argued above), but priority of *rank*.
- (3) Others, following the tradition of Finney and 19th-century revivalism, see the evangelist as an itinerant revivalist tasked with reviving the “carnal” so as to take the next spiritual step toward being a “spiritual” Christians. In this model the revivalist-evangelist is not a church officer *per se*, but does serve the

church in something of a necessary sense.

- (4) Still others have transmuted the previous idea into the concept of an itinerant “expert” on evangelism, that is, one who has honed his apologetic and rhetorical skills to confront the pagan worldview with peculiar effectiveness. Like the previous category, the evangelist is not by definition an officer of the church, nor even a necessary feature of church life; rather he is a specialist from one church who is called upon to ply his skills in another. As such, his function is unobjectionable; it remains to be seen, however, whether this idea matches the biblical concept of *evangelist*.
- (5) Finally, it has been suggested that the closest approximation of the NT evangelist in the church today is that of a church-commissioned missionary or church planter. Rather than seeing this as a separate office of the local church (much less an office of the universal church), however, most view the work of an evangelist as a function of otherwise qualified elders sent by individual local churches. This theory, which is defended in these notes, derives from three key exegetical arguments:
 - The known function of Philip, the only named evangelist in the NT, in Samaria, the road to Ethiopia, and Azotus (Acts 8:5, 12, 27, 35, 40).
 - The fact that the function of an evangelist is a mandate extended to an elder (2 Tim 4:5), and presumably to elders in general.
 - The meaning of the verb εὐαγγελίζομαι, a verb that demonstrably expands on its most obvious meaning (to preach the gospel with the goal of conversions) to include the grounding of new believers in the faith and in churches (Acts 15:35; 1 Cor 9:18).

b. The Function of an Evangelist

- (1) It seems probable that the commissioning of men such as Paul, John Mark, Barnabas, and Silas to take the gospel to new locales (so esp. Acts 13:1–3; Rom 15:20; 2 Cor 10:16) was a commission to do the work of an evangelist: preaching the gospel so as not only to secure new converts, but also to ground them in the faith and organize them into local assemblies.
- (2) Since these men were commissioned by local churches and reported back to the same local churches (Acts 13:1–3 cf. 14:27), it is highly unlikely that they are to be considered “at large” officers of the universal church. Instead, they represent a special function of existing churches involved in the process of self-replication, providing the commissioned oversight necessary to the birth of new, independent assemblies complete with regular officers.
- (3) The complete absence of data about the selection and qualifications of evangelists, while admittedly an argument from silence, suggests that (1) their qualifications/selection are the same as those of elders or, better, that (2) the evangelist is not a separate office at all, but rather a regular *function* of

existing elders.

- (4) Evangelists, as such, appear in summary to be, in Barclay's words, the "rank and file missionaries of the Church." Some evangelists, like Paul and Barnabas, apparently established multiple churches and handed them over to settled pastors; others may have planted churches in which the evangelists themselves continued as settled pastors. The former practice is better attested, perhaps, but there is little here by way of prescription. It is probably best to leave this as a matter of ecclesiastical preference.

5. Teachers

As noted above, Calvin argued that the last function in Ephesians 4:11, the *teacher* or as he denominated it, the *doctor* of the church, represents one of four permanent offices of the modern church (the others being pastors, elders, and deacons), and the only one that may (but by no means must) exceed the pale of a single local church (*Institutes* 4.3.4; and esp. the *Genevan Ecclesiastical Ordinances*). While one might be both a pastor and a doctor of the church simultaneously, the two functions are very different. As a pastor, a man is charged with the ministries of Word and Sacrament; as a doctor, he serves as a resident theological scholar charged with both teaching the people and training new ministers. While intriguing, there is little in the text to commend this understanding:

- a. As Wallace has demonstrated, teachers represent a broad category of church function of which pastors are a specialized part.
- b. The absence of any instruction concerning qualifications, selection, or ordination of teachers suggests that teaching is a gift of less formal or official import in the church than the office of elder.
- c. To summarize, teaching appears to be a subsidiary function and task with which all elders (but not *only* elders) are charged.

Conclusion: Of the candidates for offices of the universal church detailed above, only one (apostles) clearly fits the definition of an "office" of the universal church—and by virtue of the qualifications for that office, we have concluded it to be a *temporary* office. The others appear to refer either to (1) transitional, revelatory functions appropriate to the era of incomplete revelation (prophets) or to (2) subsidiary functions and tasks charged primarily, but not exclusively, to elders of local churches (evangelists and teachers). There is little room for concluding from Ephesians 4:11 that any authority has been permanently vested in entities outside and/or above the local church.

B. Regular or Ordinary Officers of the Local Church

1. Pastors/Elders/Bishops

Coming to the fourth term in Ephesians 4:11 (and the last for our discussion), we move most definitely into the purview of the local church life. Of all the ecclesiastical functions detailed in the epistles, the pastor/elder is overwhelmingly the most

thoroughly described as to his character and function. This is because (1) he is set apart politically as having singular oversight over the church and (2) because the church needs guidance in the evaluation and selection of men to this all-important office.

a. The Qualifications of a Pastor/Elder/Bishop

(1) The Call to Ministry?

While great emphasis has historically been placed on the pastoral call as the first qualification for pastoral ministry, several cautionary factors should be recognized:

- (a) Nowhere does the idea of a call to ministry appear in the biblical record as a **qualification** for pastoral ministry. While appeal is often made to 1 Timothy 3:1 in this regard, it should be noted that the qualifications for bishop do not technically begin until verse 2. Verse 1 does not seem to speak at all to the idea of “call,” much less whether it is divine. It simply says that *if a man sets his heart on the office* (without any commentary at all on the validity of his aspiration), then the church should measure his suitability for the office by observing in him the qualifications detailed in the succeeding verse.
- (b) Nowhere does the word **call** appear in the biblical record in connection with **pastoral ministry**. While God surely uses means to cultivate desires for pastoral ministry in a man, and most emphatically *does* “send out” laborers (Matt 9:37–38), “make” overseers (Acts 20:28), and “give” pastoral candidates to specific individuals in the church (Eph 4:11–12; Col 4:17), God does not do so immediately (as the term *call* suggests) or without the use of means; not surprisingly, then, the term *call* (καλέω) is never in Scripture used to describe God’s appointment of pastors.

There are five demonstrable uses of the Greek term for call (καλέω) in the Scriptures (see esp. BDAG, 502–4):

- All people generally are called in the sense of being *addressed* or *identified* by names or labels. Cephas was *called* Peter; believers were *called* Christians; etc.
- Guests are called in the sense of being *verbally invited* (Luke 14:8–10; 1 Cor 10:27).
- Believers are called in the sense of being *effectually chosen* or *selected* to salvation (Rom 1:6–7; 8:28–30; 9:24; 1 Cor 1:9, 24, 26; 2 Thess 2:14; 1 Tim 6:12; 1 Pet 2:9; etc.) and its attendant responsibilities and benefits (Eph 4:4; 2 Tim 1:9; 1 Pet 1:15; etc.).
- Apostles and prophets are called in the sense of being *verbally and authoritatively summonsed by means of special revelation* (Matt 4:21; Mark 1:22; Luke 6:13; Acts 9:1–19; 22:3–16; 26:12–18; Rom 1:1; Gal

1:1; Acts 13:1; 16:9–10).

- All people have something of a calling that has reference to their *lot in life*, or the situation in which God has placed them (1 Cor 7:17, 20, 24).

What is strikingly absent, however, is any demonstrable NT use of the term in the sense of a *mystical call to ministry* sometimes anticipated in ordination council meetings. Insistence on such a “call,” as such, tends to (1) blur the distinction between extraordinary and ordinary offices in the church (i.e., apostles/prophets vis-à-vis pastors/deacons) and to (2) unduly strain the candidate’s commitment to cessationism.

Conclusion: While a church does well to seek in a pastoral candidate a sober sense of resolve and manifest destiny in view of the trust of the church with which he is potentially to be charged, quests for audible or mystical calls seem ill-conceived and may even distract a church from pursuing legitimate concerns and qualifications specifically detailed in Scripture.

(2) Biblical Qualifications (1 Tim 3:2–7; Titus 1:5–9)

The following is not a comprehensive treatment (such is accomplished elsewhere in the seminary curriculum), but a summary definition for each of qualifications detailed in the two key texts, together with answers to a few key questions connected with some of the more disputed of the qualifications.

1 Timothy 3:2–7: The overseer is to be above reproach, faithful to his wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him, and he must do so in a manner worthy of full respect. (If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God’s church?) He must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil. He must also have a good reputation with outsiders, so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil’s trap.

Titus 1:6–9: An elder must be blameless, faithful to his wife, a man whose children believe and are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient. Since an overseer manages God’s household, he must be blameless—not overbearing, not quick-tempered, not given to drunkenness, not violent, not pursuing dishonest gain. Rather, he must be hospitable, one who loves what is good, who is self-controlled, upright, holy and disciplined. He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it.

(a) **Above Reproach/Blameless:** A summary qualification denoting a long-standing pattern of good behavior that renders him free from legitimate accusation.

(b) **Faithful to His Wife:** A long-standing pattern of exclusive fidelity to one’s wife.

Question: May a divorced and/or remarried man ever become an officer of the church?

The construction of Paul's phrase μιᾶς γυναικὸς ἄνδρα (lit. a "one-woman man") is an unusual one and thus its interpretation is a matter of considerable debate. Note the following observations:

- It seems quite obvious, before moving to more controversial aspects of the phrase, that the pastoral candidate must be male and may not be homosexual. The syntax allows no room for a "one-spouse spouse" much less a "one-man woman" or a "one-man man." This is not the point of the passage, but no other scenario can make any sense of it.
- While few Protestants today affirm that the phrase *requires* an elder to be married (or in some extreme cases, that he must remain unmarried if a wife dies), this is the standard Eastern Orthodox view. In response, it should be noted that the emphasis of the passage throughout is *proven character*, not the superiority of a married to an unmarried state (or for that matter having children to being childless—v. 6), nor especially the promotion of asceticism (cf., in principle, 1 Cor 7:32; 9:5).
- The broadest interpretation of the phrase is that it merely prohibits polygamy among pastors and does not speak at all to divorce as such: a pastor must be monogamous (so Grudem, 916–17, NIV84?). This is not to say that all who hold this view are fine with a pastor who divorces and remarries at will (the requirements of managing one's household well and having a good reputation still apply), but they argue that the phrase ultimately is silent concerning divorce, and deals instead with a local problem in Ephesus and other polygamous cultures. Standing against this is (1) the complete absence of any other indication of problems with polygamy in the NT Church, (2) the universal appeal of the rest of the pericope, and (3) the fact that the rest of the items in this list deal with the candidate's *character*, not specific life situations.
- The narrowest interpretation of the phrase is that to be qualified for pastoral ministry, a man must never have been divorced (or at the very least must never have remarried after a divorce). Some further stipulate (borrowing from the language of Leviticus 21:7, 14; Ezek 44:22), that his wife must likewise never have divorced or committed fornication of any kind. In favor of this understanding is (1) OT precedent within the priesthood; (2) the fact that leaders are held to a stricter standard (Jas 3:1); and (3) the sad reality that the consequences of sin frequently persist even after forgiveness is granted (Exod 34:7): it is not the pastor's absolution from guilt that is in view, but his *blameless reputation* (so 1 Tim 3:2, 7).
- A mediating interpretation is that a man must have established a long-standing pattern of exclusive fidelity to his wife in order to qualify for the pastoral office (so NIV2011, Fee, Keener, Saucy, etc.). This position allows a man into pastoral ministry who, in the distant past

and prior to conversion, engaged in sexual/marital sin but has afterward, over considerable time (v. 6, 10), established a reputation (v. 7) of faithfulness to his wife and of sound management of his family (vv. 2, 5). Standing in favor of this understanding are (1) the pattern of the passage in dealing with *character/reputation* issues, not specific sins or life situations and (2) the NT precedent, after a period of testing, of welcoming even the vilest of sinners into ministerial roles (Acts 9:26–27).

Conclusion: Both of the last two explanations are attractive and each boasts an impressive array of proponents. The no-divorce position is of course more conservative, “safer,” and offers a plausible meaning of the phrase in question. The latter, however, also offers a plausible meaning of the phrase and, in this professor’s opinion, better fits the context.

- (c) **Temperate/Self-Controlled/Prudent:** Marked by patterns of judgment that are clear-headed, reserved, and even-keeled; having a cultivated habit of not being reactionary or of speaking/acting without careful forethought.
- (d) **Respectable:** Able to act appropriately and in a **dignified** manner (so also 3:8, 11) in order to *legitimately* earn people’s approval.
- (e) **Hospitable** (lit. a “lover of strangers”): Willing to make personal sacrifices to accommodate people’s needs, especially those who cannot reciprocate.
- (f) **Holding Fast the Faithful Word and Able to Teach, Exhort, Refute:** The pastor must not only be knowledgeable concerning his Bible and “the Faith,” but must also hold these fast, i.e., he must ardently embrace and guard them. While deacons and pastors alike have this responsibility in kind (1 Tim 3:9), however, a pastor must also possess the ability to communicate knowledgeably, accurately, and persuasively from a revealed body of truth. Stark in this passage for reflecting a *skill* rather than a character quality, this ability represents the one identifiable distinctive of elders vis-à-vis deacons in these two passages: elders *must* be adept at teaching.
- (g) **Not Given to Drunkenness** (or “not addicted to wine”): Probably not an absolute ban of alcohol (cf. 5:23), but probably more (contra the NIV) than a mere caution against drunkenness or total inebriation. What is prohibited here is regular attention to habit-forming substances and/or activities that results in inattention to responsibilities, impaired judgment, and/or rowdiness.
- (h) **Not Violent/Pugnacious:** Related to the idea of temperance and self-control (v. 2), but especially in the realm of anger. A pastor should be disinclined to violence (“not easily angered”) and unlikely to “blow up.”
- (i) **Peaceable/Gentle:** Patient, gracious, and courteous; tending to diffuse rather than engender strife.

- (j) **Not Self-Willed, Quarrelsome, or Overbearing:** Not so insistent on one's own rights that he becomes either irritable or imperious.
- (k) **Not a Lover of Money and Not Pursuing Dishonest** (or perhaps better, *inordinate*) **Gain:** Not materialistic, and disinterested in personal wealth. Paul has already stipulated that pastors have a right to make their living from the Gospel (1 Cor 9:14; 1 Tim 5:17–18), so this cannot mean that they must refuse remuneration; rather, it means that pastors should not hold tightly to their rights, hoard resources, or otherwise aspire to personal wealth.
- (l) **Managing His Own House Well:** This may include fiscal responsibility, but primarily denotes behavioral control, as seen in the clarifying phrase, **“Seeing that his children obey him, and in a manner worthy of full respect.”** Titus seems to go even further, stipulating that his children must **“believe”** and not be **“open to the charge of being wild and disobedient.”**

Question: Since no pastor can guarantee the individual election of his children, how can this be a legitimate qualification for the pastorate?

The fact that in Titus 1:6 we find that a pastor must have τέκνα ἔχων πιστά (lit. children having faith/faithfulness) does not necessarily mean that a pastor's children must be believers. The qualification instead demands that the pastor control the behavior of his children living at home (“in his household”), so that they are not openly rebellious or incorrigible (so the ensuing explanatory remark). In the words of the HCSB, a pastor must have *“faithful children”* [that is] children *“not accused of wildness or rebellion.”* No man can guarantee the salvation of his children, but he can and must restrain their behavior by commanding respect and submissiveness. And if he cannot do this, his is not qualified for the pastorate.

- (m) **Not a Recent Convert:** Quick elevation of young, inexperienced, and incompletely trained believers to positions of ecclesiastical authority tends, Paul tells us, to *pride*. It also leaves inadequate time to develop...
- (n) **Having A Good Reputation Outside the Church:** A pastor must have not only a good “church face,” but must have a good testimony in the unbelieving community as well. This ties in with the earlier expectation that the pastor be able to “refute” (ἐλέγχω) outsiders. One who has no reputation for good outside the church has no platform for apologetics and evangelism (Titus 2:6–8; 1 Pet 3:15–16).
- (o) **A Lover of Good:** Another of the “φιλο-” terms that Paul is fond of. Pastors are not to be lovers of money (1 Tim 3:3), but are to be lovers of strangers (1 Tim 3:2; Titus 1:9) and here, lovers of “good” (ἄγαθος). This probably is not a reference merely to *moral* good (though it includes this), but also if *civic* good, as seen in the wealth of its usage in Aristotle, Philo, and others.

- (p) **Upright and Holy:** Here Paul is speaking to conformity to a moral/ethical standard established by God for conduct toward both God and people respectively.
- (q) **Disciplined:** Paired with the term for self-control in Titus 1:9 (also 1 Tim 3:2), discipline involves, similarly, an ability to stay on task and to self-consciously restrain one's reactions to impulse.

b. The Function of a Pastor/Elder/Bishop

- (1) As *elders*, pastors are to be mature, respectable leaders within the church, and their function involves that of “presiding” or “ruling.” Like their OT Jewish namesakes who were elected/appointed to administer the affairs of the city or nation and to instruct and counsel the citizenry (Deut 21:2; Josh 8:33; 1 Chron 11:3; 15:25; 2 Chron 5:2; Ezra 10:8, 14), so also NT elders lead the local church in its administrative and teaching functions.

1Tim. 5:17—Elders are to “rule well,” and to “work hard in preaching and teaching.”

Question: Does this text imply that there are two kinds of elders: ruling elders and teaching elders?

The contrast being made in this verse is not between elders who rule and elders who teach, but between elders who *rule well and work hard at teaching* and elders who *do not rule as well and do not work as hard at teaching*. There is no syntactical basis for arguing two kinds of elders. Significantly, the *μάλιστα* that connects the two halves of the verse cannot be construed in any sense as coordinate or continuative in nature. Instead, it says something additional about the first element, and is thus translatable as *that is, even*, or as in most translations, *especially*: “**Elders who rule well are to be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching.**” In point of fact, the term offers proof that a good elder both rules *and* teaches well: our text recognizes the necessary overlap of ruling and teaching by the *selfsame* elder.

Elsewhere, we note that *all* elders are to be “apt to teach” and able to “manage the house of God” (1 Tim 3:2, 5). Likewise, elders are indiscriminately told to “shepherd the flock” (1 Pet 5:2; Acts 20:28). There is no distinction noted between ruling and teaching branches of the office, though, functionally, one pastor may do more administration and another more teaching within a given local body.

- (2) As *overseers* (bishops), and *pastors* (shepherds), pastors are to superintend the work of God. This differs only subtly from ruling, but seems to imply a personal, “hands-on approach” in equipping people for the work of the ministry and caring for the souls of one's flock—a concept that exceeds the aloof decisions and judgments that might be inferred from the idea of “ruling.” The terms for oversight and shepherding usually appear together in the NT.

Acts 20:28: Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you *overseers*, to *shepherd* the church of God.

1 Peter 2:25: For you were continually straying like sheep, but now you have returned to the *Shepherd* and *Guardian* of your souls.

1 Peter 5:2: Be *shepherds* of God's flock that is under your care, serving as *overseers*.

Hebrews 13:17: Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit: for they watch in behalf of your souls, as they that shall give account.

(3) As *preachers*, pastors have as a primary responsibility the proclamation of the Word.

1Tim. 4:13: Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to *preaching* and to teaching.

2 Timothy 4:2: *Preach* the word; be ready in season [and] out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and *instruction*.

c. The Source and Extent of Pastoral Authority

By virtue of the indiscriminate commands for the pastor to “rule” and “oversee” it is clear that the Bible sees authority as *inherent* within the pastoral office. The congregation does not technically invest pastoral authority in men; it elects men to a position with inherent authority. A church may not grant someone the pastoral office while withholding authority—the authority belongs to the office, not to the congregation (see above). Specifically, pastors have broad authority to preach on topics that they deem necessary to the health of the church; to exhort, confront, and counsel persons in the flock without seeking “permission” to do so; and to lead in worship and evangelism, placing emphasis as they see fit to correct deficiencies and promote appropriate congregational participation, etc. This does not mean that there can be no mutual advisement, but it does mean that pastors have considerable liberty to rule, oversee, shepherd, and preach as they see fit.

Question 1: Do these notes advocate, then, for the concept of “elder rule”?

Scripture recognizes two kinds of local church authority: pastoral authority and congregational authority. These two authorities exist in tension, but *never to the exclusion of each other*. Churches may differ legitimately on the amount of authority exercised by the pastors and congregations respectively; however, both entities must retain the specific authority assigned them in Scripture. The pastor “rules” the congregation, but only by the good pleasure of the congregation.

In most cases, the phrase “elder rule” involves the assumption of responsibilities that in Scripture appear consistently as the purview of congregations. So, no, these notes do not advocate for the concept of “elder rule.”

Question 2: Does the pastor have authority to suggest or command a course of action in a non-biblical area?

Pastoral authority operates in the realm of spiritual oversight; however, “secular” and “spiritual” are not mutually exclusive categories. For instance, a pastor has no right to order individuals in his congregation to buy Chevrolet cars and not Ford or Toyota products. However, he may rightly advise a man not to purchase an extravagant car that will strap him financially and so injure his family or hamper his participation in the life of the church. In this case the “secular” issue has very obvious spiritual ramifications—it affects a member’s stewardship and spiritual commitments.

It is incumbent upon a pastor to recognize that his responsibility is sometimes to *advise* and sometimes to *command*. A person should not fall under church discipline for disobeying his pastor unless he is disobeying a clear scriptural directive. At the same time, it is incumbent upon the congregation to develop trust in their spiritual leader and act on his advice as often as is possible.

d. The Number of Pastors in a Given Church

(1) The Argument for a Single Pastor or “Lead” Pastor within a Pastoral Hierarchy

- (a) While the pattern of leadership Scripture often included multiplied leaders, the pattern also included at the very minimum a *primus inter pares* and usually a singular head/overseer/superintendent/monarch.
- OT Israel had 70 elders, but Moses was still their leader, and their subsidiary authority was channeled *through him* (Num 11:24–25).
 - Later, Israel had many governors, but one supreme monarch who appointed them all.
 - Similarly, the first-century synagogue model, from which the early church borrowed heavily, was organized with a president.
 - The early church had 12 apostles, but Peter held the keys in a unique sense (Matt 16:17–19; cf. Acts 1:15ff; 2:14ff; 8:14ff; 10–11).
 - The church in Jerusalem had multiple elders, but James was clearly their leader (Acts 12:17; 15:13, 19, 22; **21:18**; **Gal 2:9**, 12).
 - Other social institutions (e.g., the family) and even the Trinity itself have a hierarchical structure (1 Cor 11:3).
- (b) While plurality of eldership is clearly common in the NT, this does not necessarily upset the single-elder model (at least not the second expression detailed above); however, the few occasions where singularity of eldership is maintained in fact *do* throw the plural-elder model into question.
- 2 John 1; 3 John 1—John’s self-description as “the” elder implies that he was not merely one of many, but was unique in some sense.

- Revelation 1–3—Each of the seven churches is represented by a single *angel* or messenger. While at first blush it seems odd to identify these as *pastors*, several elements render this translation plausible:
 - The term can be used of human messengers (Matt 11:20).
 - The warnings and encouragement in these letters do not seem appropriate to angels (e.g., Rev 2:4, 5).
 - The idea of ecclesiastical guardian angels, while possible, has no other biblical precedent.
- (c) While itself not definitive, it is telling that 1 Timothy 3:1ff offers qualifications for a *pastor* (singular), but 3:8ff offers qualifications for *deacons* (plural).
- (d) In view of the demands of 1 Corinthians 9:14 (“The Lord has *commanded* that those who preach the gospel *should receive their living from the gospel*”), it is often fiscally impossible for many churches to support more than one full-time elder.
- (e) Likewise it is often impossible for many churches to discover in their respective memberships more than one gifted and qualified elder. In fact, in the history of Baptist life, it has often been necessary for single pastors to shepherd multiple churches simultaneously.
- (f) Practically speaking, there are always leaders among leaders, such that all or nearly all elder-led congregational churches are *de facto* single-elder led, even if they claim otherwise. As Patterson notes, there is a prevailing “psychology of leadership” that renders a single leader virtually inevitable in all human organization (151). Furthermore, absolute equality of rule is extremely cumbersome and inefficient.

Answers by Advocates of Plural Eldership

- The passages purportedly detailing a single-elder scenario are debated:
 - The singular ἐπίσκοπος in 1 Tim 3:1 is inconclusive.
 - The normal translation for ἄγγελος in Revelation 1–3 is *angel*.
 - The use of the article with πρεσβύτερος in 2 John 1 and 3 John 1 could possibly point to John as the senior or even sole elder of his assembly, but it could simply be a reference a prior acquaintance.
 - That James is singled out among the elders in Jerusalem is not conclusive. He may be singled out as a presiding elder, a designated spokesman, or even an apostle.
- In the balance of references to elders and bishops in the NT, the terms invariably appear in the plural (Acts 11:30; 14:23; 15:2, 4, 6, 22; 16:4; 20:17, 28; 21:18; Phil 1:1; 1 Thess 5:12; 1 Tim 4:14; Titus 1:5; Heb 13:7, 17; Jas 5:14). This does not amount to a prescription for the Church, but it is a substantial and consistent description.

- While plurality and equality are at times inefficient, this is by design. Plurality (1) ensures that more options and objections are considered and (2) prevents the corruption that tends to accompany centralized authority embodied in the single-elder model.
- Practically, most single-elder-led congregations *are* committed to plural leadership, but rather than vest that authority in an elder board according to the biblical pattern, they instead vest that authority in a deacon board despite the lack of biblical warrant.
- Practically, a plurality of elders all but guarantees that a church is never left completely bereft of pastoral leadership. Even in periods of transition, qualified elders remain to direct and oversee the life of the church. Contrarily, churches with single elders are often obliged to make their very most important ecclesiastical decisions (who to lead them) without any pastoral guidance.
- The objection of unpaid elders, while a serious one, is in part answered by the fact that the problem is not unique to plural-elder-led congregations. Many single-elder-led congregations are led by unpaid or partially paid “tent-making” pastors and assistant pastors, copying the example of Paul. It is probable that 1 Corinthians 9:14 should be read in its context with the caveat that a minister may *voluntarily* relinquish his right to compensation. This happens all the time not only in plural-elder-led but also single-elder-led congregations.

(2) The Argument for Plural Eldership with more-or-less Equal Authority

- (a) The testimony of the NT Scriptures to plural eldership is universal or very nearly so. We cannot definitely identify one NT church that was governed by a single elder, but can arguably identify at least 10 churches or groups of churches that had a plural eldership.
- Jerusalem (Acts 11:30; 15:2, 4, 6, 22; Acts 16:4; 21:17)
 - Syrian Antioch (Acts 13:1)
 - Ephesus (Acts 20:17)
 - The churches to which James wrote (Jas 5:14)
 - Philippi (Phil 1:1)
 - The churches to which the book of Hebrews was written (Heb 13:7, 17, 24)
 - The churches to which Peter wrote (1 Pet 5:1–2)
 - Lystra, Iconium, Pisidian Antioch (Acts 14:23) (?)
 - The churches on Crete (Titus 1:5) (?)
 - The church that ordained Timothy (1 Tim 4:14) (?)
- (b) The structure of the NT church suggests a need for multiplied elders. The Jerusalem church, for instance, was very large (thousands of members), which met in presumably dozens of homes, each with an elder. Still, this complex of meetings was described as “the” church at Jerusalem.

- (c) The Scriptures know of no distinction between elders, and to distinguish one man as a “super-elder” has no more biblical warrant than does the episcopal model. This does not mean that *influence* cannot be disparate within a body of elders, with spokesmen and presiding elders emerging; however, there is no reason to suggest that there is no formal parity at all. All elders are equally elders.
- (d) Plural eldership recognizes that no one man is an expert at every aspect of pastoral leadership and allows the strength of a team in the governing of the church.
- (e) Above all, plural eldership effectively disperses the authority among several leaders and diffuses the tendency in single eldership to autocracy and dictatorship.

Answers by Advocates of Single Eldership

- Plural-elder-led congregationalism represents an unnatural “psychology of polity” (Patterson). The idea of leaderless ruling boards is unknown among human organizations. Every board in the business world has a CEO; every attempt at an idealized round table in history has inevitably yielded to a King Arthur or has collapsed into factionalism and anarchy.
- Plural-elder-led congregations, by advocating lay/non-vocational/unpaid elders, uniformly violate the Lord’s explicit *command* that “those who preach the gospel *should receive their living from the gospel*” (1 Cor 9:14), and those who rule well are worthy of double honor (1 Tim 5:17). Ironically, contrary to this latter text, it is the elders who merely “rule” that are the first to be denied compensation.

Some actually make non-payment of elders *mandatory*. For example, the bylaws of Capitol Hill Baptist Church (5.2, 15 March 2009) specify that “**a majority of the active eldership shall be composed of church members not in the regular pay of the church.**”

Note: The problem here is not precisely that of non-vocational elders. Paul has just detailed in 1 Corinthians 9:13 his personal decision to engage in lay or “tentmaking” ministry for the sake of a troubled church. This was his privilege. However, he hastens to observe that this was a strictly *voluntary* decision, not a norm for the church. Irrespective of Paul’s decision to engage in voluntary lay ministry, the norm for church life is captured in verse 14: it is the Lord’s *command* that a church not only pay, but *fully* pay its elders.

For a church to constitutionally bind itself to *not* pay a majority of its elders seems to be an explicit violation of 1 Corinthians 9:14.

- Plural-led congregations are routinely obliged, similarly, to opt not only for an *unpaid* eldership, but also an *unqualified* eldership to meet pre-determined quotas of elders (e.g., theologically untrained, unable to teach, non-ordained, etc.). In view of this inequity, greater power accrues to trained, vocational elders, which scuttles the whole rationale of the plural/equal approach.

- Plural-led congregations also tend more naturally to lesser participation by the whole church, exchanging congregational rule for representative elder rule.

CONCLUSION: The Bible falls short of a definitive answer to this question. While the biblical record tilts in favor of plural eldership and common sense suggests that there is “safety in numbers,” the need for single eldership has been an unfortunate and overwhelming historical and practical reality in the life of the church. While a church that avoids plural eldership when it is feasible should surely be a rarity, there is no biblical mandate that illegitimizes churches with a single pastor.

e. The Selection and Ordination of Pastors

- (1) The church selects her pastors autonomously by vote of the members (see above). Elders do not function as an exclusive, self-perpetuating body above the local church (Papalism; Episcopalianism; Presbyterianism; etc.).
- (2) In so selecting elders, the church is *de facto* ordering or “ordaining” them to preside over the life of the church. Indeed, in historical Baptist life, ordination and installation were typically understood to be coextensive. In the modern church, elders are often “installed” independently of and even irrespective of their ordination.

Today, ordination occurs when a church formally recognizes that an individual has the God-given gifts and skills necessary to the execution of the pastoral office. The recognition is usually made on the advisement of a group of elders from multiple churches (an ordination council); however, this council is not a matter of biblical mandate, and serves only to *recommend*, not to actually *recognize* the candidates suitability for pastoral office. The latter function belongs to the local church alone.

In keeping with the biblical pattern, ordination typically includes a literal “laying on of hands.” This gesture is symbolic and does not communicate any real authority, so probably is not a requisite activity; however, it is a helpful image of the church’s recognition of God’s gifts in a man.

Acts 13:1–3: While they were ministering to the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” Then, when they had fasted and prayed and laid their hands on them, they sent them away.

1 Timothy 5:22: Do not lay hands upon anyone hastily.

2 Timothy 1:6: For this reason I remind you to kindle afresh the gift of God which is in you through the laying on of my hands.

***For a helpful procedure for ordination that is careful to guard congregationalism and local church autonomy, see McCune, *Systematic Theology*, 3:259–62.

3. Deacons

a. The Qualifications of Deacons

Acts 6:3, 5: Choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom...full of faith and of the Holy Spirit.

1 Timothy 3:8–13: Deacons, likewise, are to be men worthy of respect, sincere, not indulging in much wine, and not pursuing dishonest gain. They must keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience. They must first be tested; and then if there is nothing against them, let them serve as deacons. In the same way, their wives are to be women worthy of respect, not malicious talkers but temperate and trustworthy in everything. A deacon must be the husband of but one wife and must manage his children and his household well. Those who have served well gain an excellent standing and great assurance in their faith in Christ Jesus.

Like the qualifications for bishops, the qualifications for deacons focus on character issues, and differ very little from each other. There are, however a few differences:

- (1) As noted above, there is no requirement for deacons to be adept at teaching; however, they are not absolved from “holding fast to the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience,” indicating that a firm grasp of and commitment to biblical/theological truth is still expected of deacons.
- (2) **Sincerity** is also incumbent upon deacons. The term used here (μὴ διλόγους— not “double-worded”) is extremely rare, and could refer metaphorically to being sincere or non-hypocritical (as in most modern translations), or more literally to a reticence to “repeat words” (cf. **not being gossips** in v. 11; so Mounce, etc.). Why this issue (or these issues) is singled out for deacons is unclear. Several possibilities emerge:
 - Some who accept female deacons suggest that this issue is included because this is a sin to which women (arguably) are more prone than men.
 - Some suggest the function of deacons in addressing poverty, embarrassing physical illness, etc., might be peculiar objects of gossip, leading to a special emphasis on this concern.
 - Others suggest that the list here is simply representative in nature, and that the differences can simply be attributed to Pauline variety.
- (3) **Trustworthiness** is also a newcomer on this list. Again, the peculiar mention of this term with reference to deacons may be incidental; however, it does seem that loyalty would seem to be a particularly desirable quality for church leaders who serve under the rule and oversight of overseers.
- (4) Of particular interest in these verses, of course, is the mention of **wives** or **women** (γυναῖκας) in verse 11. Two major options emerge:
 - (a) The term refers to the *wives* of deacons (so ESV, HCSB, NIV84). This fits more naturally with the clear identification of male deacons in v. 12, and

with the pattern of exclusively male leadership elsewhere in the NT, and esp. in Acts 6:1–6). This view suffers, however, from the absence of any qualification of the word *γυναικας* (if the word is to be translated as *wives* we would expect to see v. 11 begin with *their* wives or at least *the* wives). The fact that Romans 16:1 describes the woman Phoebe as a deacon also stands against this view.

- (b) The term could also indicate that women may be deacons (so NASB95 and NIV2011). This understanding explains why women are mentioned in the discussion of deacons but not of bishops (vv. 1–7), and better explains the unqualified use of the term *γυναικας* in v. 11). It also makes good sense for females to be active in a diaconate that began as a ministry specifically to women. Standing against this view principally is 1 Timothy 3:12, but also Acts 6:1–6, and the general pattern of exclusively male leadership in the NT church.

Conclusion: Baptists have historically been amicably divided on this issue, and are likely to remain so. The exegetical and theological arguments are rather evenly weighted. In any case, it is critical for the church to recognize and employ women, irrespective of whether they may an “office,” to accomplish diaconal tasks that are better suited to women. In no sense are women to be denigrated or denied a place in the function and administration in the local church.

b. The Function of Deacons

- (1) The function of deacons is inherent in the meaning of the term “deacon”: deacons are *servants* of the church who relieve the weight of ecclesiastical oversight by assisting primarily with the church’s *physical* and *social* tasks (Acts 6:1–6). Among such task might be included ministries of benevolence, maintenance of facilities, financial business, and the logistics of the church service. Some insist that this is the *only* legitimate function of deacons.
- (2) The qualifications listed in Acts 6:3 and 1 Timothy 3:8–13 suggest, however, that deacons may be commissioned to carry out spiritual duties as well. They need not necessarily be “able to teach,” but they must “keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience” (v. 9), a qualification which suggests that they may be called upon to use these “deep truths” as occasion demands.
- (3) In the end, it seems best to affirm that deacons may “do whatever is necessary to allow the elders to accomplish their God-given calling of shepherding and teaching the church... Each local church is free to define the tasks of deacons based on its particular needs” (Merkle, 240).

c. The Source and Extent of Diaconal Authority

There is no *innate* authority attached to the office of deacon or to a “board” of deacons. All authority possessed by deacons is *delegated*. This is not to say that a pastor or a church cannot delegate significant authority to its deacons or employ them as an advisory body. However, Scripture nowhere describes deacons as

possessing any independent authority to “rule” in the church.

NOTE: There is a tendency, especially among churches with a historically unstable pastorate, for deacons to assume independent authority to “hold the church together.” It is incumbent upon deacons to be on guard against this potential fault once a pastor is installed.

d. The Selection of Deacons

- (1) Scripture offers no procedural specifics concerning the selection of deacons except by example in Acts 6.

Acts 6:2–6: The Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, “It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.” This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch. They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.

Note: Since this passage sees the church appointing men who are *never specifically called deacons* to assist *not elders but apostles*, some do not recognize this passage as introducing a normative pattern for the church. However, it is probable that the incident is recorded to establish a precedent for handling similar situations in other churches.

- (2) While the Scriptures offer no specific guidance to this end, most churches elect deacons for terms of service (and not for an the open-ended commitment normally seen for elders), and many also require deacons to “sit out” a term. While these steps are not mandatory, both practices help to prevent deacons from assuming power that is not biblically theirs.
- (3) The number of deacons is determined at the discretion of the church (1) by need and (2) by availability of qualified men. The term always appears in the plural in the New Testament (Acts 6:1–6; Phil 1:1; 1 Tim 3:8–13), though the NT never prescribes plurality as necessary.
- (4) Acts 6 indicates that deacons were recipients of the laying on of hands; however, most churches today reserve this gesture for pastors.

Question: Must a church have deacons?

Most Baptists view the deacon as a *necessary* office; that is, a church should have at least one or two deacons when it organizes. Others, borrowing from the occasion in Acts 6, see the office as strictly need-based; that is, deacons are necessary only when the elder(s) can no longer handle the administrative details of the church alone. While the Scriptures are not absolutely prescriptive on this point, two factors suggest that all properly ordered churches should have deacons:

- (1) In general, plurality of leadership seems to be a biblical pattern (Eccl 4:9–12) not only in terms of wisdom generally, but also the sharing of responsibility,

accumulation of skills, and reserve help in the case of incapacity. As such, one wonders why, if qualified candidates are available, elders would not want deacons.

- (2) It has also been argued, reasonably, that Acts 6 is formative of church polity *in general*, and not in all its details: that is, the delay in adding deacons until some time after the church began is not intended to be normative for all churches. Instead, all churches constituted after this event were to have deacons immediately.

4. Messengers?

In keeping with biblical practice, churches will sometimes appoint representative messengers to complete specific tasks on behalf of the church—representatives at association meetings, delivering gifts, etc. (Acts 11:30; 15:2; 1 Cor 16:3). These are not to be considered offices in any sense, but a delegation of representative function for a particular task that, once completed, causes that function to cease.

VI. The Ordinances of the Local Church

A. The Meaning of an Ordinance

Strong's definition of *ordinance* as an "outward rite which Christ has appointed to be administered in his church as visible signs of the saving truth of the gospel" (*Systematic Theology*, 930) has been much cited in Baptist literature, and it is generally unobjectionable. A survey of historical Baptist polity manuals divulges, however, that Strong has missed a significant if not primary function of the church ordinances. What sets the two ordinances apart from other "ordained" features of church life is not primarily their *soteriological* function, but their *ecclesiological* function. That the ordinances are visible signs of the "saving truth of the Gospel" is true (and their abuse as sacraments renders this clarification necessary), but it is their function as *signs of the visible union of the saints in local bodies of Christ* is what sets them apart as distinctively *church* ordinances.

As such, I would adjust this definition to say that an ordinance is an **outward rite that Christ has appointed to be administered in his church as visible signs of the union of the believer with Christ and with the gathered body.**

B. Baptism: Ensuring Congregational Purity by Guarding the Door to the Church

See esp. Mark Dever, "Baptism in the Context of the Local Church," in *Believer's Baptism: A Sign of the New Covenant in Christ* (Nashville: B&H, 2006).

"Believer's baptism is important to us because it is the principal means by which [a regenerate church] membership is preserved" (Hammett, 95).

This statement, following on the heels of an extensive survey of Baptist confessions and manuals, is startling to the modern Christians because this purpose of baptism is rarely emphasized today. Instead, almost exclusive emphasis is given to baptism as the believer's personal affirmation of *individual* union with Christ: his public profession of

solidarity with Christ and his first public step of Christian obedience. The following is not intended to diminish the individual union so beautifully pictured in baptism, but to resurrect a lost emphasis of baptism—the church’s careful use of the rite to collectively affirm that the one being baptized bears all the marks of a true believer and so confirm the *corporate* unity of the whole church with him. This, then, serves as a *primary vehicle of protecting the body from imposters*.

1. The Meaning of Baptism

Baptism is a symbol and public announcement of the believer’s union with Christ.

- a. The believer is *individually* united with Christ by participation in his death and burial (the believer’s death to sin) and resurrection (the believer’s walk in the new, abundant life of regeneration that culminates in his ultimate resurrection in the eschaton).

Romans 6:4–5: We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection.

Galatians 3:26–27: You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.

Colossians 2:12–13: [You have] been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised up with him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead. When you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, he made you alive together with him, having forgiven us all our transgressions.

Question: Are these Passages a Reference to Water Baptism or Spirit Baptism?

Spirit baptism is the judicial placement of the believer into the multi-ethnic body of Christ in the present dispensation (1 Cor 12:13). Water baptism is symbolic of spirit baptism, but also reflects more broadly the believer’s union with Christ. As these verses point out, individual union with the Christ-life is *essential* to sanctification. Without it there is neither death to the penalty of the Law nor slavery to righteousness (so also and esp. 2 Pet 1:3–4).

Though theologians differ on this point, it seems necessary to conclude, herefrom, that individual union with Christ is essential in every dispensation. It is conceded, of course, that OT saints did not know all that we do about the God-man Jesus Christ; however, there must have been some kind of experimental union with Christ for these saints to have enjoyed the benefits of regeneration and sanctification: Christ is the only viable source of regeneration life in this or any dispensation.

Since what is being celebrated in these verses is not the *judicial placement* of the believer into the multi-ethnic body of Christ, but the *experiential participation* in the Christ-life that results in new behavior, it seems advisable to view this not as Spirit Baptism (which is strictly a *judicial* placement into Christ’s body that is unique to this age), but rather

water baptism, which depicts in part the participation of the believer in the *experimental* benefits of Christ's crosswork.

In the present dispensation, of course, we recognize that union with Christ and Spirit baptism occur *simultaneously*; however, it is not necessary to conclude therefrom that the two theological concepts share *identity*.

- b. The believer is also *corporately* united to the body (i.e., the church) of Christ. This is the neglected function of baptism that has largely been lost by the modern church: Water Baptism is a *church* ordinance.

- (1) The *symbolism* of physical immersion draws primarily from its spiritual counterpart in Spirit Baptism into the universal body of Christ.

1 Corinthians 12:12–13: For even as the body is one and yet has many members, and all the members of the body, though they are many, are one body, so also is Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

Exegetical Note: The baptism here described is not water baptism into local church life: it is spirit baptism into the universal body of Christ, with which ALL NT believers have invisible or mystical union. However, the context of this passage (the distribution of gifts in *local* church life) indicates that there is a corresponding visible union that unites believers on a local level. It is this imagery from which the Christian church derives the rite of water baptism: **Water baptism symbolizes on a local, visible level what Spirit baptism accomplishes on a universal, invisible level.**

Gal 3:28: [You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.] There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

Exegetical Note: In this passage the two functions of baptism are inextricably united. Water baptism is both (1) a profession of personal faith and individual union with Christ (vv. 26–27), as seen above, and also (2) an entry point into union with the multi-ethnic body of Christ.

- (2) The *uniqueness of water baptism to this age* demonstrates its significance to the local church.

Matthew 28:19: Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them...

Acts 2:41: Those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls.

Exegetical Note: The argument here is that if water baptism is merely symbolic of soteriological truth, it would be requisite in all ages. The fact that

it is not indicated that it has unique significance for the *church* age. The reason that baptism did not exist during the Mosaic economy is not because people did not participate in the benefits of Christ's crosswork, but because there was no uniquely spiritual body into which one might be baptized.

- (3) The *institution of water baptism as a precursor to inclusion into the new community of God* demonstrates its significance for local church life.

Acts 2:41: Those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls.

1 Peter 3:21: The significance of baptism is "not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God," a likely reference to a public pledge of ecclesiastical commitment voiced to God, in conjunction with the rite of baptism, as witnessed by and shared with the local community (see e.g., Davids).

Colossians 2:11–12: In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead.

Exegetical Note: Colossians 2:11 serves both as a comparison and as a contrast of circumcision with baptism. What connects the two rites is that each is an entry rite into its respective dispensational expression of the "people of God." What distinguishes them is that the former (circumcision) is strictly a visible symbol of community identity, whereas the latter (baptism) is a visible expression of an invisible "connection with the Head, from which the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow" (v. 19): **Water Baptism is the Entry Rite into the NT people of God, the Church.**

Question: What, Then, Is the Relationship of Baptism to Church Membership?

In Hiscox's words, baptism "does not admit to the fellowship of the churches; it, however, stands at the door" (p. 111). Scripture knows of no "unchurched" believer, because Christians announce their profession publicly by means of water baptism. In so doing they are saying *both* "I want to declare my acceptance by Him (Christ)" *and also* "I want to request acceptance with Them (the church)." Technically, a member is received by the affirmation (vote) of the body and not by baptism itself; however, both should occur together. See below.

In keeping with the preceding, it naturally follows that water baptism should not occur unless one is willing to be received into the membership of the baptizing body. To administer baptism in such a scenario is to gut baptism of much of its meaning.

2. The Administration of Baptism

- a. The church is the only proper administrator of baptism. Baptism is a *church* ordinance, not merely a *Christian* ordinance.

- (1) Only the church has as its property the guardianship of the truth (1 Tim 3:15). It alone is qualified to examine and approve the validity of a believer's profession (Acts 10:44–48; 11:18).
- (2) The symbol itself assumes identification with a visible manifestation of the body of Christ: the local church. Para-church baptisms, family gatherings in backyard pools, or “field baptisms” by military chaplains do not qualify.

Note: It is common for Baptists, being rightly vigilant against (1) a sacramental view of baptism and (2) the distinction between clergy and laity, to announce that a proper administrator of baptism is not necessary to valid baptism. This is partly true. The church may appoint whomever she pleases to administer baptism, whether a resident elder, a visiting elder, a deacon, or a regular member. In fact, since the one baptizing transmits no grace to the one being baptized, a baptism may be considered valid even if the one baptizing apostatizes and proves himself an unbeliever. One non-negotiable about the administrator of baptism, however, remains: only a *church* may properly administer baptism.

Question: What About the Ethiopian Eunuch in Acts 8?

Standing against the suggestion here made that water baptism is an entry rite into the local church is the anomalous story of the Ethiopian eunuch who, after a brief evangelistic encounter with Philip, converted and submitted to baptism apart from any local church context. There are reasons, however, to view this incident as something less than normative. Note the following:

- (1) As a **descriptive** passage, Acts 8 can sustain less theological freight than the unified witness of the prescriptive corpus of the NT to baptism as a distinctly ecclesiastical rite (so 1 Corinthians 12; Galatians 3; Colossians 2; 1 Peter 3; and the whole discussion above). This is not to say that Acts 8 may be ignored as superfluous, but it does suggest that the weight of prescriptive material is on the side of baptism as a *church* ordinance and not merely a *Christian* ordinance.
- (2) As an **incomplete** descriptive passage, Acts 8 does not contain enough information to make an informed assessment. We are quite simply unaware of many salient details of this incident. Was the eunuch baptized alone or did others join him? Could it be (as church tradition suggests) that this event marked the initial organization of the church in Africa? We just don't know. And to radically adjust ecclesiology based on the absence of contextual details seems at best imprudent.
- (3) As a **formative** passage, the normative value of Acts 8 for the modern church is in question. As a *miracle-working* evangelist, Philip clearly has no contemporary equivalent. As an *evangelist*, Philip's contemporary equivalent is debated: (1) Calvin, as we noted, restricted the role of evangelist to the first century; further, (2) if Philip was an evangelist in the sense of a modern missionary/church-planter, it follows that he was baptizing at the behest of a local church and with a view to the establishment of another local church.

Conclusion: While the problem of the incident of Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch is surely a thorny one, it is doubtful that the modern church should appeal to this story as sufficient reason to abandon the idea of baptism as a distinctly *church* ordinance. At best it offers a window into the procedure for pioneer church planting, but a dubious one at that.

b. The procedure for baptism.

(1) The church ascertains that the candidate grasps the necessary content of the Gospel and has a credible profession of faith. **This is the church's principal venue for preserving the purity of the local body.** Note the following:

- If at all possible, this evaluation should be made by the whole church so that each member may render an informed decision and not a decision based on the report of a committee alone. Again, it is the church that guards its purity, and not merely representatives of the church.
- The examination is threefold: (1) the church must ascertain that the candidate's profession carefully reflects the Christian kerygma; (2) the church must ascertain that the candidate is aware of and willing to submit to the doctrinal standards and duties of membership established by the church, and (3) the church must affirm that the candidate's conduct corresponds with his profession.

Question #1: Should a Delay Ever Occur Between a Candidate's Profession of Faith and the Administration of His Baptism in Order to "Prove" the Candidate?

Scripture knows of no delay between one's profession and his baptism, but neither does it offer an explicit command in this regard. Over the centuries Baptists have made several observations in this regard that are worth noting:

- (1) Biblical baptisms always involved adults who had a clear understanding of their decision, whereas the modern church often deals with children or others whose understanding lags behind their zeal.
- (2) Biblical baptisms occurred in a milieu where embracing Christ and the Christian message meant immediate social ostracism: hasty and uninformed professions were less likely in such a setting. Contrarily, in some modern cultures, "getting religion" often meets with broad approval and can actually improve one's social status. A church should be mindful of this factor as fertile ground for disingenuous professions.
- (3) The historical rise of early speedy baptisms is a relatively recent feature in Baptist life, (1) commencing with the rise of the Campbellite aberration (baptismal regeneration), (2) accelerating during the next century as regard for baptism as an entry rite fell into decline in lieu of regard for baptism as a mere announcement of faith, and (3) becoming a fixed feature in Baptist church life based primarily on sociological rather than theological factors (for this question and the next see esp. John Withers, "Social Forces

Affecting the Age at Which Children Are Baptized in Southern Baptist Churches,” Ph.D. dissertation, SBTS, 1996).

Conclusion: It seems appropriate in many cases to allow a short time lag to ensure complete understanding and even to observe satisfactory evidence of a changed life. A long delay, however, is inappropriate, unless there is credible reason to doubt the candidate’s profession.

Question #2: May a Church Set an Age Requirement for Children Seeking Baptism?

Again, Scripture knows nothing of an age requirement for children seeking baptism; of course, Scripture also records for us no examples of children getting baptized in the first place. As such, arguments from silence cut two directions on this issue. Historically, Baptists have been very conservative on this issue, withholding baptism until candidates are “of age,” i.e., adults or otherwise making independent decisions. In American Baptist life during the last century, however, the minimum age of church baptisms has steadily crept lower, so that some churches today baptize children as young as three or four years of age.

In recent years, however, there has been something of a pushback to this trend—and one that has been led by several key conservative leaders: Bethlehem Baptist (John Piper) specifies age 11 as a lower age limit; Grace Community Church (John MacArthur) specifies age 12 (for links to corroborating documentation see <http://www.challies.com/articles/at-what-age-should-we-baptize>). Clearly in the forefront in this pushback, however, is Capitol Hill Baptist Church (Mark Dever), which in 2004 established a minimum requirement for baptism as such time when a child can “deal directly with the church as a whole, and not, fundamentally, to be under their parents’ authority,” or more specifically, when they “assume adult responsibilities (sometime in late high school with driving, employment, non-Christian friends, voting, legality of marriage).” The elders conclude that it is only after children have reached this level of maturity that they have proved themselves competent “to declare publicly their allegiance to Christ by baptism” (see <http://www.capitolhillbaptist.org/we-equip/children/baptism-of-children/>). Cf. also Hammett, 111–13.

In the blog debates that have ensued, the watershed of separation, it seems, is the bloggers’ respective views of the *primary purpose of baptism*: (1) those who see baptism primarily as a “first step of obedience” are horrified by the idea of delay since it has churches expressly requiring children to be disobedient; (2) those, however, who see baptism primarily as a secure entry rite into the community of the redeemed (which is charged with perpetuating the orthodoxy, orthopraxy, and mission of the church) are in turn horrified that immature and unproven children are populating the church and precipitating, in effect, a Halfway Covenant *redivivus*. The following observations lean in favor the latter stance (delay), but are not unmindful of the concerns of the former:

Relative to the concern for the purity of the church, we note that credible professions are extremely difficult to extract from small children:

- *Intellectually and theologically*, small children are often incapable of the abstract and conceptual thought necessary to embracing concepts like Christian theism, guilt, imputation, and genuine faith.
- *Psychologically*, small children are conditioned to gain approval by saying the right thing, and when they do, it is impossible even for *them* to detect self-deception, let alone a detached congregation.
- *Philosophically* speaking, most children do not explore worldviews alternative to their own until their teen years, and the “commitments” they make prior to that exploration are regularly regarded by society as preliminary at best (i.e., career choices, potential spouses, etc.).

Summary: At the end of the day, most parents and church members know, based on these factors, that child professions are inherently less credible than adult professions. In view of this, it seems advisable for a church to at least consider delaying baptism in such cases in order to avoid (1) the potential of churches whose ranks are populated with unbelievers and (2) false security for those unbelievers that effectively insulates them from further Gospel appeals. Baptism is not only a Christian announcing to the church, “I’m with Jesus,” but also a church replying, after due deliberation, “He’s with us.” And that is a very serious judgment, *especially in a congregational system*.

In answer to the concerns of the biblical command for all believers to be baptized, we note that...

- While baptism *is* a matter of individual obedience, we all recognize that many matters of obedience involve delay pending maturation. In fact, even most churches that encourage small children to obey the command to “be baptized” and “do this in remembrance of me” prove this by denying those same children the right to obey the command to “expel the wicked man from among you” (1 Cor 5:13) or to “choose from among yourselves men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom” to serve as deacons (Acts 6:3).
- Similarly, a church should never insist that a child to submit to *baptism* if that church is not also prepared to insist that he submit to the *discipline* of the church.

Summary: The responsibility of all believers to be obedient to the command to submit to baptism cannot be divorced from all other rights, privileges, and accountabilities of church membership. It would seem that all of these rise and fall together. This in no wise suggests that children cannot be saved; however, it may suggest that delay of baptism be considered.

Conclusion: While every church is sovereign in this matter and the Bible is largely silent, the weight of evidence seems to favor at least *some* level of delay.

Question #3: To what degree must a candidate (1) agree with a church's doctrinal stance and (2) show evidence of a changed life in order to qualify for membership?

In keeping with the above, a candidate for membership should at a minimum be able to clearly articulate the Gospel Kerygma and offer no dissent with the unmistakably clear teachings of Scripture. Many churches also require further subscription to a creed or covenant. While including doctrinal minutiae in such standards for membership is not advisable, every church is sovereign in this matter.

With respect to a changed life, no church can, of course, demand entire sanctification from its candidates for membership. However, no candidate who can be charged with biblically defined sins of which he is unrepentant may be admitted into membership.

- (2) The church may appoint anyone it wishes to immerse the candidate. Usually this is a pastor in the baptizing church, but in the absence of this option, the church may legitimately appoint one of its members or the pastor of a sister church to perform the baptism. There is no biblical mandate in this case.

Question: What should we make of the contemporary practice of churches appointing fathers to baptize their own children?

In view of the foregoing, the church may surely choose to appoint a father to baptize his own children. However, as a word of caution, in view of the fact that baptism is a *church* ordinance and not an *individual* or *family* ordinance, it may be wise for a church to avoid confusion by leaving the administration of baptism to the elected leadership of the church. Nonetheless, each church has autonomy in this matter.

Under no circumstances, however, should the evaluation of the credibility of a child's profession be left to the parents alone. This is because it is the *church*, not the *family*, that is charged with safeguarding the purity of the church. If a child cannot offer a credible profession to the gathered church independent of parental promptings and interpretation, then that child really has no place seeking membership in a church.

- (3) The vote to receive the baptized person into membership should occur immediately.

The most common approach in this matter is to vote a person into membership *after* baptizing him; baptism is, after all, a *prerequisite* of membership. It is worth noting, however, that the decision of the church is not a simple decision to *receive a baptized Christian into membership*, but rather a complex decision, after due examination, to *baptize a believer into membership*. As such, a church may legitimately decide to render this decision immediately *prior* to baptism. This approach has two benefits:

- It precludes the unlikely but possible conundrum of a church baptizing a candidate and then rejecting his membership *post hoc*.
- It more clearly communicates the vital connection of baptism with church membership. Rather than suggesting that baptism is a Christian rite that individuals “get done” in order to be considered for membership, this approach more accurately unites baptism and church membership as distinct but inseparable events.

Question: May a candidate be baptized but not brought into the membership of the local baptizing body?

No. In such a scenario, a key component of the meaning of baptism is lost. Baptism is symbolic of more than a person’s individual faith; it is also an announcement of camaraderie and union with the body of Christ. If a person is unwilling to enter into fellowship with the baptizing church, he should delay until he is in the company of a body of believers with whom he intends to fellowship.

(4) Baptism is properly received only once.

Some Baptist churches require baptism for entry into a local church even if the candidate for membership has already been Scripturally baptized. This practice, however, has no biblical precedent, and should be rejected for the following two reasons:

- The NT writers anticipated that churches would “accept” or “receive” previously baptized members on the basis of a letter alone (Rom 14:2; 15:7; 16:2; Phlm 17). See the discussion of “letters,” above.
- While water baptism precipitates entry into the local body of believers, it also points symbolically to the believer’s personal union with Christ and his entry into the church universal, both of which happen once and cannot be lost. As such, to repeat this rite would be to confuse its symbolism.

Question: When receiving previously baptized candidates into membership, what constitutes a valid baptism?

The following are requisite features of a valid baptism:

- **A Valid Meaning: A symbol of the believer’s union with Christ.**
- **A Valid Administrator: A Church**
- **A Valid Mode: Immersion**

This excludes (1) sacramental baptism, (2) baptism received while a non-believer, (3) baptism received from a non-ecclesiastical entity, and (4) “baptisms” which expressly or symbolically represent some theological truth other than a believer’s union with Christ (pouring, sprinkling, trine immersion).

C. Communion (The Lord’s Supper): Ensuring Congregational Purity by Maintaining the Community of the Church

See esp. Ray Van Neste, “The Lord’s Supper in the Context of the Local Church,” in *The Lord’s Supper: Remembering and Proclaiming Christ Until He Comes* (Nashville: B&H, 2010).

1. The Meaning of Communion

Just as Baptism served as an *entry* or *initiation* rite celebrating the believer’s union with Christ and his Church, the Lord’s Table serves as a *continuation* rite in which believers perpetually re-examine and celebrate the communion that was established in baptism.

- a. The believer celebrates his continuing *individual* union with Christ by identifying with his body and blood, including the imputation of the passive and active obedience of Christ.

Matthew 26:26: Take, eat; this is my body...my blood...which is poured out for many for forgiveness of sins.

John 6:53–56: Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in yourselves.

1 Corinthians 10:16: Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ?

1 Corinthians 11:24–26: Do this in *remembrance of me* (3x).

Exegetical Note: “Remembrance” is not simply memory recall. It is an observance, a reliving, an internal cogitation on the significance of the events memorialized (e.g., “remember the Sabbath day” [Exod 20:8]; “remember the prisoners, as though in prison with them” [Heb 13:3 cf. Col 4:18]). We are to relive, that is, to renew our union with Christ by reminding ourselves of the cost of that union and of our responsibilities in view of that union.

- b. The believer celebrates his continuing *corporate* union with the body (i.e., the church) of Christ.

Communion is more than a memorial merely of the believer’s individual union with Christ: it is a celebration of the corporate union of all believers in the body of Christ. This is Paul’s primary emphasis in 1 Corinthians 11:17–34:

Now in giving the following instruction I do not praise you, since you come together not for the better but for the worse. For to begin with, I hear that when you come together as a church there are divisions among you, and in part I believe it. There must, indeed, be factions among you, so that those who are approved may be recognized among you. Therefore, when you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord’s Supper. Because at the meal, each one eats his own supper ahead of others. So one person is hungry while another gets drunk! Don’t you have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you look down on the church of God and embarrass those who have nothing? What should I say to you? Should I praise you? I do not praise you for this!

For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: On the night when he was betrayed, the Lord Jesus took bread, gave thanks, broke it, and said, “This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” In the same way, after

supper He also took the cup and said, “This cup is the new covenant established by my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.” For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.

Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy way will be guilty of sin against the body and blood of the Lord. So a man should examine himself; in this way he should eat the bread and drink from the cup. For whoever eats and drinks without recognizing the body, eats and drinks judgment on himself. This is why many are sick and ill among you, and many have fallen asleep. If we were properly evaluating ourselves, we would not be judged, but when we are judged, we are disciplined by the Lord, so that we may not be condemned with the world.

Therefore, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for one another. If anyone is hungry, he should eat at home, so that when you gather together you will not come under judgment.

Exegetical Note: The structure of this exegetical section is easily identified as a modified chiasmic or A-B-A structure in which the words of Christ concerning the rite are sandwiched by instruction on the proper practice of the rite:

A (vv. 17–23)		A ¹ (vv. 27–34)
<i>When you come together it is not really to eat the Lord’s Supper.</i>	What is the Problem?	<i>You are eating the bread and drinking the cup of the Lord in an unworthy way.</i>
<i>You come together not for the better but for the worse</i>	What are the Results?	<i>Many are sick and ill among you and many have died. You are being disciplined by the Lord (but not condemned).</i>
The Specific Manifestation		The Specific Solution
<i>When you come together as a church there are divisions among you.</i>	→	<i>Recognize the body.</i>
<i>You look down on the church of God and embarrass those who have nothing</i>	→	<i>Each must evaluate himself. All must evaluate themselves.</i>
<i>One eats his own supper ahead of others</i>	→	<i>Wait for one another.</i>

Theological Commentary: Paul’s concern in this passage is to correct the Corinthian error of not partaking of Communion in a communal manner. This problem is particularly egregious, Paul affirms, because so long as they persist in this error, they are “**not really eating the Lord’s Supper**” (v. 20). This remarkable statement stands at the theological center of the meaning of the Lord’s Supper. It says, in effect, that a believer cannot legitimately have communion with

Christ through the partaking of the bread and wine unless he is simultaneously in communion with the gathered church.

It follows, then, that the exhortation for each man to examine himself (v. 28) is not primarily to ascertain that one's vertical relationship with Christ is healthy, but that one's horizontal relationships with all the members are likewise healthy. Further, Paul's exhortation for the whole church to examine themselves (v. 31) suggests that this is not merely an individual examination, but also a mutual examination of the health of the whole church, with the sober realization that, if necessary, excommunication should occur prior to eating (1 Cor 5:11). It is for this reason that Baptists have traditionally viewed the Table in connection with Church discipline as a primary means whereby the church may maintain its purity and unity.

2. The Administration of The Lord's Table

- a. As was true with the ordinance of baptism, the church is the only proper administrator of the Lord's Supper. The Lord's Supper is a *church* ordinance.
 - (1) Communion was celebrated biblically "when you come together as a church" (Acts 2:42–44; 20:7; 1 Cor 11:33 cf. vv. 18, 20). The Acts passages are, of course, descriptive and inconclusive of themselves (though no one can point definitively to a biblical communion service *outside* of the church either). In 1 Corinthians 11:33, however, Paul uses a participle of attendant circumstance that carries imperatival force.
 - (2) Arguing further from 1 Corinthians 11, we noted above that Paul says that the Corinthian believers were *not really eating the Lord's Supper* because only *part* of the local body was present (1 Cor 11:28–29 cf. vv. 21, 33). It follows therefrom that communion cannot rightly be practiced outside the full local assembly of believers. Para-church and *ad hoc* celebrations of communion and even taking communion to shut-in members are apparently excluded.
 - (3) 1 Corinthians 5:11 indicates that the enforcement of church discipline (clearly a church function in verses 2, 13; cf. also Matt 18:17; 2 Cor 2:6) includes the withholding of fellowship and specifically of *eating*. Whether this is a precise reference to the *Lord's Table* is disputed, but it certainly *includes* the Lord's Table in its scope.

Note: A survey of Baptist manuals shows that Baptists have historically taken this last point with extraordinary sobriety. One of the most frequent reasons offered for church discipline in early Baptist life was the failure to attend the church's celebration of the Lord's Supper. Failure to attend was interpreted as either (a) an expression of disharmony that constituted schism, or (b) an attempt to avoid accountability to the church. Communion and church discipline are integrally related in the life of the church. See especially the collected essays in Mark Dever, ed., *Polity* (Washington, DC: Center for Church Reform, 2002).

- b. The Procedure for Observing the Lord's Supper

- (1) Communion is to be practiced perpetually in the life of the church “until he comes.” Unlike baptism, which celebrates the believer’s one-time act of uniting with Christ and with the visible body, communion celebrates the believer’s perpetual unity with Christ and the benefits that continue to accrue to his account from this union. It also revisits and reinforces the believer’s commitment to the visible body of Christ and to the duties of Church membership. Scripture sets no schedule for the observance of the Table except to say that it should be observed “often” (1 Cor 11:26). Acts 20:7 suggests that the early church observed communion weekly, but the Bible offers no rule in this regard.
- (2) Once a schedule is established, it should be announced in advance in order that preparations be made. The early Baptists typically scheduled communion services infrequently (four times a year was common), but they made much of the idea of *preparation* for the service. This is because the act of “examining *ourselves*” and making necessary corrections could not be accomplished in a few hasty moments of self-examination during a formal service. Instead, the early Baptists announced “preparation periods” of several days or even a week, during which time the following is to occur:

- (a) Interpersonal conflicts between members are to be resolved under pain of chastisement of the church or ultimately of God:

Matthew 18:15 cf., in principle, 5:23–24—If a brother sins against you or is holding a grudge, fellowship is to be restored before a community rite is celebrated.

1 Corinthians 11:28–32—A man should examine himself; in this way he should eat the bread and drink from the cup. For whoever eats and drinks without recognizing the body, eats and drinks judgment on himself. This is why many are sick and ill among you, and many have fallen asleep. If we were properly evaluating ourselves, we would not be judged, but when we are judged, we are disciplined by the Lord, so that we may not be condemned with the world.

Note the progression: *Before eating*, (1) each man examines himself, and (2) we discipline ourselves; if we don’t, (3) God will discipline us, or else (4) we would apostatize and be condemned with the world.

- (b) Final steps of church discipline are to be finalized so as to exclude from participation anyone who might not be eating in a worthy manner.

1 Corinthians 5:4–5, 11–13—When you are assembled in the name of our Lord Jesus and I am with you in spirit, and the power of our Lord Jesus is present, hand this man over to Satan.... You must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat. What business is it of mine to judge

those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? God will judge those outside. “Expel the wicked man from among you.”

(c) The church is to receive into its fellowship the following:

- New members, either by baptism, letter, or experience,
- Restored members who have repented in the face of discipline,
- Transient members of other churches are received into temporary fellowship either by letter or affirmation.

(3) The nature of the event must be established and the carried out. Like the timing of the Table, the Bible offers little guidance as to the exact nature of the Supper. Serving of the two elements of bread and wine is obviously non-negotiable, and many American churches limit the celebration to these. The Corinthians enjoyed a full meal, a practice highly regarded by early Baptists for its peculiar value in facilitating meaningful fellowship and accountability within the gathered body, which we have argued to be a primary purpose of the rite. The Bible again, however, offers no rule in this matter.

Typically, a pastor distributes the elements to the whole church with the help of the deacons (perhaps drawn from the early practice of deacons “waiting on tables”—Acts 6:2—though this connection is not certain, and does not reflect particularly good exegesis); however, the church may appoint anyone she wishes to preside over the rite.

Question: Are details of the elements, such as (1) an unleavened and single loaf and (2) a single cup of real wine, necessary for a valid celebration?

That the disciples used a common loaf and a common cup is apparent in the biblical record, and the idea of unity that these convey is attractive. However, there is no indication that the church in Acts saw this as a necessary component of the rite; further, it is highly unlikely that the 5000 men of the Jerusalem assembly could have found a loaf or a cup of adequate size.

That the bread was unleavened and the wine unpasteurized in the original Supper is likewise indisputable. Further, since leaven is sometimes a symbol of impurity in the Bible, use of unleavened bread could strengthen the symbolism of purity. The absence of leaven in Passover bread, however, has to do not with purity, but with *haste*. We note again, further, that Scripture offers no rule in this regard.

(4) The administrator should review the biblical requirements for fellowship at the Lord’s Table. There are four of these:

(a) Regeneration

- Biblically, this is the consistent pattern.

Acts 2:41–42: So then, *those who had received his word...were continually devoting themselves...to the breaking of bread.*

1 Corinthians 11:32: God’s chastisement for eating the Lord’s Supper in an unworthy manner occurs in lieu of condemnation with the world.

- The theological symbolism of the rite also requires regeneration. In order for one to participate in the *continuing* benefits of Christ’s crosswork, he must have received the first benefit: *regeneration*.

(b) Baptism

- Biblically, this is the consistent pattern.
Acts 2:41–42: So then, *those who...were baptized* were continually devoting themselves...to the breaking of bread.
- The theological symbolism of the rite also suggests a chronological priority of baptism to the Lord’s Table. Baptism symbolizes a believer’s one-time *entry* into union with Christ. Logically, it must precede a rite that celebrates the believer’s *continuing participation* in Christ.

(c) Church Membership

- Biblically, this is the consistent pattern.
Acts 2:41–42: So then, *those who were added...were* continually devoting themselves...to the breaking of bread.
- The material above on communion as a *church* ordinance also suggests the necessity for church membership. Communion was observed “when you are gathered together *as a church*” (1 Cor 11:18), that is, as a *whole* church. Further, Paul affirms that interpersonal accountability to the church—union with other believers in the local body—was integral to the procedure.

(d) An Orderly Walk

As is demonstrated above and further below, one of the more visible results of church discipline is the withholding of fellowship, particularly that of eating together (1 Cor 5:11). The Table is a God-ordained means for the church to police and correct the conduct of her members.

3. Communion and the Question of Non-Members.

The question of whether a host church may or must include Christians outside its own membership has been a matter of debate and often vitriol in the history of Baptist life. The following details the three primary options to this question and defends the option of “close” communion.

a. The Central Concern

Though there are three principle positions on the issue, the determining factor is

largely a binary question about the *purpose of the Lord's Table*:

- (1) Those who hold to **open** communion argue that the rite is intended to celebrate, irrespective all other differences, the common *invisible* union of believers with Christ. Though Communion is regularly celebrated in local churches, it is emphatically *not* a local church ordinance. Instead, it is either (1) a Christian ordinance or (2) an ordinance of the church at large—the universal church.

As such, the decision of a church to withhold communion from a person is tantamount to an announcement that that person is *de facto* an unbeliever.

- (2) Those who hold to **closed** and **close** communion argue that the rite is intended to celebrate not only the *invisible* union of believers with Christ, but also the *visible* union of believers in local assemblies. As such Communion is strictly a local church ordinance, and any celebration of the rite outside the auspices of a local church represents, *de facto*, a failure to properly regard the Lord's body and, as such, an instance of eating and drinking in an unworthy manner.

b. The Positions Considered

- (1) **Open** communion is offered without restriction to any professing believer. No inquiry or stipulation is made that he be baptized, a member of a church, or even possessing an orderly walk (though general caution is sometimes issued about eating “unworthily”). A. H. Strong offers four reasons for rejecting this position (*Systematic Theology*, 977–80):

- Open Communion defies biblical practice (Acts 2:41–42).
- Open Communion severely clouds the symbolism of local church unity communicated by the rite.
- Open Communion minimizes the value of baptism and church membership while attaching near sacramental value to communion.
- Open Communion eliminates the accountability of church discipline, thus sacrificing purity for the sake of unity.

- (2) **Closed** communion restricts communion to professing believers who are immersed and members in good standing *of the host church alone*. This practice is especially common among Landmark Baptists, who are typically suspicious of the validity of any church save their own.

In principle this practice is valid: since a church cannot successfully evaluate the behavior of strangers or exercise discipline on them, it is the safest course of action to not eat with those “outside” the jurisdiction of the local church (1 Cor 5:13): opening the rite to a stranger potentially makes the church an accessory to his sins and a cause for divine judgment.

Standing against this position, however, is New Testament practice, which seems to allow for believers to partake of the Lord's Supper in churches not

their own (e.g., Paul in Troas—Acts 20:7, 11).

- (3) **Close** communion restricts communion to professing believers who are immersed and members in good standing of the serving church *or of any church of like faith and practice*. This view recognizes that NT practice allows for churches to invite to the Table those outside their membership (see above), but is also concerned about abetting “lone ranger” Christians who seek to participate “without recognizing the Lord’s body” either by (1) holding no membership at all in a church or (2) fleeing the discipline of another church. Close communion was demonstrably the practice of the early church and has been the majority practice in Baptist life in all but the last century:

Didache 9, 14: Let no one eat or drink of your Eucharist, unless they have been baptized into the name of the Lord; for concerning this also the Lord has said, “Give not that which is holy to the dogs.”... But every Lord’s day gather yourselves together, and break bread, and give thanksgiving after having confessed your transgressions, that your sacrifice may be pure. But let no one who is at odds with his fellow come together with you, until they be reconciled, that your sacrifice may not be profaned. For this is that which was spoken by the Lord: “In every place and time offer to me a pure sacrifice; for I am a great King, says the Lord, and my name is wonderful among the nations.”

In keeping with this policy, churches that practice close communion extend communion as a courtesy to transient believers who by letter or affirmation are established to be “saved and baptized members in good standing with a church of like faith and practice.”

Question #1: Why are baptism and church membership singled out from all other aberrations of Christian orthodoxy and orthopraxy?

While many other aberrations of Christian faith and practice are of great import, these issues are emphasized for three reasons:

- Baptism and Church Membership are highly *visible, measureable, and biblical* benchmarks of obedience.
- Baptism and Church Membership are *body-centered* factors. Since Paul's chief concern with the practice of communion in 1 Corinthians 11 is properly evaluating the gathered body, such issues receive similarly high concern: if one has not been baptized into membership in and accountability to the local church, he is disobediently failing to give due regard to the gathered body of Christ, and thus is risking the chastening hand of God if he partakes.
- Baptism and Church Membership are *public* matters of ecclesiastical accountability and purity. Since Paul's chief concern with the practice of communion in 1 Corinthians 5 is protecting the public purity of the church via church discipline, such issues receive similarly high concern.

Question #2: Should a pastor ever publicly withhold the elements from someone who wishes to participate in a Communion service?

Such action should rarely be necessary, but could occur in unusual circumstances. Note the following:

- If adequate preparations are made, those present will be keenly aware of who is and who is not invited to partake. Under no circumstance should a pastor make an arbitrary “spot” decision that the church should not be eating with one of its members unless he is under church discipline.
- While the onus of 1 Corinthians 11 is for “each man to examine himself,” there is also obligation for the church to “not eat” with people in gross sin (1 Cor 5:11). As such, if a transient is known to be in violation of the church’s participation policy and insists on partaking anyway, the Table administrator is within his rights to withhold the elements in order (1) to uphold the pure unity of the church that is being publicly announced in the rite and (2) to avoid facilitating sin and precipitating divine judgment.

Question #3: Couldn’t the practice of Close Communion be perceived as judgmental, elitist, or otherwise unloving?

Of course. That’s why pastors should take the time to be pedantically careful to the point of redundancy in regularly explaining and defending the practice.

Conclusion: If the Lord’s Supper could be reduced to a simple memorial of the death of Christ for individual sinners, then the rite might be properly regarded as a Christian ordinance with few restrictions on its practice. Since, however, the Lord’s Supper is also an act of *communion* that secures the unity and purity of the gathered church, the details of the rite cannot be overstated. This being the case, the practice of close communion commends itself as the most biblically and theologically viable expression of the Lord’s Table.