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# Restoring Integrity in Baptist Churches


Thomas White

*Cedarville University*, [thomaswhite@cedarville.edu](mailto:thomaswhite@cedarville.edu)

Jason G. Duesing

Malcolm B. Yarnell

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# Restoring Integrity in Baptist Churches

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# Introduction

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THOMAS WHITE

In the locker room of a popular gym, I sat talking with friends. We had just finished lifting weights. After months of lifting one hour a day, four days a week, we had experienced only minimal gains in the amount of weight that we could lift. I had hit a plateau and could not seem to break through it. Another guy in the gym came up to me and told me that he had something that could help me break through my barrier. I sat up in anticipation, thinking this guy was about to give me the secret to eternal youthfulness, when he pulled a bottle out of his pocket—a small glass bottle with a space in the top for a needle to withdraw the fluids. The label on the bottle read “testosterone.” I realized that I had a choice to make. I could compromise my integrity by taking steroids and reap the rewards of gaining pounds on my bench press and my squat, or I could maintain my integrity and struggle for gains the old-fashioned way. Was lifting weights all about the numbers, or was it more about the process? Was my goal to be bigger and better or simply to keep my body in shape? I struggled with the answers to these questions for many months. I watched as others grew much faster while I worked much harder. It did not seem fair.

The local church faces a similar dilemma. It can grow by using any number of tactics. A church can grow by appealing to consumerism, by creating a “trendy” atmosphere, by reaching out to felt needs, by not offending members, and by attempting to please all those people who enter the door. These “guaranteed” methods to achieve church growth can do harm to the corporate body, just as drugs that guarantee the growth of human muscle can harm the individual’s body. A church must ask some tough questions: Does this mentality compromise the integrity of the local church? Are numbers the most important thing? Does the

church only want to be “bigger and better,” or would it be satisfied to maintain its integrity even if that meant sacrificing some growth or growing at a slower rate?

At this point, you may be thinking, How is the church in danger of losing its integrity for the sake of growth? Think about what has happened to Baptists over the past 150 years. Since the 1850s, the skewed emphasis of soul competency and the priesthood of the “believer” (rather than “believers”), the loss of church discipline in most Baptist churches, the changing view from closed or close Communion to a more open position, and the failure to continue defending our distinctive of believer’s baptism by immersion have occurred. How have these affected Baptists?

Two main areas of discussion are needed, and these two, highlighted in this introduction, will guide the reader throughout the remainder of this work. First, this work will examine how events or trends have challenged the Baptist church’s integrity and purpose. Second, this work will demonstrate how one can maintain or regain the integrity of the local church and theological purity while addressing the challenges of modern culture. With these two areas of discussion in mind, experts in Baptist life were sought to make presentations on these important topics.

#### CHALLENGES TO BAPTIST ECCLESIOLOGY

The following challenges that have shaped Baptist ecclesiology are not listed in order of importance, and they are not documented in this introduction. The documentation of these challenges will occur in subsequent chapters. This section simply will introduce the reader to several factors that have influenced Baptist churches to arrive at their current condition.

First, extreme individualism and the belief in the priesthood of the “believer” rather than “believers” has created congregations who feel each person possesses a right to his or her opinion. Extreme individualism allows members to believe that they can live life on their own terms without the encouragement or admonition of the body of believers. In addition, the priesthood of the “believer” provides theological nomenclature for defending whatever one wants to believe and admonishing those who deny the legitimacy of such belief. Baptists are neither free now nor have they ever been free to believe whatever they want. Baptists are bound by Scripture and should follow the plain meaning of Scripture without twisting hermeneutical spirals to support personal agendas. Self-determined positions undermine church discipline (where one member is confronted by others), closed Communion, and the defense of one position as the right position on baptism.

Second, theological denigration has affected many Baptist churches. The demise of sound theology, and more specifically ecclesiology, whether intentional or not, has occurred. Church discipline rarely occurs in the majority of Baptist

churches. This loss of church discipline has affected the Baptist belief in regenerate church membership. With Baptist churches no longer guarding regenerate church membership, congregational polity becomes problematic, as unspiritual members continue contributing to spiritual decisions. This problem has led some to abandon congregational government rather than correcting the problem at the source by reimplementing church discipline and meaningful membership. Baptist church rolls contain the names of many people who rarely if ever enter the doors of the church. The loss of church discipline and the minimization of regenerate church membership functionally demonstrate the ecclesiological slide of Baptist churches.

Third, the emergence of the megachurch introduces unique and new challenges to Baptist ecclesiology. For example, how does a church carry out discipline when more than five thousand people attend every Sunday? That is fifteen hundred more people than live in my hometown of Honea Path, South Carolina. In addition, how can one properly guard the Lord's Supper when most members do not know each other and the pastoral staff certainly cannot have a personal relationship with everyone? The megachurch to some extent allows members to become anonymous, receiving the benefits of attending church without the duties of dedicating themselves to the ministry of the church. This is not to claim that the megachurch is wrong. After all, the first church at Jerusalem had three thousand people added in one day. But it brings unique challenges to Baptist ecclesiology that deserve discussion.

Fourth, a consumer-driven culture has created challenges for Baptist churches. Part of this has been prompted by churches seeking to entertain people in order to gain attendance. And part of the problem arose over members desiring to implement what the world offers in the local church. This consumer attitude perhaps is best exhibited by the "church hopper," who moves his or her membership from one church to another at the first whim. Such a person focuses more on personal happiness and felt needs than contributing to the ministry of the local church. The churches, by accepting these members so easily, reinforce this behavior. Another action that reveals the consumer culture is Christians driving past theologically sound churches near their homes to attend "popular" churches much farther away without valid theological justification. If someone attends a church farther away from his or her home because of preference or "commercial attraction," and not belief, that person is likely exhibiting a consumer mentality rather than a servant mentality. I drive farther to eat at certain restaurants because of preference. I drive farther to shop at certain stores because of preference, but I should not choose a church in the same way I choose a restaurant or a department store. Consumers will never understand meaningful membership or experience the local church as

the body of Christ while focusing on their individual felt needs. Leaving one's local church body should be a painful and unpleasant experience. But with "church hoppers," meaningful connections never tend to form, and accountability rarely occurs. Rather, personal preference rules the day.

Fifth, perhaps the biggest challenge confronting Baptist churches is the "seeker-sensitive" movement. This movement positively seeks to remove unneeded barriers to reaching people with the gospel of Jesus Christ. At the same time, most seeker-focused churches do not practice church discipline. Few things could be less seeker-oriented than the act of publicly disciplining a member for improper behavior. Most, if not all, seeker churches do not practice the strictest form of Communion, limited to members only, and many do not practice Communion with like faith and practice, commonly called close Communion. Seeker churches tend to practice open Communion, with a few not making any statement at all about the Lord's Supper being for believers only. Restrictions placed on the Lord's Table could come across as not being seeker-friendly to many visitors. Controversial doctrines like believer's baptism by immersion do not receive extensive discussion in seeker-sensitive churches. This clearly biblical doctrine historically has been very important to the Baptist tradition but does not fit nicely within the seeker-sensitive tradition.

With these five challenges in mind, how can one seek to maintain a distinctive Baptist ecclesiology in today's culture? The presentations in this book seek to confront these challenges and show how a church can maintain proper ecclesiology while remaining relevant to culture. These discussions address the issue of maintaining the integrity of the local church by upholding necessary theological beliefs while operating in a seeker-sensitive world. Many of the challenges I have listed possess positive characteristics that do not conflict with theological integrity. The difficult task of the presentations in this book is to identify the balance between proper theology and practical relevance.

#### THEOLOGICAL IMPORTANCE OF ADDRESSING MODERN CULTURE

This volume addresses and emphasizes several areas of theological belief and practical application that will benefit the local church and bring some sense of discovery to the quest for theological purity amidst modern culture. These chapters have not been organized in any order of importance, partially because the elements are all intertwined to some degree. The essays are organized thematically according to five broad categories: church membership, baptism, the Lord's Supper, church discipline, and universal priesthood.

First, meaningful church membership must be regained. Meaningful membership will counter the culture of consumerism that the church faces. In addition, a congregation full of members who understand their role will result in a well-balanced church with more than the usual 20 percent of the members doing 80 percent of the work. In order for the members to take membership seriously, biblical expectations must be placed on them. This works in conjunction with church discipline and enforcing the expectations on those who malevolently or ignorantly fall short. Membership also can be emphasized by proper teaching on the Lord's Supper and baptism. For any church to function properly, its membership must see its role as meaningful.

An emphasis on the importance of regenerate church membership must be recovered. A proper theological understanding of the believers' church will affect the way the members see their individual roles in the local church. Correspondingly, the baptism of believers protects regenerate church membership by making baptism the door to the local church and the public profession of faith. Only those participating in this ceremonial act may be accepted into the membership of the local church. Thus, baptism properly understood protects the entrance to the church, while church discipline protects the continued integrity of the church. Without proper church discipline, no church can maintain meaningful and regenerate membership. The successful maintenance of regenerate church membership allows congregational church government to function properly. Regenerate membership is perhaps the most crucial and central element of polity in the life of Baptist churches.

Second, Baptist churches must regain, and act on, the proper understanding of baptism. The doctrine from which the denominational name arose has fallen into anonymity. With challenges from less-than-conservative churches questioning the importance of baptism and with seeker churches minimizing its importance, many younger pastors and church workers have not been properly equipped to defend the doctrine of baptism. Thus, this book dedicates discussion to the following aspects of baptism: baptism must be of believers, baptism must be by immersion, baptism is the outward symbol of the inward change, baptism is the public profession of faith, baptism is the door to the local church, and baptism begins the covenant relationship among the believers in a local congregation. The presentations will positively present proper theology and at the same time address current issues challenging the importance of the biblical doctrine of baptism.

Third, Baptist churches must understand and maintain the proper view of the Lord's Supper. A proper view of the Lord's Supper celebrates the ordinance meaningfully and not just as a necessary quarterly addition to the end of the church

service. The Lord's Supper celebrates the memory of Christ on the cross, the fellowship and unity of the body, and the anticipated triumphant return of Christ, while denying the errors of transubstantiation and consubstantiation. In addition, the Lord's Supper, understood correctly, cannot be separated from church discipline and the regenerate nature of the congregation. This emphasis immediately creates tension with seeker-sensitive organizations that minimize such connections or celebrate the Lord's Supper only during services when few seekers are present, such as a Wednesday night service.

Fourth, Baptist churches must regain the proper practice of church discipline, which always seeks restoration. Church discipline easily can be twisted and used as a political tool to root out those with differing views or as a legalistic hammer with which one may beat others over the head. These misuses do not exemplify biblical church discipline, which intentionally confronts members in sin seeking both individual restoration and the maintenance of a pure body of believers. The loss of biblical church discipline is why many onlookers conclude that the church is no different than the world. This should never be the case; by requiring meaningful membership reinforced by biblical church discipline, the church will look very different from the world. A church will never successfully gain meaningful membership or maintain regenerate church membership without the consistent practice of church discipline. In addition, biblical church discipline necessarily correlates with the Lord's Supper, as we are not to celebrate the ordinance with those who practice immorality.

Finally, Baptist churches must address emerging and seeker groups pointing out specific challenges to Baptist theological practice. Without dismissing the very important emphasis on community and the desire for evangelism, Baptists must examine proper theological practice in light of the success these movements have achieved. While the local church needs a measuring stick for success other than numbers, the conversion of lives does represent the mission of the church. Traditional Baptist church order that follows and flows from Scripture can reflect in a real way the emphasis on community expressed by emerging groups and the emphasis on evangelism of seeker groups. Perhaps both of these movements in some way have recognized missing aspects of the local church—*aspects missing because of an incomplete theology of the church*. Community and a focus on evangelism can receive proper emphasis while maintaining traditional Baptist and biblical theology. This book demonstrates how a proper and complete understanding of Baptist church doctrine can guard the integrity of the local church while operating successfully in a seeker-sensitive world.