

Congregational Church Government and Regular Business Meetings (Conference)

Identifying the Issue and Historical Background:

The second article of faith subscribed to by Tyler Primitive Baptist Church states:

“We believe the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the revealed word of God, and the only rule of faith and practice” or, “We believe the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the revealed and inspired word of God, and as such are the only rule for both faith and practice.” (Tyler Primitive Baptist Church, circa 1907)

It is important that we understand and agree that any doctrine or practice subscribed to or adopted by this congregation is subject to being challenged and/or remedied by the clear exposition of the scripture.

With this in mind, we want to address the question of how the church should conduct business, or, by what means the congregation is to be governed.

You will often hear me use the word “distinctives” in reference to Baptist or Primitive Baptists. This word as I use it means simply, “Those principles or practices which are unique to, or set Baptists apart from other congregations or denominations, and/or Primitive Baptists from other Baptists. While there are many similarities between various denominations in their Articles of Faith, essential doctrinal beliefs and even many practices, they are not identical else there would be no cause for them to exist under different names and structures. Thus, a Baptist is not the same as a Presbyterian, even though they may share a common belief in the doctrines of God and even hold to the, so called, five points in their soteriology. Likewise, Primitive Baptists are not the same as Reformed Baptists and Sovereign Grace Baptists, even though many of their doctrinal statements sound similar, or they may even claim to subscribe to the same Confession of Faith.

A long-standing Baptist distinctive is that of the sole authority of the local congregation under the direction of Christ its head. This stands in contrast to other popular governmental models including: hierarchical priesthood (Roman Catholic/Anglican); hierarchical elder ruled (Presbyterian/Reformed); elder ruled/elder-deacon ruled (many modern Baptist and most “non-denominational”); pastor ruled (many Baptist churches of today, and sadly some professing Primitive Baptists).

Historical Background:

In the ninth chapter of his History of the Church of God, entitled Characteristics of the Apostolic Church, Sylvester Hassell identifies twelve identifying marks of the New Testament Church.

The fifth mark identified by him was simplified in a later condensed version as,

“The independent or congregational polity or government of each local church, subject only to the Headship of Christ; all the local apostolic churches being united by no outward bond of force, but by an inward bond of love.” (Hassell S. , 1909, p. 346)

The eighth mark was identified by Hassell as,

“The fraternal equality, the essential priesthood, of all the members in accordance with which fact they choose to office among them those of their number whom they perceive to be already qualified thereunto by the spirit of God--there being but two classes of officers, bishops, or elders, or pastors, and deacons; the fraternal equality of all the members involving the eternal equality of the ministry.” (Hassell S. , 1909, pp. 346-347)

Hassell has much more to say in the text of his History on these two points, and we may return later to share more of his words.

Additional historical evidence for this “congregational” model of church government may be found in various confessions, church covenants, and rules of decorum adopted by Baptist congregations, and indeed, by Tyler Primitive Baptist Church itself.

The Confession of Faith, Of those Churches which are Commonly (though falsely) called Anabaptists; known to us as the **1644 London Baptist Confession of Faith**, addresses this issue in three articles as follows:

“XLII. Christ has likewise given power to his whole Church to receive in and cast out, by way of Excommunication, any member; and this power is given to every particular Congregation, and not one particular person, either member or Officer, but the whole.”

“XLIII. And every particular member of each Church, how excellent, great, or learned soever, ought to be subject to this censure and judgement of Christ; and the Church ought with great care and tendernesse, with due advice to proceed against her members.”

“XLIV. And as Christ, for the keeping of this Church in holy and orderly Communion, placeth some special men over the Church, who by their office are to governe, oversee, visit, watch; so likewise for the better keeping thereof in all places, by the members, he hath given authoritie, and laid dutie upon all, to watch over one another.” (Baptists, 1959, p. 168)

The Confession of Faith Put Forth by the Elders and Brethren of Many Congregations of Christians (baptized upon profession of their Faith) in London and the Country, known to most of us as the Second London Confession of Faith, or the **1689 London Baptist Confession of Faith** even in its name suggests the inclusion of the “Brethren” in its adoption rather than the “Elders” alone. Further, in its body, the following statements are included in chapter 26 under the heading “Of the Church”:

“6. The Members of these Churches are Saints by calling, visibly manifesting and evidencing (in and by their profession and walking) their obedience unto that call of Christ; and do willingly consent to walk together according to the appointment of Christ, giving

up themselves, to the Lord and to one another by the will of God, in professed subjection to the Ordinances of the Gospel.”

“7. To each of these Churches thus gathered, according to his mind, declared in his word, he hath given all that power and authority, which is any way needful, for their carrying on that order in worship, and discipline, which he hath instituted for them to observe; with commands, and rules for the due and right exerting, and executing of that power.” (Baptists, Second London Baptist Confession of Faith, 1959, pp. 286-287)

Additionally, Baptist congregations have come into being through the execution of a Covenant between their founding or initial members to which each member added is also made party. Some church covenants of antiquity include statements as that found in the **Kiokee Baptist Church of North Georgia (1771)**:

“4. We do also promise as much as in our power to give all due attendance to the public worship of God on the Lord’s Days, and all other days, as we may have opportunity, also on such days as are appointed to transact the business of the church, and when met calmly and faithfully give our opinions, avoiding clamorous disputations and whispering during discussion, and to do all in our power to maintain peace and good order among us—and whoever fails attending our regular meetings, three times in succession without sending or rendering a sufficient excuse, the church shall appoint some person or persons to cite and require such delinquent person to attend, and should he or she neglect or refuse yet to attend, he shall be dealt with as a disorderly member and for better observance of this rule, the clerk shall be required at the conclusion of each conference to note down, and call for such absentees who shall be required at the next conference to give the reason of absence, the minutes of the last conference shall be read at the commencement of the next when thought necessary.” (Kiokee Baptist Church, 1996, pp. 206-207)

In other cases, the instructions for regular business meetings are limited to a separate document entitled, Rules of Decorum. Hassell shares the Rules of Decorum of the churches of the historic Kehukee Association of North Carolina in the body of his History with the preamble as follows:

“PREAMBLE. From a long series of experiences we (who hope we are) the Church of Christ at _____, are convinced of the necessity of coming together as often as may be in order to hold Conference, and to discharge our duty in watching over each other as Christ hath commanded.

Ordered therefore that the following Decorum be a rule for the church to conduct herself by in her future Conferences. We will not forsake the house of God, or the assembling of ourselves together. Neh. x. 39; Heb. x. 25.” (Hassell, 1886, p. 696)

Tyler Church Documents:

The **Church Covenant of Tyler Primitive Baptist Church** is as follows:

CHURCH COVENANT

For as much as Almighty God, by His grace, has been pleased, as we hope, to call us out of darkness into His marvelous light, and we all having been regularly baptized upon profession of our faith in Christ Jesus, and have given ourselves to the Lord and to each other in a gospel church way, to be governed and guided by a proper discipline, agreeable, as we believe, to the Word of God; we, therefore, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and by His assistance, covenant and agree to keep up the discipline of the church of which we are members in the most brotherly love and affection toward each other, while we endeavor, punctually to observe the following rules:

In brotherly love to pray for each other, to watch over one another for good, and if need be, in the most tender and affectionate manner, to reprove each other; if we discover anything amiss in a brother or sister, to take the directions given by our Lord, in Matthew eighteenth chapter, and not to be whispering and backbiting; we also agree, if not providentially hindered, to attend our church meetings, and especially not to absent ourselves from the communion service without a lawful excuse; and not to neglect the defraying of the expenses of the church, and not to depart from the fellowship of the church without a regular discussion. These things we covenant and agree to observe and keep sacred, in the name and by the assistance of the Holy Trinity. (Tyler Primitive Baptist Church, circa 1907)

The **Rules of Decorum of Tyler Primitive Baptist Church** are as follows:

RULES OF DECORUM

1. The church shall be composed of members of her own body, but members of sister churches of the same faith and order who may be present shall be invited to seats by the moderator.
2. Conference shall be opened and closed by prayer to God.
3. The church shall choose a pastor and moderator annually, or as the church deems necessary, who shall serve when present, unless objection be made, or one appointed to act as moderator pro tem, whose duty it shall be to keep order and extend invitations for the reception of members.
4. A clerk shall be chosen annually or as the church deems necessary whose duty it shall be to make a plain record of all business transacted by the church, which record shall be read and all necessary correction of the minutes be made before conference closes.
5. Every member, when he rises to make a speech, shall address the moderator by the appellation of Brother Moderator. The member thus speaking shall not cast any reflection on former speeches, nor digress from the subject under consideration; and shall give his

views in as plain a manner as possible; nor shall he speak more than three times on any subject without permission of the church.

6. No member shall be received into our body, or dismissed from us by letter, without the unanimous vote of the members present; but a transgression member may be excluded by a majority of the members present; and a majority shall rule in all other cases, except as specified in Rule 17.
7. No complaint respecting grievances of a private nature shall be brought into the church against any transgressing member, unless the aggrieved party has complied with the directions given in Matthew 18: 15, 16, 17.
8. Every motion made and seconded shall come under the consideration of the church, unless withdrawn by the person who made it.
9. If a minority shall be aggrieved at the decision of the majority, the same should be made known to the church immediately; and if satisfaction cannot be obtained, it may be necessary to call for help from sister churches.
10. The moderator shall be entitled to all the privileges of speech, the chair first being filled, but shall not vote, except there be a tie; then he shall give the casting vote.
11. Any of the members who are absent from the regular church meeting should have good reasons for the same; and if they miss three meetings in succession, it shall be the duty of the church to inquire their reason.
12. No member shall go to law with another member, on any account, without permission of the church.
13. If one member be aggrieved with another, and instead of laboring with the said brother or sister, should be whispering and backbiting, such member shall be under censure of the church.
14. No member shall vacate his seat in time of conference without permission of the moderator.
15. Whereas, Christ's kingdom is not of this world, and His humble followers are much persecuted, therefore we cannot take evidence indiscriminately from the world; but when reports of unmistakable facts are in circulation against one of our members, we think it right to take such testimony as is valid.
16. We agree that our regular conference meeting shall be held on our regular meeting time each month, fourth Sundays. May and September shall be our communion time.
17. Alterations, additions, or amendments may be made to these rules at any time by a two-thirds majority of the members present, after a months notice has been given of any intended change, except in the instance of rule 6; rule 6 shall never be changed.

18. No special called conference shall be considered legal by this church, without each member has been notified at least ten days before such called conference, the call stating definitely what business is to be brought before the church at such meeting, but the church may adjourn conference to meet at any time that they deem proper or prudent.
19. Our deacons shall have charge of the financial affairs of the church, that is, our finances are to be handled through our deacons. They may appoint one of their number to take charge of the funds which may be in their hands. They will be expected to report monthly as to the standing of the finances, so the church may know how the same stands.

The foregoing rules shall be read as the church may deem proper. (Tyler Primitive Baptist Church, circa 1907)

The Biblical Pattern:

What does the scripture say?

As observed at the outset, the principle of congregational church government, and regular conference/business meetings, while clearly demonstrated to be a historical practice of Primitive Baptist Churches, can only be required or upheld if it is indeed a Biblical practice and ordinance.

The following are a selection of scriptures which deal with the authority of the Church as well as the method of dealing with matters of church discipline, government, discretion, and mutual accountability.

“And Jesus answered and said unto him, Blessed art thou, Simon Barjona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven. And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” - Matthew 16:17-19

In this familiar text, it is clear that Christ is giving a certain authority, recognized by heaven, to exercise discretion or judgement. Peter is addressed as a member and representative of the church and there is a clear assignation of authority to bind and loose which will be recognized by God.

“And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican. Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say unto you, That if two of you shall agree on earth as touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.” - Matthew 18:17-20

In this text, Jesus addresses the reality of offenses, disputes, and difficulties between members of a congregation. While we would love to live in complete peace and unity at all times, the reality is that our human nature will not allow us to agree at all times. The Savior, therefore,

prescribes a pattern for conflict resolution that begins with private communication between involved parties, but may escalate to the inclusion of two or three witnesses and ultimately may result in matters being brought “unto the church.”

This begs the question, “What is the church, and how may a matter be brought unto it.” The English word “Church” is nearly always translated from the Greek “ekklesia” which means, literally, “called out assembly.” The church is a congregation or group of believers who are gathered together by virtue of the calling of God. It is important to note that in Jesus’ address of formal church discipline in this text, he does not say, “tell it unto the apostles,” or “tell it unto the elders,” rather, he says “tell it unto the church.” We will see in subsequent texts this principle is upheld in practice and further direction of inspired writing.

Additionally, the instruction to “tell it unto the church” assumes that the church is assembled at some time for the matter to be presented. To tell the matter to individual members of the church separately, or to the Elders as representatives of the church would be nothing more than talebearing. The historic pattern of the church assembling at appointed times for the conduct of business presents an opportunity for such matters to be openly presented and acted upon.

Also of note in this text is similar language to that found in Matthew 16. “Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven...” Once again, there is an acknowledgement of authority recognized in heaven for the decisions of the church here on earth.

“And in those days Peter stood up in the midst of the disciples, and said, (the number of names together were about an hundred and twenty,) Men and brethren, this scripture must needs have been fulfilled, which the Holy Ghost by the mouth of David spake before concerning Judas, which was guide to them that took Jesus. For he was numbered with us, and had obtained part of this ministry. Now this man purchased a field with the reward of iniquity; and falling headlong, he burst asunder in the midst, and all his bowels gushed out. And it was known unto all the dwellers at Jerusalem; insomuch as that field is called in their proper tongue, Aceldama, that is to say, The field of blood. For it is written in the book of Psalms, Let his habitation be desolate, and let no man dwell therein: and his bishoprick let another take. Wherefore of these men which have companied with us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, Beginning from the baptism of John, unto that same day that he was taken up from us, must one be ordained to be a witness with us of his resurrection. And they appointed two, Joseph called Barsabas, who was surnamed Justus, and Matthias. And they prayed, and said, Thou, Lord, which knowest the hearts of all men, shew whether of these two thou hast chosen, That he may take part of this ministry and apostleship, from which Judas by transgression fell, that he might go to his own place. And they gave forth their lots; and the lot fell upon Matthias; and he was numbered with the eleven apostles.” - Acts 1:15-23

Immediately after the ascension of the Lord, Luke records that Peter stood up in the midst of the disciples (who must have been assembled together) and declared to them that the scripture predicting the fall of Judas and of his replacement with another “overseer.” Bishoprick is an English translation of the Greek “episcopus” which means overseer or elder.

Peter does not simply declare this need to the other apostles, nor to the Christ appointed ministers (at least 70, see Luke 10:1), but to the entire congregation. The text reveals that in

response to Peter's declaration, they, the Church, "appointed two," prayed together, and then "gave forth their lots." The church cast their votes and by the direction of the Holy Spirit selected Matthias as the one to replace Judas as the 12th apostle.

"Then the twelve called the multitude of the disciples unto them, and said, It is not reason that we should leave the word of God, and serve tables. Wherefore, brethren, look ye out among you seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business. But we will give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word. And the saying pleased the whole multitude: and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Ghost, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolas a proselyte of Antioch: Whom they set before the apostles: and when they had prayed, they laid their hands on them." - Acts 6:2-6

Similarly, in Acts 6, realizing that the labor of serving tables, or providing for the distribution of physical helps to the widows and indigent among the church, was too burdensome and was limiting the more important work of prayer and preaching, the apostles called together the "multitude of the disciples." They presented the problem, and the proposed solution. The church was instructed to "look ye out among you seven men..." whom the apostles might appoint to the newly created office of deacon. In response, it is recorded that, "they chose Stephen..." along with the others. This "choosing" can be nothing other than "voting" on the choice of each of the deacons.

"And the apostles and brethren that were in Judaea heard that the Gentiles had also received the word of God. And when Peter was come up to Jerusalem, they that were of the circumcision contended with him..."

"...When they heard these things, they held their peace, and glorified God, saying, Then hath God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life." - Acts 11:1-18

When Peter was directed by the Spirit to preach the gospel in the home of Cornelius, a gentile, and subsequently baptized Cornelius and all in his house who believed. In this account, however, it is clear from the outset that Peter, though an apostle in the church, recognized an accountability as a member of the church at Jerusalem. He took witnesses with him to observe the work of the Lord and to bear witness to the message that he preached, the reception of it by the household of Cornelius, and ultimately of the presence and baptism of the Holy Spirit. Upon the return of Peter and his companions from Caesarea, they reported to the church, so that "the apostles and brethren that were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also received the word of God." In the text above, we are informed that there were some "of the circumcision" who contended with Peter over his action toward the household of Cornelius.

While the primary and explicit point of the narrative is found in Peter's explanation and defense, what must not be overlooked is the fact that there was a forum available for the contention to be aired and the charges to be heard and disputed. Peter, though the one to whom Christ had directly said, "I give to you the keys of the kingdom..." submitted himself to the authority of the local church at Jerusalem and defended his actions on the basis of the words of Christ and the endorsement of the Holy Spirit.

Also, not to be overlooked is the judgment rendered by the church in its assembly. "...they held their peace, and glorified God, saying, Then hath God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life."

"And when they were come, and had gathered the church together, they rehearsed all that God had done with them, and how he had opened the door of faith unto the Gentiles."
- Acts 14:27

Paul and Barnabas, having been set apart by the church at Antioch for the ministry of the word to the Gentiles in Asia, went forth and preached the gospel throughout the region. At the end of their journey, this text tells us that they "gathered the church together" so that they might rehearse or report to them all that God had done with them. This first instance of "foreign evangelism" serves as a New Testament pattern for the preaching and ministry of the word. The ministers are accountable to the local church for their work and ministry. The ministry is directed and empowered by the Holy Spirit but the ministers, even the Apostles, do not operate outside of the authority of the church.

Similarly, in the following chapter as the word of foreign evangelism in Gentile regions disturbed the peace and fellowship between churches, Paul and Barnabas along with others from Antioch traveled to Jerusalem where they met together with appointed representatives of the church at Jerusalem. Also a Biblical pattern and nod to the right of churches to appoint delegates or representatives from their number and to collectively pass judgment and exercise discretion in matters of fellowship between congregations.

"In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when ye are gathered together, and my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, To deliver such an one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus." - 1 Corinthians 5:4-5

As we understand, in this epistle, the Holy Spirit was addressing the Church of Christ at Corinth regarding a number of errors which had been promulgating within their congregation. In this text, Paul addresses the allowance by the church of the sin of fornication by one of its members which at the time had not been declared against or acted upon. This text assumes that the church is gathering together, and at the very least, that in such gatherings they are empowered to act toward this erring brother for his deliverance from sin. "To deliver such an one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh..." This forms a pattern and defense of the principle and practice of church discipline. It is the responsibility of the members of the church to "watch over one another for good" and to hold one another accountable to our profession of faith and repentance.

"For what have I to do to judge them also that are without? do not ye judge them that are within? But them that are without God judgeth. Therefore put away from among yourselves that wicked person." - 1 Corinthians 5:12-13

Again, the message is reinforced, God has committed authority and judgment to the church. Notice, the Apostle does not invoke his authority as an apostle, nor himself exclude the offending party. Instead, he commands the church by the Holy Spirit to act in their capacity judging those that are within their body.

This text clearly establishes the idea that God has set the church in place as an authority and shield for its members. God judges directly those that are without, but those that are within, the church is responsible for. If a church forgoes its obligation for its members, it becomes partaker of their sins. For this reason, the command is given, “Therefore put away from among yourselves that wicked person.

“Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them.” - Romans 16:17

The congregation at Rome is here admonished to “mark them which cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine...” To “mark” is, “to consider, to take heed, to direct one’s attention to.” This admonition is to the church. Again, these commands must be balanced with the instruction to avoid “backbiting.” If an individual takes it upon themselves to call attention to such offenders, there is a danger of miscommunication or lacking discretion. However, if the church meets together to consider charges and makes a united declaration against an individual with instruction to its several members to “avoid them,” then confusion can be avoided as well.

“And when I come, whomsoever ye shall approve by your letters, them will I send to bring your liberality unto Jerusalem.” - 1 Corinthians 16:3

In this text, Paul expects the church to “approve by your letters” indicating an expectation for the church to act in concert one with another in choosing emissaries as well as in the collection of funds.

*“I wrote unto the church: but Diotrephes, who loveth to have the preeminence among them, receiveth us not. Wherefore, if I come, I will remember his deeds which he doeth, prating against us with malicious words: and not content therewith, neither doth he himself receive the brethren, and forbiddeth them that would, and casteth *them* out of the church.” - 3 John 9-10*

Finally, the negative example is provided in John’s account of his dealing with a pastor of the church at Ephesus. Diotrephes had exalted himself and his authority to a point that he was both determining unilaterally whom the church would receive and not receive, and also was exercising the authority to cast members out of the church. This is a Biblical example of “Pastor rule” that is foreign to the instruction or pattern of Christ and the Apostles, though sadly, not at all uncommon in the realm of church polity today. While John does assert his authority as an Apostle saying, “...if i come, I will remember his deeds which he doeth...” yet, he is writing the epistle to the church admonishing them and encouraging them in their authority and ability to reject Diotrephes and his error. In fact, the Holy Spirit, through John, appears to be endorsing Demetrius as a suitable replacement for Diotrephes in their congregation.

Conclusion:

The above scriptures, among many others, establish the principle of church authority, invested in the membership of each congregation, the equality of members as the body of Christ, and the responsibility of the church to be accountable one to another and for the souls of those who are counted in their number.

The Baptist practice of holding regular business meetings for the rendering of judgment, exercise of discipline, address of grievances, and open communication of matters to be set before the church is in keeping with a clear scriptural pattern.

It is important to note also that one of the implicit powers vested in the church is that of determining the details as to how these meetings are scheduled and conducted. Some churches have chosen to meet in conference weekly, others monthly, and still others quarterly, or annually. As in all matters, discretion should be exercised and a balance should be sought between priorities.

I do not believe that limiting such meetings to an annual basis is wise, however, meeting weekly seems excessive and may tend to direct focus away from the primary purpose of our meetings which is to magnify Jesus Christ in the preaching of the gospel, prayer, and singing of hymns. Many of our churches have opted to schedule monthly meetings following regular worship services. Others have scheduled conference for a regular time absent the likelihood of significant visitation. All of these are reasonable and permissible practices.

Some have suggested that conference be scheduled only on an, “as needed basis.” The most obvious problem with this arrangement is that those who are to schedule such meetings must be privy to the need. This requires a “back channel” relationship between those empowered to schedule the meeting and each individual who may have a matter to bring before the church. It also allows the leadership to serve as a sort of gatekeeper to determine what matters may be brought before the church.

Some have used this practice as a means of ensuring that matters are “already settled” before they are ever brought up in conference. However, this sort of approach cannot avoid disenfranchising those members who are not consulted, and/or whose opinions are not sought in the process.

While an argument can be made that such practice tends toward a greater appearance of peace and may protect the church from public airing of grievances, it is also true that avoiding dealing with such matters in a transparent manner tends toward an attitude of distrust and ultimately leads to necessary action being deferred or completely avoided.

Primitive Baptists have a rich heritage of doctrine and practice which is based solely upon the pattern and direction of scripture. Rather than seek to imitate the practices of other denominations and congregations which have followed a pragmatic road in seeking out new inventions, we ought rather, to rejoice in the heritage that God has given us seeking only to reject those traditions which are contrary to the Word of God, and respecting the wisdom of the saints who have gone before whenever their judgments are in keeping with scripture.

May God bless us together to deal honestly with all men, seeking only His glory in our every deed.

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APPENDIX A

Additional Material from Hassell's History

5. The Fifth Mark of the Apostolic Church was the independent or congregational polity or government of each local church, subject only to the Headship of Christ; all the local apostolic churches being united, by no outward bond of force, but by an inward bond of love. The Greek word rendered "church" in the New Testament is "ekklesia," which is derived from the verb *ek-kaleo*, to call out, and denotes an assembly called out, a select body separated from the mass of the people. In ancient Greece the *ekklesia* in each State was the assembly of free-born, native, self-governing citizens, the highest legal body in the land, from which there was no appeal; slaves and foreigners were excluded from the *ekklesia*. In the Septuagint *ekklesia* is the usual rendering of the Hebrew word *kahal*, "the congregation" of Israel or of the Lord, from which were excluded the uncircumcised, the unclean and the "mixed multitude." *Ekklesia* occurs in the New Testament 115 times; twice referring to the Hebrew "congregation of the Lord," three times referring to the Greek assembly, and 110 times referring to the Christian church. In 92 of these last cases the reference is to a special, local, visible society of Christians; in the remaining 18 cases the reference is to the entire body of the elect in Heaven and on earth, or what is sometimes called the invisible church (as in Ephesians v. 25, 29; iii. 10, 21; Colossians i. 18, 24; Hebrews xii. 23). The word is never used in the New Testament to designate a universal (or Catholic) visible church, a national church (as the Church of Judea or England), or a denominational church (as the church was not divided into different denominations in the Apostolic Age, and as there was not then any *great organization*, like the Presbyterian Church or the Methodist Church, including in itself a large number of local congregations). A visible church is always in Scripture a local body; and *every local church, acting by a majority of its members* (in 2 Cor. ii. 6, "*ton pleionon*" is, literally, not "many," but "*the more,*" *the majority*), *is invested by Christ with the exclusive and final power of receiving, disciplining, excluding and restoring its members, electing its officers, and transacting all other necessary business* (Rom. xiv. 1; Matt. xviii. 15-18; 1 Cor. v. 4, 5, 7, 11-13; Rom. xvi. 17; 2 Thess. iii. 6; Acts i. 15-26; vi. 1-6; 1 Cor. xvi. 3; xiv. 23). In this last passage the Greek verb "*cheirotoneo*," rendered "*ordained*," means, according to Liddell and Scott, to stretch out the hand for the purpose of

giving one's vote in the Athenian ekklesia, to appoint to an office in the church; the same word is used in 2 Corinthians viii. 19; and, in accordance with the analogy of Acts vi. 2-6, the word *cheirotoneo* in Acts xiv. 23 is explained by the latest and ablest German scholars to denote *the election of the Elders in each church under the supervision of Paul and Barnabas*. Especially does the language of Christ in Matthew xviii. 15-18 demonstrate that *the church is the highest and last ecclesiastical authority on earth*; that there can be no appeal, under the law of Christ, from the decision of the church to a presbytery, or synod, or general assembly, or conference, or convention, or priesthood, or prelacy, or papacy, or Association, or any other earthly authority. After a church has excluded one of its members, and classed him with heathens and publicans, it is not only thoroughly unscriptural, but also thoroughly absurd, to suppose that any man or set of men can, by any exercise of authority, put back such an offender in the fellowship of that church. With true repentance, confession and reformation the fellowship will be restored; but without these exercises gospel fellowship can never be restored. Each gospel church is a separate and independent republic, having Christ as its only Head and Lawgiver, and not subject, in ecclesiastical matters, to any outside jurisdiction; such, according to the ablest scholars and historians, was not only every apostolic church in the first century, but also of the second century (see the works of Gibbon, Mosheim, Neander, Coleman, Whately, Burton, Barrow, Schaff, etc.). The church is repeatedly declared in the New Testament to be the body of Christ (Rom. xii. 5; 1 Cor. vi. 15; x. 17; xii. 27; Eph i. 23; iv. 12; v. 23, 30; Col. i. 18, 24; ii. 17); the only Head, therefore, of this body, is Christ, who guides and controls and preserves the church as His body. Hierarchies and synods are unscriptural, tyrannous usurpations which have, through the ages, inflicted grievous wrongs upon the people. It is openly and proudly claimed by the advocates of these ecclesiastical monarchies and oligarchies that these systems are *the fruit and product of the greatest worldly experience and wisdom*; very few scholars, among these advocates, even pretend now to base these systems upon the New Testament. The apostolic church, or the church of the first century, they say, was "a strictly supernatural organization, a stranger in this world, standing with one foot in eternity, and longing for the second coming of her heavenly bridegroom; but afterwards, finding that Christ did not come, she, in her new constitution, planted foot firmly upon earth, yet thus became secularized and finally Romanized, and this necessitated a reformation on the basis of apostolic Christianity." Bible Baptists believe that, not only in the first, but also in every succeeding century, God has had on earth faithful, spiritual, unworldly, un-Romanized apostolic churches, each one of which, in its divinely established individuality and independence, has presented an insurmountable and indestructible breakwater against the countless tides of error, strife and corruption setting in from every quarter; and all of which have been united, by no mechanical, outward, worldly, usurping and oppressive

bond of force, but by an inward, heavenly, spiritual, emancipating, purifying and elevating bond of Divine love and peace and fellowship, such as the Lord Jesus Christ, their Ever-Living, Unchangeable and Omnipotent Head, in the last solemn moments of His suffering earthly ministry, tenderly enjoined upon them and earnestly besought His Father to grant them (John xiii. 34, 35; xv. 12, 13; xvii. 20-23). Born and taught by God, being one body, and having one Spirit, even as they are called in one hope of their calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in them all, they, not in word only, but in deed and in truth, love one another, and endeavor to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (John i. 13; vi. 45; Eph. iv. 1-6; 1 Thess. iv. 9; 1 John ii. 27; iii. 14-18; iv. 7-21). They have always corresponded with each other by brotherly letters and messages, and have from time to time met in a general or associational way, not to lord it over God's heritage, but to worship God, and to edify, exhort and confirm one another in the most holy faith once delivered to the saints (Acts xiii.-xv.; Phil. ii. 25; Heb. x. 23-25; xii. 22-29; 1 Peter v. 3, 5; Jude 3, 20). Scriptural Associations are only general meetings of churches, or brethren from different churches, for the purpose of Divine worship and mutual edification; and, while no church should, either in a private or general way, maintain fellowship with a church which persists in heresy or disorder, yet there is not a particle of New Testament or apostolic authority for any such general meeting assuming the functions of an individual church, such as admitting, disciplining or excluding members of a church, or electing or disciplining the officers of a church. It cannot be repeated too often that *each gospel church is, according to Christ and His Apostles, the highest ecclesiastical authority on earth*. While all gospel churches should always so live as to maintain peace and fellowship with each other, Christ nowhere in the New Testament gives the slightest authority for an organic union or consolidation of gospel churches. Such a union would be a fruitful source of corruption and oppression. The New Testament contains not a single example or intimation of the subordination of a church to any ecclesiastical authority outside of itself, whether popes, or diocesan bishops, or synods, or presbyteries, or general assemblies, or councils, or associations, or conventions. The simple fact that the Apostles address their epistles, not to church officers or church judicatories, but to the churches of the called and faithful saints of God, proves both the right and responsibility of each church in respect to the management of its own affairs. The idea that the government of the apostolic church was *presbyterial* or *by Elders* originated from the mistake of supposing that the Christian church was a copy of the Jewish synagogue. Bible scholars admit that neither synagogues nor the government of synagogues were of Divine institution, but that they began to be built and established after the Babylonian exile—after the close of the Old Testament canon. The only place in the Old Testament where the Authorized Version of the English Bible contains the word

“synagogue” is Psalm lxxiv. 8; and the Hebrew word “*moed*” is here rendered by Gesenius and the best commentators, “tabernacle of the congregation” or “holy place”—there being no allusion whatever to any organized body of people or any method of government. Christ and His Apostles use *not sunagoge*, but *ekklesia*, an *essentially differently governed body*, to denote a Christian church. Only once in the New Testament is the Greek word “*sunagoge*” used even to denote the *place* of a Christian assembly, and then by the most Judaic writer in the New Testament, James (ii. 2). The numerous passages already cited which prove that the church, subject only to Christ, was to govern itself, disprove that elders were to govern it. Elders, bishops or pastors are to lead (*hegeomai*), oversee or preside over (*episkopeo, proistemi*), care for (*epimeleomai*), and shepherd (*poimaino*) the flock (Heb. xiii. 7, 17, 24; Acts xx. 28; 1 Tim. v. 17; iii. 5; John xxi. 15-17; 1 Peter v. 2); they are not to exercise the despotic authority of Gentile and Jewish rulers (Mark x. 42-45—*archon*; compare Luke viii. 41; xxiv. 20; Acts iv. 26), not to lord it (1 Peter v. 3—*katakuriuo*, exercise complete dominion over) God’s heritage. Even Christ Himself came not to be ministered unto, but to minister (*diakoneo*, to serve: Mark x. 45); and His Apostles are servants of the church for Jesus’ sake (2 Cor. iv. 5). All His people are made by Him kings and priests unto God (Rev. i. 5, 6; 1 Peter ii. 5, 9); Christ alone is the High Priest of our profession (Heb. iii. 1; v. 5, 6)—He alone is the King of kings (Rev. xix. 16). It would be disloyalty to Christ for any church to alienate from itself and delegate to any other person or set of persons the rights and functions which Christ has committed to her; a gospel church cannot have *delegates*, but may have *messengers*. But the sisterly relations of churches involve sisterly obligations. They are all members of the same mystical body of Christ, permeated by the same Divine Spirit, and should be sweetly constrained by the same heavenly love to maintain the same strict faith and order of the gospel, to have tender regards for one another’s feelings, and to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Eph. iv. 1-6). In temporal things each church is subject, and should be quietly submissive, to worldly powers (Rom. xiii. 1-7; 1 Peter ii. 13-25); but in spiritual things each church is subject only to Christ (Matt. xxiii. 8-12; xvii. 5; John xiii. 13, 14).