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FrontLine

BRINGING THE TRUTH HOME

A large flock of sheep and goats is walking along a dirt path through a dense forest. The animals are of various breeds, including white, black, and grey. In the background, a person is visible walking away from the camera, leading the flock. The forest is filled with tall, thin trees and green foliage, with sunlight filtering through the canopy.

Membership
Matters

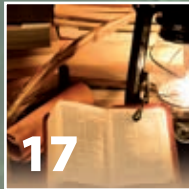
Membership Matters



6



14



17

FEATURES

6 Church Membership

Larry R. Oats

Why is church membership so important to Baptists?

8 Regenerate Church Membership

Marty Marriott

Reformed denominations confuse the gospel by baptizing and admitting infants into their assemblies.

11 The Importance of Church Membership

Bryan Brock

Where is membership found in the Bible?

14 A Disciplined Church Membership

Fred Moritz

Examine the Scriptures to understand the strategy of the church as it faces sinning members.

17 Historic Church Membership

David Saxon

In all three regions that practiced infant baptism, nominal Christianity had become prevalent by the 1730s.

24 Dr. Earnest Pickering on the Dangers of Celebrity Christianity

Kevin Schaal

DEPARTMENTS

5 Mail Bag & News from All Over

20 On the Home Front

23 Wit & Wisdom

David Atkinson

27 Are We Listening?

Trisha Brown

28 Regional Reports

29 Notable Quotes

Robert Condict

31 On Language & Scripture

Mark L. Ward Jr.

32 At a Glance

Select Studies in Isaiah—Chapter 14
Layton Talbert

36 The Skies of Vietnam

LCDR Tavis J. Long, CHC, USN

38 The Sufficiency of the Lord in Difficult Times

Jerry Sivnksty

Our sincere thanks to Dr. Larry Oats for coordinating this issue of *FrontLine* magazine.

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Church membership, graphically portrayed here

as a flock of sheep under their shepherd, is one of the most important and practical areas of theology. Church is where almost all the rest of the “-ologies” are put into practical function. Paul declared that the church—and in the context it is clearly the local church—is the “pillar and ground of the truth” (1 Tim. 3:15). The church is the only institution authorized by God to carry out the Great Commission and celebrate the ordinances. The newly converted are to be baptized and brought into a local church, where they are nurtured and educated. That church then becomes the base of operations for believers, old and new, to win others and repeat the process.

Church membership is a New Testament teaching. Some today see no necessity in “joining” a church, but the New Testament demonstrates the need to commit to the authority of a church. The New Testament also teaches a *regenerate* church membership. Unlike many other denominations, Baptists seek to maintain a pure church consisting only of believers. Church membership is critical to the spiritual growth and maturation of the members of the body. Church discipline is the natural outgrowth of maintaining a New Testament church, for this is the methodology God gave to the church to maintain its purity. Finally, these elements of Baptist church membership have been held historically by Baptists, especially by the Baptists in America.

The faculty at Maranatha Baptist University trust that these articles, focusing on Baptist church membership, will be a blessing to you and your church as together we seek to be obedient to the New Testament.

Larry Oats



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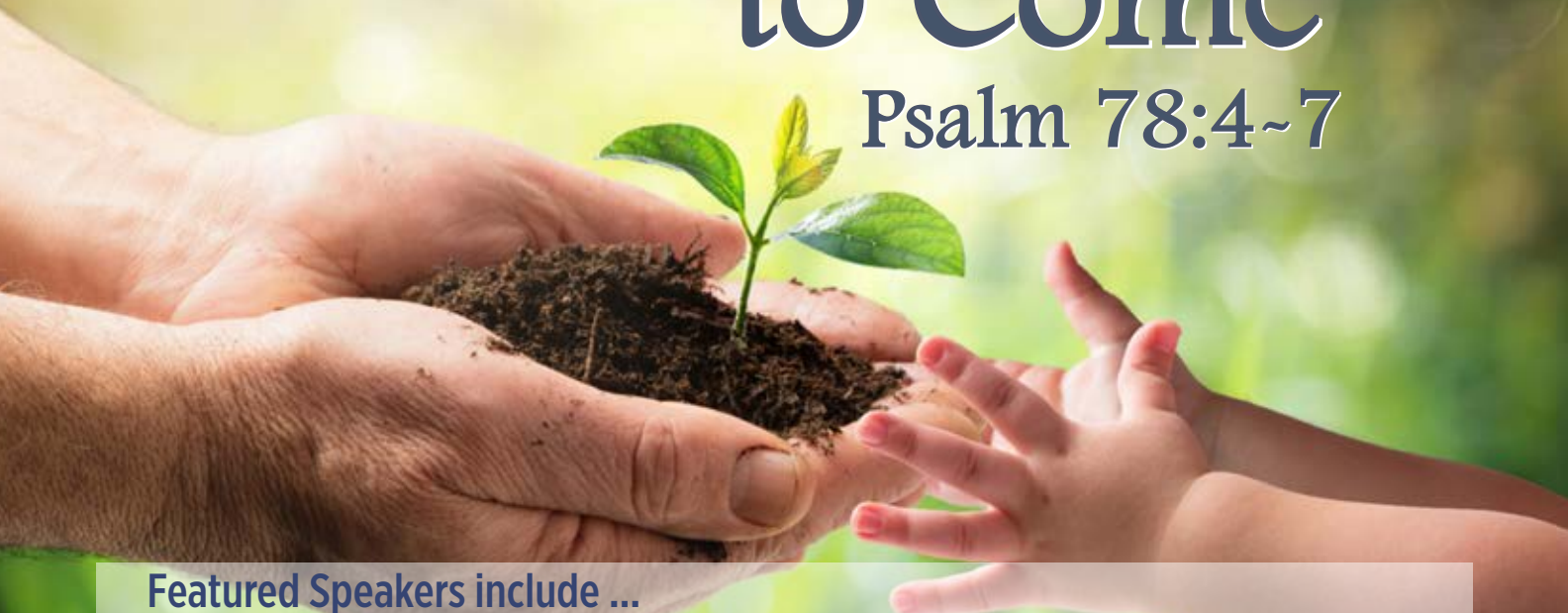
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I am sending *FrontLine* subscriptions to friends. *The New World, Old Lies* issue [Nov/Dec 2017] is fabulous. I knew from my Bible Presbyterian Church background many years ago about a lot in the issue. But that *FrontLine* issue ties so much together! It clarified for me Eric Metaxas's recent book on Bonhoeffer. I knew Bonhoeffer had been under the influence of Barth and German higher criticism, yet he took some courageous stands against the Nazi regime when he returned to Germany and ultimately was killed just days before the war ended. I liked the *Convergence* issue a lot too. Your [Chuck Phelps's] piece in *Be Not Anxious* was very poignant and helpful too. Not in your article, but I remember you saying that "God's grace is sufficient to sustain us, but it is not an anesthetic." A paraphrase of your statement that I have poached and used often. But Bless God for the magazine. May it gain steam in many circles.

Wendy Brant
Zionsville, OH

I just finished reading the article *Terror Attacks* in the November/December 2017 *FrontLine* about your daughters. . . . I appreciate their love for the Jewish people and their desire to reach them with the gospel. What a great opportunity to befriend them!

My husband, Gary, is a converted Jew, saved three months before his eighteenth birthday in 1965. Yes, that makes him seventy years old. His mother disowned him and removed him from the will. His father was saved about two years later, and his life was radically transformed. Both are deceased now. To our knowledge, his mother never received Christ. However, after her death, a Bible was found open on her desk, with passages in the New Testament carefully underlined.

Before our marriage, the relationship between his mother and him was restored. Before we married, she asked me one day how I felt about the Jewish people. I told her I was raised to love them, that they were a special people and God's chosen ones. And that from them, the Messiah came. She fully accepted my answers, and we had a good relationship.

We never knew until after her death, that she had reinstated my husband back into the will. She was a very successful businesswoman.

I pray that your daughters will continue to have opportunities to visit Israel and to witness to more Jewish people.

I might add that a dentist and his family witnessed to my husband for a number of years. They

Continued on bottom right

Pastor Rick Ballard from Calvary Baptist Church Huntingburg, Indiana, is considering opening a halfway house for people struggling with addictions. He is looking for someone with a desire and aptitude to counsel as well as to teach/mentor interns. ACBC certification would be a definite plus. Their church is very conservative and desire someone who would "fit in" well. If interested, please contact Rick at rballard@calvaryin.org.



November 2017 marked the fifteenth anniversary of the Biblical Theological Seminary (BTS) in Amman, Jordan. BTS is a ministry of New Testament Church in Amman. This ministry was the vision of **Pastor Ghassan Nicolas Haddad**, who was serving in Jordan as a pastor for a local church in the capital city of Amman. It was founded with the dual purposes of training leaders to start churches and established ministries in the Arab world. Over 330 men and women have studied at the school, and 36 former students are currently serving in full-time ministry. Ghassan has turned the pastoral duties over to Ayser Mazahreh and now serves as the president of BTS.

had a son who was Gary's age. Steve finally told his folks that it was no use to witness to Gary because he had told Steve to quit talking about Jesus. One night out of the blue, Gary asked Steve and another friend how to be saved. And that is how his conversion came about.

My husband was a pastor for nearly thirty-eight years, and now our son is the pastor of our church.

I encourage them [your daughters] to not give up because they do not know what is going on in an individual's mind and heart.

Annetta Small
Lynden, Washington

Thank you for such a practical and timely topic, *Be Anxious for Nothing*. I was encouraged personally and plan to use this issue as a resource to give to others.

Denise Beverly
Beckley, West Virginia

Church Membership

The concept of “church membership” is not explicitly stated in the New Testament, but it is implicitly taught. This raises the question as to why “membership” is so important to Baptists. Since we believe that the Scriptures are the sole authority for our faith and practice, is there a danger of placing the human invention of “membership” over the commands of Scripture? After all, there are no records

of churches listening to the testimonies of converts and then voting those converts into the membership of the church. There is no instruction of how to keep track of the church membership. So although it is true that the concept of “membership” is not explicitly stated in the New Testament, it is *implicitly* taught. Luke, in the Book of Acts, and Paul, in his epistles, made numerous references that *imply* the concept of an identified membership.



The Early Church

The church in Jerusalem took its Great Commission responsibility seriously (Acts 1:8). As a result, many were saved in and around the city during the early years of the church (Acts 2:41, 47; 4:4; 6:7). In Acts 2:14–41, Peter preached the first evangelistic sermon of the church age. When some of the listeners asked how they should respond to the preaching, Peter declared that they needed to repent and be baptized. Luke then states that on that day about three thousand Jews were saved and “added.” To what were they added? It was undoubtedly to the 120 believers in Acts 1:15 who had been waiting for Pentecost. Verse 47 of Acts 2 declares that as time went by more Jews were converted and each convert was added to the church. There is a textual problem here. The traditional text has “to the church,” while the critical text has “to them.” Either way, however, it is clear that God was regularly adding believers to the already existing body of believers.¹ This implies an *identifiable* group of people to whom new converts were added.

In Acts 4:23 Peter and John, who were detained by the Jewish leaders because of their preaching and then later released, returned to “their own.” This may refer to the original group of believers (the 120)² or more likely to the church as a whole (all the disciples).³ Either way, the implication is that these two apostles returned to a clearly discernible group.

In Acts 6:2–5 the apostles called the church together and instructed them to pick out from among *themselves* seven men to deal with a problem in the church. Their proposal was agreed to by the whole congregation. The necessity of a discernible membership is inherent in the story, for there had to be a membership to agree to the plan, a membership to do the selecting, and a membership from which to choose the seven.

Paul wrote epistles to specific local churches, which required that he send the letters to identifiable groups of individuals within a locality (1 Cor. 1:2; 2 Cor. 1:1; Gal. 1:2; Eph. 1:1; Phil. 1:1; Col. 1:2; 1 Thess. 1:1; and 2 Thess. 1:1). Similarly, John wrote the Book of Revelation to seven specific churches, which implies discernible groups of people in specific places.

The New Testament also indicates the necessity of keeping track of groups within the membership. Paul instructed Timothy to maintain a defined list of widows who were the most in need (1 Tim. 5:9). These widows needed to meet certain criteria. This would indicate a sub-membership within a definable church.

Paul instructed the church at Corinth to discipline one of its members (1 Cor. 5). In so doing they were to deliver him to Satan. This is excommunication, putting one outside the protection of the church. To put a man *out*, however, would seem to require that he and the rest of the church understand that he is *in*. This discipline was to take place “when ye are gathered together” (v. 4), indicating a gathering of an identifiable group of people—the membership of the church. Discipline demands membership. In addition, in verses 12–13 Paul clearly assumes the concept of membership when he states that the church is to “judge them

that are within” and is responsible to put away the wicked person “from among yourselves.” God will judge “them . . . that are without.” This description of some being “in” and others being “out” indicates a church membership.

A Covenanting Together

Membership is more than attendance. There are believers today who are content to attend one of our churches, enjoy the fellowship, support the church with their giving, and even minister in some way if the church allows them to, but who also choose not to become members. While Paul does not directly refer to believing attenders who were not members, he does indicate that the church in Corinth had visitors to its church services (1 Cor. 14:23). Attendance at a church service, even regular attendance, does not equate to membership.

False teachers are regarded as intruders into the local church (Jude 4). “Jude indicates that the false teachers were not originally part of that church, but have come from outside.”⁴ The implication is that there was a discernible group of people in the church and that false teachers came into that group.

One ministry of the local church is to demonstrate love for the brethren, have affection for one another, prefer others over self, honor one another, and care of each other’s needs (Rom. 12:10, 13). Paul continues with a string of other “one another” passages—Rom. 15:7, 14; Col. 3:16; Gal. 6:2; Eph. 4:2, 32; Col. 3:13, 16; and 1 Thess. 4:18 and 5:11. These are general obligations of Christians toward other Christians. Yet it is impossible for a believer to accomplish these requirements universally to all other believers. When someone joins a church, however, he obligates himself to meet these commands among the membership of the church. Because Baptists believe that church membership is a spiritual duty and a voluntary choice, they see membership as the covenanting together of a group of people to specifically accomplish these “one another” commandments.

While the term “membership” is not found in the New Testament and the mechanics that are used today to bring people into and remove them from membership are not fleshed out in the New Testament writings, it is clear that the concept of an identifiable and specific group of individuals, what we call today the “church membership,” was the basis for various actions and commands in Acts and the Epistles.

Larry Oats is professor of Systematic Theology at Maranatha Baptist Seminary in Watertown, Wisconsin.



¹ J. Kistemaker and William Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Acts of the Apostles*, New Testament Commentary 17 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 114.

² Kistemaker and Hendriksen, 165.

³ A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Nashville: Broadman, 1930), 3:54.

⁴ H. Davids, *The Letters of 2 Peter and Jude*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 43.

Regenerate Church Membership



The New Testament requires, and therefore Baptists have long held, that the local church must be comprised of a regenerated and immersed church membership. Acts 2:41 provides the pattern traced throughout the Book of Acts: they first *believed*, then were *baptized*, and only then *belonged*. This *description* of the first local church becomes a *prescription* for all churches.

In this one verse, Scripture rules out infant baptism, because personal faith was necessary, while simultaneously excluding from membership those who are not baptized. Further, it teaches persons must be able to believe and to choose to be baptized, before they become, at baptism, immediately associated with a local body of believers.

Regenerate, Immersed Church Membership Guards the Gospel

Contrary to those churches who trace their roots to the Reformation, the most important point that

Baptists derive from the Scriptures regarding the local church is the makeup of its membership. Consider how the following Reformed denominations confuse the gospel in baptizing and admitting infants into their assemblies:

- The Westminster Confession of Faith of 1646 teaches that baptism admits recipients into the visible Church, engrafts them into Christ, causes regeneration, and results in remission of sins.¹ It also states, "The efficacy of baptism is not tied to that moment of time wherein it is administered; grace promised is not only offered, but . . . conferred by the Holy Ghost, to such (whether of age or infants)."²
- Presbyterians: "Being washed with the water of baptism, we receive new life in Christ. In the words of the PC (USA) Directory for Worship: 'The baptism of children witnesses to the truth that God's love claims us before we are able to respond in faith.'"³

- Christian Reformed Church: Because “infants as well as adults are in God’s covenant and are his people,” they, “no less than adults, are promised the forgiveness of sin” and thus “by baptism . . . should be received into the Christian church.”⁴
- Wisconsin Lutheran: In the Scripture “baptism is *not a mere symbol . . . not just a ceremony* done to connect someone outwardly to a church. *God is at work through baptism. He is connecting us to Christ’s death and resurrection.* All of his mercy and grace are directed at the person being baptized. *The Holy Spirit is giving the new life of faith in Jesus.*”⁵

In Acts 2, the subjects of baptism were already *identifiable converts* who were professing their personal faith by public immersion. Those who are being saved (v. 47) are *the only proper candidates for membership*, and these are spoken of as *believers* (v. 44).

Steve Lemke writes, “The affirmation of believer’s baptism is in all major Baptist confessions . . . [and] is central to our identity. The notion of sprinkling of infants to wash away their original sin is repugnant to Baptists throughout our history. This is not a peripheral issue; Baptists have literally given their lives for this belief.”⁶

The importance of the baptism of believers must not be minimized; it reminds the church of the clear gospel. In contrast, the sprinkling of infants miscommunicates the gospel in at least two ways: it focuses on the church as the means to salvation, and it fails to emphasize personal repentance and faith in the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus.

Regenerate, Immersed Church Membership Protects the Church

The NT Epistles were written to believers and to churches comprised of believers. These letters, in giving the theological framework for church organization and practice, make apparent that regenerate, immersed church membership provides for *the protection and propagation* of both the church and the gospel.

Protects the Authority of the Scriptures. Baptists differ from Protestant and Reformed denominations in that they find their authority for all church matters not in tradition but in the Scriptures alone—especially the NT.

Adoniram Judson was the first Baptist missionary sent from the US, but when he sailed from our shores he was a Congregationalist. Anticipating meeting the Baptist missionary William Carey in India, he was compelled to study infant baptism and personally settle the subject from the Bible once and for all. A letter by Mr. Judson stated his conclusion: “The immersion of a professing believer is the only Christian baptism.”⁷ The couple was baptized on September 6, 1812, in Calcutta. Ann wrote, “Thus we are confirmed Baptists, not because we wanted to be, but because the truth compelled us to be.”⁸

The authoritative Scriptures consistently demonstrate that baptism is for those capable of intelligent faith in Jesus Christ. Even the account of the Philippian jailer, which has been twisted by many, clearly demonstrates the baptism of believers. Paul and Silas spoke the word of the Lord to

the jailer and his entire household. The household was then baptized. The Philippian jailer is found rejoicing and “believing in God with all his house.” The whole household hears the Word, believes, and is baptized (Acts 16:32–34)!

We read in Acts 2:41 that those who “gladly received the word were baptized.” Their faith was based on an understanding of the Word of God; the NT church received the Word preached by Peter based in the OT Scriptures. It required some measure of mental maturity to believe and to obey the command to be baptized (Acts 2:38). Infants do not qualify. Personal faith was and remains today the biblical prerequisite for baptism!

Protects True Fellowship. The early church was comprised of believers unified around apostolic teaching. This doctrine became the ground of true fellowship or partnership in ministry (Acts 2:42). It is impossible for those who are unconverted to truly partner in spiritual work. The addition of unsaved individuals to the local church is not at all neutral. Having their participation in local church ministry will have tragic consequences. It will become a hindrance to the fulfillment of the Great Commission in both the evangelism of the lost and the edification of the local church. The unconverted cannot be expected to desire or model personal evangelism, become effective teachers of truth, or to have the mind of Christ in decisions.

Protects the Mission of the Church. Notice that the *saved* were added daily to the church (Acts 2:47). The apostles sought to win converts and those converts comprised the church. The salvation of souls produced church members (v. 41). This is how Christ builds His church today. Without this focus, the local church is easily distracted into false missions such as kingdom building, dominion theology, or the political state-church.

Regenerate, Immersed Church Membership Promotes Evangelism

The early church modeled baptism and church association as fruits of conversion, not the cause of conversion. The Baptist practice of regenerate, immersed church membership sharpens our focus on the need for evangelizing the lost. As a corollary, any method of evangelism that does not result in the increase of church members ought to be examined as to its authenticity.

Crisis Conversion. Baptists believe in crisis, point-in-time conversion, or being born again. Passing from death to life occurs instantly upon faith (John 5:24) and is not a process. Covenant theology generally calls for a prolonged instructional process, catechism, and confirmation; Baptists characteristically work and pray for a point-in-time conversion of our children.

Since Reformed churches characteristically associate regeneration with baptism, personal faith can come years after regeneration, and in the case of infants, always does. Consequently, members of reformed churches seldom speak of being saved at a point in time and are likely to view their children as “safe” because they were baptized as infants.

Baptists recognize that even those closest to us, our own offspring, need to be converted. Baptists seek to win all

individuals to Christ—especially the lost young ones within the homes of our congregation and in our Sunday schools—knowing that none are saved by church ritual or association.

In response to Peter's preaching on Pentecost, there was a conscious, individual decision to receive the Word, which is to believe in Jesus (Acts 2:41, 44). To receive the Word was to receive the teaching of Peter concerning Jesus' being both Lord and Messiah (v. 36), crucified according to the plan of God (v. 23), raised from the dead (vv. 24, 32) and seated at the right hand of God (v. 25).

From the word "saved" in this context we learn that regeneration and belief go together. Those who "believed were together" and were designated as "saved" (Acts 2:44, 47).

Clear Membership. No one partakes of the work of Christ through the standing of their parents or through baptism. There is no place for godparents. There is no middle ground; either one is a believer and is saved or one is still lost and in sin. *Baptist polity clearly defines who is in and who is outside the church!*

Central to this Baptist perspective is that salvation fundamentally involves a *response* or choice on the part of the convert. Doctrinally, calling for a decision in a public invitation is logically connected in other Baptist beliefs such as soul responsibility and believer's baptism.

Believer's baptism reminds us of evangelism; it keeps conversion before us, and it places a clear distinction between the saved and the lost.

Regenerate, Immersed Church Membership Makes Word-Centered Worship Possible

Baptists believe in Word-centered, local-church instruction for all believers. Therefore, Baptist worship is not liturgical or sacramental but focuses on instruction and exhortation from the Bible. The early church was committed first to the teaching of the apostles (Acts 2:42). In fact, their desire for hearing and obeying the Word of God through the apostles was an evidence of their regeneration (1 John 4:6) and resulted in clear requirements for membership and church life.

Where do we find the teaching of the apostles today? Our Lord brought to the memory of the apostles the things He taught and desired to be recorded. You can only remember what you have previously heard or known. The Gospels were written from the firsthand experiences of the apostles. Jesus promised them, "But the Comforter . . . he shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you" (John 14:26).

Jesus also led them into new understanding and to new revelation to be written to give direction to the churches during this dispensation. He said, "The Spirit of truth . . . will guide you into all truth . . . and he will shew you things to come" (John 16:13).

We need a guide when we are going into new territory. The Epistles are the result of this promise, guiding the apostles in writing the inspired letters to the churches. The "things to come" that He would show them are the focus of the Book of Revelation as well as other prophetic content in the teaching of our Lord.

Because the unregenerate cannot spiritually understand the teaching of the Scriptures (1 Cor. 2:14), regenerate,

immersed membership makes the teaching of the Word of God effective and the understanding of the Word possible for all members.

The order of the Great Commission, as commanded by the Lord Jesus, is evangelism, church association through baptism, and local church instruction. Regenerate, immersed church membership follows this command; and it both emphasizes and enables Word-centered worship as believers are instructed in all things the Lord has commanded.

Worship in Reformed churches tends to be liturgical. It employs repetition of a scripted liturgy—a fixed set of ceremonies and words which are used during public worship. Liturgy is designed for beauty and symbolism. The prescribed liturgical worship tends to be mechanical, repetitious, and ornate; it employs clerical authority; and it theoretically confers grace, often apart from intellectual understanding, to those who participate.

In contrast, the apostolic church continually gathered for Bible teaching; they were continuing steadfastly to hear and understand the teaching of the apostles. They sat under the preaching ministry of the apostles, whose teaching, now written on the pages of the New Testament Scriptures, is to be taught by all pastors.

Paul's letters to his protégés Timothy and Titus reflect both the priority of truth and of the preaching of the Word. God designed the church to be a place where His Word is proclaimed and explained. A commitment to the apostles' doctrine or teaching is foundational to the growth and spiritual health of every church. This is the heritage and the commitment of Baptist churches.

Conclusion

Regenerate, immersed church membership matters. It guards the gospel, protects the church, promotes evangelism, and makes the teaching of the Word of God effective for all members. The Reformation brought a shift in the public worship for many churches from the centrality of the sacraments to the centrality of the reading and preaching of the Word. But it is the Baptists who have most consistently followed the biblical pattern of the early church. Let us faithfully extend that commitment to the next generation.

Dr. Marty Marriott is the president of Maranatha Baptist University, Watertown, Wisconsin.



¹ *Westminster Confession of Faith* 1646, XXVIII.I.

² *Ibid.*, XXVIII.VI.

³ "Sacraments: Grace We Can Touch," *Presbyterians Today* (June 2014), 34.

⁴ *Heidelberg Catechism*, Q. and A. 74.

⁵ Joel D. Otto, "Alive in Christ," Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Essay File, 12.

⁶ Steve Lemke, "What Is a Baptist? Nine Marks That Separate Baptists from Presbyterians," *Journal for Baptist Theology & Ministry*, 5.2 (Fall 2008): 20.

⁷ David Cummins, *This Day in Baptist History III* (David L. Cummins, 2006), 499.

⁸ E. Wayne Thompson and David Cummins, *This Day in Baptist History* (Greenville: Bob Jones University Press, 1993), 69.

The Importance of Church Membership

If you are a fan of American football, maybe you've heard the name Shaquem Griffin, and maybe you haven't. Griffin is a defensive player who achieved high levels of success during his college career, achieving All-American honors and defensive MVP of the 2018 Peach Bowl. He is currently poised to enter the National Football League, and if he makes it, his story will be one of the most remarkable in history. The reason his story stands out, however, is not because of his high level of play and outstanding speed and athleticism, but rather because he would become the first amputee to play in the NFL. You see, Griffin is missing his left hand—amputated mid-wrist when he was a child. In the history of the highest level of America's most physical sport, there has never been a one-handed player.

When we think of high-level athletics, we obviously understand the importance of major body parts. Each member of an athlete's body has a crucial role for speed, strength, balance, and so on, and to be missing any members could be a major detriment to the success of the player on the field or court. This reality isn't just true of our physical bodies, however; the New Testament describes a spiritual body—the local church—whose members are just as crucial to its function and success. While the metaphor of a body can be used of the worldwide brotherhood of NT believers, there are four texts that particularly picture a local assembly as a body: 1 Corinthians 12:12–27; Romans 12:3–8; Colossians 2:16–19; and Ephesians 4:11–16. Each of these passages argues for the vital importance of church membership.

Throughout fifteen years of ministry in the church and classroom, I have often had people question the concept of church membership. They challenge the idea by asking, "Where is membership found in the Bible?" I understand their point. Nowhere in Scripture do you see the kind of membership reflected in today's boys' organizations, warehouse clubs, and national associations. There is no secret handshake, no membership dues, no shopping discounts, or roadside assistance. I would argue, however, that the kind of church membership that Scripture does present is eminently more meaningful and absolutely less optional than those secular memberships. I would actually

argue that a Christian's membership in a local church is of parallel necessity to your vital body parts' membership in your person. Indeed, this is the argument that Paul makes repeatedly in his letters.

In his two extended body-metaphor writings (1 Cor. 12 and Rom. 12) Paul uses the Greek word *melos* fifteen times, with approximately half referring to the members of the human body and half referring to the members of a local church. I say "approximately" because it is difficult to distinguish exactly where the argument transitions from physical to spiritual membership. *Melos* most plainly means "member," as in a part of a unit or parts of a body.¹ Likewise, it designates "the unity of the body and the multiplicity of the members in their various potential tasks."² There is little doubt that Paul expected NT believers to be committed, integral members of NT churches—not the kind of members that sign up for the benefits, but the kind of members that belong in a *koinonia* partnership. With that being established we now turn our attention to why this kind of membership is important, and to that end we look to the text.

Members Form Together into a Body (1 Cor. 12:12–14)

Paul begins his most extended body-metaphor grounding local believers in the reality that they are literally members of Christ's spiritual body—in a local context. While it might sound ironic to say that believers are *literally* members of Christ's *spiritual* body, this is exactly what Paul says in verse 12: "For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ." NT Christians are not imaginary parts of a mythical organism, but are really connected to Christ in a visible assembly. The local church is what makes the unseen reality of Christ tangible. The next verse implies the same as the invisible Spirit baptism into one body is intended to become visible through water baptism into one body.

While it is true that people will be saved from every socioeconomic group, Paul's point in verses 13–14 is that this diversity will be manifest in local assemblies. The Corinthian church reflected its local community in its varied composition of Jews, Greeks, slaves, and free. This is

where the picture becomes beautiful, because, whereas in secular society diversity existed in strict social strata, for the church, the strata dissolves into oneness. In the body of Christ, diversity exists in composition, not in comparison: many members formed together into one body (v. 14).

Members Must Think Like a Body (1 Cor. 12:15–20)

Diverse members forming a unified local body is the divine design of the church, and therefore comes with the obligation of members to think like a body. In verses 15–17 Paul gives the rather humorous illustration of body parts questioning their place in the human body. An anthropomorphic foot says, “Because I am not the hand, I am not of the body,” and an ear says the same thing about not being an eye. Paul’s point is not just that bodies require complementing body parts to function, but primarily that church members must think rightly about this reality.

So, how should we think like a body? Paul’s threefold answer to this question is timeless. (1) We need to remember that God formed each of us to function in the church exactly like He wanted us to be—as it “pleased Him” (v. 18). (2) We need to be certain that our individual human ideals—if realized—would make us a dysfunctional monster as a church (v. 19)! (3) We need to trust the God who composed our physical bodies can also form our church body to thrive using our diverse persons, traits, and gifts (v. 20).

Members Care for Each Other Selflessly (1 Cor. 12:21–27)

As Paul concludes, he pulls back from looking at the body collectively and now focuses on inter-body relationships. In verses 21–23 he again personifies body parts such as the eye. His conclusion is that even if the eye could think and talk for itself, it could not truthfully say, “I don’t need you” to the hand. No matter what parts seem to be weaker, less honorable, and less needed, each member needs its fellow members.

In fact, God intends for the local Body of Christ to have a perfect balance of parts (v. 24). The Greek verb “tempered” is also used of a painter skillfully blending colors to compose a harmonious work.³ Believers, then, are perfectly orchestrated by God’s wise hand to blend with others. As our individual identities fade, mix, and are enhanced along with others, the result is masterful. Allowing our individuality to blend in the body can come with the trepidation that we might lose more than we gain; however, there is no loss, because God takes initiative to give “more abundant honour.” Any apparent “lack” is actually just a faulty perspective (v. 24b). Paul uses the Greek voice that emphasizes perception—to feel inferior or *feel* lacking; not of those who are actually inferior.⁴ This is also the point of verse 22, “Those members of the body, which *seem to be* more feeble, are necessary”

(emphasis added). So for those who feel inadequate, God gives them greater honor—which doesn’t just catch them up to their supposed superiors, but rather speaks to bringing them beyond a standard of abundance.⁵ The point is that there are no less-honorable members. That should be our perspective; that’s what God has done.

A faulty perception of more honor vs. less honor can cause division, but the right perspective of how God orchestrates the church creates unity (v. 25). The seriousness of this potential division is driven home by the word “schism,” which means to tear or divide and graphically pictures “tearing the body of Christ, limb from limb and organ from organ.”⁶ Instead of schism, the members should interact with “care” which indicates intentional attention and personal consideration. If this kind of selfless care for others is real, it will pass the most practical test—“whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honoured, all the members rejoice with it” (v. 26). This kind of selfless care is born out of a proper understanding of the church as a body—both that we *are* the body of Christ, and also its members individually (v. 27).

Members Are Given Gifts for the Body (Rom. 12:3–8)

In his letter to the Romans Paul again addresses church membership with the same central conclusion as his letter to the Corinthians—that “we, being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another” (v. 5). What he adds in this letter, however, is the presence of spiritual gifts. He challenges these members not to think more highly of themselves than they ought. Just as the Corinthians had a wrong perception of honor, the church at Rome is reminded that gifts are “gifts” (i.e., they don’t come from us). God has sovereignly distributed to “every man the measure of faith.” Every Christian has been given faith-resources or spiritual gifts in the exact amounts and proportions which God has deemed best.

In order for the one body to function optimally, each member must have a different role and position, not for his own glory but for the proper functioning of the church (vv. 4–5). Paul exhorts the members to use their different gifts to benefit the body. He concludes by listing seven possible gifts that members should use for each other and the local church body (vv. 6–8).

Members Must Be Fixated on Christ for Growth (Col. 2:16–19)

Paul calls the church of Colossae to an extraordinary Christ-centered perspective of church membership. The church was being beguiled by busy-bodies who were preoccupied with issues such as food regulations, holiday observation, external standards (i.e., voluntary humility), spiritual beings, and visions. But the greatest problem was that these issues were becoming a fragmenting distraction from the body of Christ (vv. 16–17).

**The New Testament
describes a spiritual
body—the local
church—whose
members are
just as crucial to
its function and
success.**

As one commentator put it, these spiritual-seeming issues were causing them to lose “contact with the only effective source of spiritual growth.”⁷

Engorged by the buffet of new and novel spiritual causes to champion, the church members were not holding onto their Head, Christ. Their zeal for these causes was threatening to cut them off from their true source of spiritual vitality. This concept focuses the body’s complete dependence on its Head for nourishment and growth.⁸ The solution, of course, is to “hold onto” or to “adhere to” Christ.⁹ Members must be fixated on Christ, and in so doing would again be knit together in unity and experience the increase that only comes from God (v. 19).

Members Are Responsible for the Body’s Maturity (Eph. 4:11–13)

The final Pauline body-metaphor that demonstrates the importance of church membership is found in his letter to the Ephesians. In chapter 4 Paul describes how Christ gave gifted leaders to the church in order to equip the saints for the work of the ministry so that the body of Christ will be built up. These are well-known verses, but we must ask, “What’s the goal of the church being built up?” Paul gives the answer to all local churches in verse 13: “Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ.”

This is a collective responsibility for each of the saints. The responsibility is personal and breaks down along three lines. We see first of all that as we all take responsibility, we continue to grow together in our faith and knowledge of Christ (v. 13a)! As Harold Hoehner explains, “Such knowledge applies not only to individuals but to the body of believers who together come to a unity of the knowledge of Christ. . . . A dynamic faith brings a dynamic knowledge of Christ, which in turn produces more faith.”¹⁰ Second, as we all take responsibility, we gain maturity (stability and strength) as a body (v. 13b). Finally, as we all take responsibility, we collectively become like Christ! Hoehner captures this concept well when he expounds, “Each member is to use the gift that has been given to him or her in measure (v. 7) and as each member fulfills this, then the body will measure (v. 13) to Christ’s full stature.”¹¹

Members Are Accountable for Perpetual Body Health (Eph. 4:14–16)

Paul places the responsibility of spiritual maturity on the members of the local body. He reiterates the need for doctrinal and personal maturity through speaking the truth in love, and he returns to the theme of a growing devotion to the head, Christ. Then he narrows in on one aspect of the body metaphor that he also alluded to in Ephesians 4:16, namely, that the body has joints—that is, real points of connection.¹² You see, real growth happens as members’ lives touch members’ lives. Speaking the truth in love happens in the context of conversation; spiritual gifts are often exercised in the context of members’ homes and personal acts of inter-body service; discussions are turned from seemingly spiritually sensational issues to the supremacy

of Christ by members caring for one another’s souls; and unity is promoted as individuals find their corporate identity in being members of Christ’s body together. All this happens when there are real points of contact between members of the body!

Conclusion

Is your membership in a local church important? I think it’s a temptation to look around the congregation and at times wonder whether we would be missed. Remember the football player without a left hand? Although it’s remarkable what he’s been able to achieve to this point in his career, an unstated question lingers: how good could he have been if not for his disability? Or perhaps another, more troubling, question: could he still be effective if he were to lose another member? I would suggest, based upon all that we have just seen, that the question, “Is my involvement as a church member important?” is just as troubling with just as obvious an answer.

God has made local churches the visible expression of the body of Christ. He’s saved you and me to belong—not as a satellite to church, but as a member. Remember, this is God’s work: “But now hath God set the members every one of them in the body, as it hath pleased him” (1 Cor. 12:18). Church membership is important; it’s important we have this perspective; and it’s important we live it out week-to-week together with our brothers and sisters!

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¹ Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, Vol. 1, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains*, electronic ed. of the 2nd ed. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 613.

² Horst Robert Balz and Gerhard Schneider, Vol. 2, *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1990–), 404.

³ Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2000), 1010.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ The Greek wording literally means “greater, more, even more” (William Arndt, Frederick W. Danker, Walter Bauer and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000], 806).

⁶ Thiselton, 1011.

⁷ Douglas J. Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2008), 230.

⁸ James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle: William B. Eerdmans Publishing; Paternoster Press, 1996), 185–86.

⁹ Moo, 230.

¹⁰ Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 554.

¹¹ Ibid., 557.

¹² Joint means “contact” or “connection” (ibid., 573).

A man with a beard, wearing a green robe and a white turban, stands in a rocky, arid landscape. He holds a long wooden staff in his right hand and a small, fluffy brown lamb in his left arm. The background shows rolling hills under a clear sky.

A Disciplined Church Membership

Church discipline characterized the life of the various local churches from the beginning of the New Testament era. Our Lord gave instructions concerning church discipline before Pentecost (Matt. 18:15–17). God supernaturally protected the purity of the Jerusalem church when Ananias and his wife Sapphira lied to God about the price of a possession they sold (Acts 5:1–10). Peter charged them with lying to men and to the Holy Spirit about what they gave. God took their lives “and great fear came upon all the church” (Acts 5:11). Paul instructed the church at Corinth to exclude members from the fellowship in the cases of immorality and other public sins (1 Cor. 5:1–13). He also instructed other churches and pastors concerning discipline (Rom. 16:17; 2 Thess. 3:6, 14; 1 Tim. 5:20; Titus 3:10).

Our purpose is to examine the Scriptures to understand the attitude of the church as it faces sinning members, what offenses the church should confront, and the strategy for dealing with various sins.

A Biblical Philosophy of Church Discipline

The word “discipline” often conveys a negative idea. Sometimes discipline is negative, but the overall idea should be very positive in our minds.

The New Testament term “disciple” is the word *mathetes*, which means “learner” or “follower.” The English words “disciple” or “discipline” come from the Latin *disco*, which means “I learn.”¹ The main idea of discipline, then, is “one taught and trained.”²

Discipline involves the work of teaching and training believers.

Most of the *discipline* process is really *discipling* believers by teaching God’s Word and challenging them to follow the Lord (1 Cor. 11:1; 1 Thess. 1:6, 7). This is a very positive, enjoyable work. Hiscox calls this the “formative” aspect of discipline.³

However, sometimes believers fall into great sin, and the local church must deal with it. Then discipline becomes confronting the sinning Christian, rebuking the believer, and seeking to restore the sinning brother to fellowship with God and the church family.

As a last resort, the church must sometimes remove the erring believer from the church’s membership and fellowship. Hiscox calls this the “corrective” aspect of church discipline.⁴ Richard Clearwaters used to say that discipline is eighty percent instruction and twenty percent enforcement.

One pastor has analyzed this discipling/disciplining process in stages. Those stages are

1. The preaching and teaching aspect of the ministry.
2. The interaction of believers with each other in personal fellowship, which also contributes to the process of encouragement and keeping from sin (Heb. 3:12–13).
3. Fellowship in the services of the local church contributes to the discipleship process (Heb. 10:24–25).
4. Self-examination at the Lord’s Table contributes to holiness and avoiding sin (1 Cor. 11:27–29).

This is the positive, “formative,” “instructional” level of church discipline.⁵

The Goals of Church Discipline

The greatest goal of church discipline is *the restoration of the erring brother*. In dealing with personal offences, gaining the brother is the goal (Matt. 18:15). In dealing with public offences, the church is to forgive and restore the repentant brother (1 Cor. 5:1–5; 2 Cor. 2:5–8). The overarching aim must always be to restore the brother: “Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted” (Gal. 6:1).

A second aim becomes apparent when a local church must take the regrettable, final step of excluding a sinning

member. In that case, its aim is *the preservation of the church’s purity* (1 Cor. 5:6–11). Scripture says, “Your glorying is not good. Know ye not that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump? Purge out therefore the old leaven, that ye may be a new lump. . . . Therefore put away from among yourselves that wicked person” (1 Cor. 5:6–7, 13).

Scripture also teaches that an aim of discipline should also be *a warning to others*. Paul reminded the Galatian churches that they were to “look at” themselves so they would not also be tempted (Gal. 6:1). When a church must discipline a pastor, Paul taught Timothy, “Them that sin rebuke before all, that others also may fear” (1 Tim. 5:20).

The Spirit in Church Discipline

The passages on church discipline also speak to the church’s attitude in exercising discipline. Scripture commands a biblical spirit in the administration of church discipline.⁶

Believers must evidence a spirit of meekness (Gal. 6:1). The church is to be resolute in its stand against sin (1 Tim. 5:20; Titus 1:13). The church is to forgive sinning brothers when they repent (2 Cor. 2:7), and the church is to love the erring brother (2 Cor. 2:8).

The Responsibility for Church Discipline

The local church is the forum for discipline (Matt. 18:17; 1 Cor. 5:4; 2 Thess. 3:6, 14). In each case of exclusion, Scripture puts the responsibility for the action on the church when it assembles. Jesus taught that the act of exclusion must be told to the church (Matt. 18:17). The “brethren” were to withdraw fellowship from errant believers (Rom. 16:17). Paul instructed the Corinthians to take disciplinary action “when ye are gathered together” (1 Cor 5:4). Again, the Thessalonian “brethren” were to discipline the disorderly (2 Thess. 3:6, 14). The ultimate act of excluding a disobedient believer is the responsibility of the assembled church.

The Procedures for Church Discipline

Dealing with Personal Offenses—Matthew 18:15–17

In the case of personal offenses, believers are to follow this procedure when one brother sins against another (v. 15). Jesus used the word *ἁμαρτάνω*, the usual New Testament word for “sin.”

When a brother sins against another, he is to be confronted. Jesus’ statement limits the nature of these offenses and the use of this procedure. We are not to go to a brother with petty differences or with small personality conflicts, nor because we dislike something about him. The Savior described this process when one Christian actually *sins* against another.

In this case the offended believer is to confront the sinning brother (v. 15). This should be “a confidential meeting.”⁷ He is to go to him alone (v. 15). He is to “tell” the sinning brother his fault (v. 15).⁸ The offended brother is to reprove, or describe, the brother’s sin to him. The aim is that the sinning brother “hear” or acknowledge his sin (v. 15). The goal is to “gain” the brother as a friend and fellow Christian (v. 15).⁹

If the sinning Christian will not hear his brother, Jesus commands a second “conference meeting.”¹⁰ The offended brother is to take one or two other Christians with him (v. 16). There appears to be a dual purpose for this meeting. The first is to establish every word in accordance with Deuteronomy 19:15. The second purpose is to exert “ethical influence. . . . Consensus in moral judgment carries weight with the conscience.”¹¹

If the second step fails to secure reconciliation between the brothers, then the issue is to be taken to the church in a “congregational meeting” (v. 17).¹² The primary purpose of this meeting is still to gain the sinning brother. If the sinning brother will not hear the church, he is to be removed from the fellowship and treated as an outsider (v. 17).

Dealing with Public Offences

Scripture describes the discipline of believers for *public offences*. Paul describes the public sins the local church must confront. These include

1. Causing division within a church contrary to biblical doctrine (Rom. 16:17).
2. Immoral conduct (1 Cor 5:1–5, 11).
3. A covetous spirit (1 Cor. 5:11).
4. Idolatry, or consorting with the false religion from which one was saved (1 Cor. 5:11).
5. Railing, or being verbally abusive (1 Cor. 5:11).¹³
6. Being a drunkard (1 Cor. 5:11).
7. Extortion (1 Cor. 5:11). This denotes being *vicious, ravenous, destructive*, like a wild animal (Matt. 7:15); *violently greedy* (Luke 18:11); substantively, a *robber* or *swindler* (1 Cor 6:10)¹⁴ or “ἄρπαξ (*harpax*), ἄγος (*agos*), ὁ (*ho*): n.masc., robber, a (violent) swindler (Luke 18:11; 1 Cor. 5:10–11).”¹⁵
8. Going to law against a fellow Christian (1 Cor. 6:5–7).
9. A disorderly lifestyle and testimony (2 Thess. 3:6, 14). In the Thessalonian Epistles, this refers to the instructions of 1 Thessalonians 4:1–12, dealing with immorality (vv. 3–5); stealing, defrauding (v. 6); being unruly, disregarding authority (1 Thess. 5:14);¹⁶ and disobedience to Scripture (2 Thess 3:14).
10. Sinning pastors (1 Tim. 5:17–20).
11. Persisting in heresy (Titus 3:10).

The New Testament does not give us the detailed procedure for dealing with public sins as it does for dealing with personal offences. It is clear that the church is not to tolerate public sins (1 Cor. 5:2). It is also clear that spiritual people in the church are to seek to restore sinning brothers (Gal. 6:1; Titus 3:10).

If a church cannot restore the sinning persons, then it must exclude them from the fellowship (Rom. 16:17; 1 Cor 5:4, 5, 9, 11; 2 Thess 3:6, 14; Titus 3:10). The word for “company” in 1 Corinthians 5:9, 11, and 2 Thessalonians 3:14 describes the exclusion in strong language.¹⁷

Exclusion from the membership and fellowship of the church is *always* the last resort. If a Christian who has been disciplined from a local church later repents, the church is to forgive that Christian and confirm its love to him (2 Cor. 2:7–8). This passage indicates that some of the believers who were living in sin and excluded from the Corinthian church after Paul’s first epistle repented. Thus Paul could encourage the church to restore those brothers.

Conclusion

Remember that the aim of church discipline is always the restoring of an erring brother. Sadly, sometimes a member must be excluded from the fellowship. That regrettable action is always the last resort. Strong biblical preaching and teaching will prevent many problems. The local church must maintain a biblical attitude in the discipline of sinning members.



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¹ Edward T. Hiscox, *The New Dictionary for Baptist Churches* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1962), 162.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Personal conversation with Ralph Warren, Lake County Baptist Church, Waukegan, IL, December 3, 2014.

⁶ These points are taken from Paul R. Jackson, *The Doctrine and Administration of the Church* (Des Plaines, IL: Regular Baptist Press, 1968), 75–76.

⁷ Douglas R. McLachlan, “The Polity Issue” (Dunbar, WI: Northland Baptist Bible College, unpublished notes, n.d.), 1.

⁸ The word used here is ἐλέγγω. In reference to discipline, it is also used in 1 Timothy 5:20 concerning the rebuking of sinning pastors. Jesus also used the word to describe the Holy Spirit’s work of convicting unbelievers of sin, righteousness, and judgment (John 16:7–11).

⁹ A. B. Bruce, “Matthew,” in *The Expositor’s Greek Testament*, W. Robertson Nicoll, ed. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1967 edition) I: 240.

¹⁰ McLachlan, 1.

¹¹ Bruce, 240.

¹² McLachlan, 1.

¹³ W. E. Vine, *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1966 edition), III, 293.

¹⁴ T. Friberg, B. Friberg, and N. F. Miller, Volume 4: *Analytical Lexicon of the Greek New Testament*, Baker’s Greek New Testament Library (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000 in Logos Research Systems), 75.

¹⁵ J. Swanson, *Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains: Greek (New Testament)* (electronic ed.) (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997).

¹⁶ Hiscox, 181–82, lists this.

¹⁷ “συναμίγνυμι (also συναμειγνυμι) (“mix up together”), passive with active sense—*minge, associate with*, 1 Cor. 5:9 (echoing the injunctions as those in vv. 5ff); 2 Thess. 3:14. Abs. 1 Cor. 5:11” (William Arndt, Frederick W. Danker, and Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000], 965).

Historic Church Membership

Churches that practiced the baptism of infants dominated Colonial

America: Congregationalists in New England, Presbyterians in the Middle Colonies, and Anglicans in the South. In all three regions nominal Christianity had become prevalent by the 1730s. God raised up Congregationalist Jonathan Edwards, Presbyterian Gilbert Tennent, and Anglican George Whitefield (among others) to bring revival of such magnitude that it became known as the Great Awakening. Interestingly, though, while all of these churches benefited from the revival of the 1730s and '40s, the religious group that experienced the greatest boon was a relatively small and despised denomination, the Baptists.

Outside the Mainstream

Since the founding of the earliest colonial Baptist churches in Rhode Island in the 1630s and '40s, Baptists had stood outside the mainstream of American Christianity because they adopted a different approach to church membership. Rather than holding to a parish system, in which infants of church members were sprinkled in order to secure their place in the state church, Baptists argued that the church should be a voluntary association of professing believers.

To the chagrin of Whitefield and other pedobaptist preachers, many Awakening converts concluded that their infant baptism had been one of the reasons they were unregenerate church members. Converts such as Isaac Backus, Shubal Stearns, and a host of others went back to the Scriptures only to find that the New Testament church did not baptize infants. Baptist churches resulted across all three regions of the country and especially exploded

in numbers and influence in the South. By the early nineteenth century, Baptists were vying with the equally explosive Methodists as the largest denomination in the fledgling United States.

With growth comes organization. Baptists formed their first national organization in 1814, the Triennial Convention; they began establishing seminaries for the training of their ministers and publishing houses for the production and distribution of denominational literature. An observer in 1750 would have found it hard to believe how far the Baptists had come by 1850 in numbers, organization, and influence.

Since the early seventeenth century, Baptists had found various ways of publicizing their distinctive polity, but the second half of the nineteenth century saw a rise in popularity of polity manuals, books that sought to explain and defend Baptist church practices. Notable authors who contributed to this genre were John L. Dagg, a Southern pastor and educator, and Edward T. Hiscox, a New England pastor.

Two years after retiring from the presidency of Mercer University in Georgia, Dagg wrote the second volume of his *Manual of Theology*, entitled *A Treatise on Church Order*, in 1858.¹ Historian Tom Nettles gives Dagg high praise: "For clarity, cogency, and sincerity of expression, no theological writer of the 19th century surpasses John L. Dagg."²

A year after Dagg's work appeared in the South, Pastor Edward Hiscox published a similar work for Northern Baptists: *Baptist Church Directory*.³ Hiscox's work was enormously influential in northern Baptist church life, and over the next several decades he wrote *The Standard Manual for Baptist Churches*, *Star Book for Ministers*, *Pastor's Manual*,

and other works. During the latter half of the nineteenth century, Hiscox became the recognized expert on Baptist polity among the northern Baptist churches.

These manuals are comprehensive guides to Baptist polity and discuss a number of doctrines. They are in essential agreement relative to the Baptist distinctives, the key doctrines that distinguish Baptists from other denominations. Most American pedobaptist churches had abandoned belief in a state-church system by the late nineteenth century and were developing alternative defenses of infant baptism. These Baptist polity manuals are important today because they show how Baptists, when they came of age in America as a major denomination, defined their ecclesiology in opposition to these new pedobaptist approaches.

Scripture as Sole Authority

Once the Scriptures are identified as the sole and sufficient authority for one's polity, the foundation for the rest of the distinctives is the definition of the church itself. Dagg provides this definition: "A Christian church is an assembly of believers in Christ, organized into a body, according to the Holy Scriptures, for the worship and service of God."⁴

Dagg's development of this definition involves him in investigating the phrase "according to the Holy Scriptures" and explaining officers, ordinances, and discipline. Hiscox provides a more thorough definition:

A Christian church is 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.⁵

The initial feature of both of these definitions is that New Testament churches are made up of believers only, which precludes infant baptism. With the majority of "churches" both historically and in contemporary church life including infants, how could these Baptists be so insistent on regenerated church membership?

What is remarkable about both presentations is that Dagg and Hiscox present the New Testament evidence in such a way that they clearly regard the case as rather cut-and-dried. The key incontrovertible fact is that the members of the first-century churches are invariably addressed as believers: saints (Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:2; 2 Cor. 1:1; Eph. 1:1; Phil. 1:1; Col. 1:2), servants of God (Rom. 6:22), people quickened with Christ (Eph. 2:5), saved (Eph. 2:8), faithful brethren (Col. 1:2), people hidden with Christ in God (Col. 3:3), elect sojourners (1 Pet. 1:1–2; cf. 1:17), a holy/royal priesthood (1 Pet. 2:5, 9), etc. These are all passages employed by Hiscox, but this list could be extended significantly. When one adds to this the evidence from Acts, the case is indeed powerful. "The saved" are added to the church at Pentecost (Acts 2:47), in Samaria (8:12), Antioch (11:21–23, 26), Philippi (16:40—"brethren"), Corinth (18:8), Ephesus (20:1—"disciples")—"everywhere."⁶ Dagg concludes, "No doubt can exist that these churches were, in

the view of the inspired writers who addressed them, composed of persons truly converted to God."⁷

So a profession of faith is necessary for membership in a New Testament church. Is this sufficient? Dagg and Hiscox believe the Great Commission suggests an additional requirement. In the Matthean version of the Commission, the Lord gives an order of operations to be observed: make disciples of all nations; baptize them; and teach them everything He has commanded. Obedient disciples, then, are men and women who have received Christian baptism. Both theologians thoroughly and carefully establish that Christian baptism is believer's baptism by immersion.⁸ They then draw this conclusion (in Dagg's words):

As profession is necessary to church-membership, so is baptism, which is the appointed ceremony of profession. Profession is the substance, and baptism is the form; but Christ's command requires the form as well as the substance. In reading the Scriptures, it never enters the mind that any of the church-members in the times of the apostles were unbaptized. So uniformly was this rite administered at the beginning of the Christian profession, that no room is left to doubt its universal observance.⁹

Hiscox makes the same point, distinguishing the spiritual transaction from the ecclesiastical.

One may become a member of "the kingdom of heaven" by being "born from above," but he cannot become a member of the visible Church except he confess that spiritual change in the waters of baptism. . . . The spiritual change of the new birth begets *Christian* fellowship; but to secure *Church* fellowship, that change must be confessed in baptism. This is the New Testament order.¹⁰

Note that baptism is regarded as a supplementary confession of faith to the oral profession. While in practice a candidate for membership will both give his testimony (or, in nineteenth-century terms, "relate his experience") and receive baptism, both of these have the same basic purpose: to establish that the candidate is genuinely a believer. Hiscox is insistent on this:

If our churches are to fulfill their mission, remain true to their traditions, and honor their apostolical pretensions, they must insist, with unabated vigor, on a *regenerated membership*. Nor must they insist on it in theory only, but take every precaution to maintain it in practice.¹¹

The Timing of Baptism

This raised a sticky issue for these men and the churches they were instructing. Should a person who professes faith in Christ be automatically and immediately accepted for baptism? They were aware that the second- and third-century churches began inserting a lengthy period of instruction and observation of life between profession of faith and baptism into the church. If the New Testament is one's sole authority, however, how could one justify such a procedure? Nevertheless, experience showed that admitting persons who had given no external evidence of their genuine

spiritual life inevitably resulted in a membership diluted by false professors. Hiscox unabashedly admits the difficulty. After acknowledging that “primitive” (early) churches baptized immediately upon profession of faith, he says,

With us it is usually somewhat different; for while no specified time is required for probation, or proof of sincerity, some time usually does, *and prudently should*, elapse after a profession of faith, before Church membership is consummated. Union with the Church usually follows baptism immediately, but baptism does not usually follow conversion immediately, as it might lawfully do.¹²

This is a surprising argument for one who holds strongly to the Regulative Principle.¹³ Dagg recognizes the difficulty and takes it on.

The churches are not infallible judges, being unable to search the heart; but they owe it to the cause of Christ, and to the candidate himself, to exercise the best judgment of which they are capable. To receive any one on a mere profession of words, without any effort to ascertain whether he understands and feels what he professes, is unfaithfulness to his interests, and the interests of religion. In primitive times, when persecution deterred from profession, and the Spirit operated in a more visible manner, the danger of mistake was less; but even then, all who professed were not received.¹⁴

Dagg also makes a case from the verb used in Acts 2:47. The KJV rendering is “The Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved.” The Southern theologian explains that “should be saved” translates a present participle, “such as are being saved,” and then comments,

Men who had entered the way of salvation, and were making progress therein, were added to the church in Jerusalem, and all the members of the church were persons of like character, for the multitude were “of one heart.”¹⁵

The present participle may suggest that these new additions “were making progress” in the way of salvation before being admitted to baptism into church membership. The initial spectacular accession of new converts at Pentecost, who would have been obvious because of tongues-speaking, may have gradually given way to a more normal mode of observing a changed life before accepting a person into membership. Even if this evidence from a participle is questionable, such a transition certainly occurred by the second century, which argues that a pure church was a high priority.

Can a pure church really be guaranteed? At times people are deceived into thinking they are believers when they are not, and at other times people are hypocrites. If our churches have unbelievers in them after all, what’s the big deal? Both Dagg and Hiscox firmly address this concern, which they no doubt heard frequently from their Pedobaptist contemporaries. First, they urge thorough vetting of potential members. Hiscox avers, “An external Christian life must corroborate the profession of an internal Christian faith.”¹⁶

Adopting a tone that sounds as though this were a problem in his day, he says further,

Those pastors make a grave mistake, and are grievously at fault, who hurry persons into the Church without giving the body a fair and full opportunity of gaining evidence of their regenerate state.¹⁷

Second, they argue that exceptions—unbelievers found in the church—serve to prove rather than disprove the rule. In Dagg’s words,

We know from the apostolic epistles, that false brethren were brought in unawares into the churches [Gal. 2:4]. But we are clearly taught that they were considered intruders, occupying a place that did not properly belong to them, and were ejected when their true character became apparent.¹⁸

The fact that unbelievers were identified and excluded is strong evidence that the church never intended to admit them.

In the twentieth century belief in and enforcement of membership standards in evangelical churches experienced significant decay. The Church Growth Movement contributed to this trend, and Baptist churches began to abandon the pure-church ideal of their denominational forebears.¹⁹ With an abandonment of biblical membership requirements—profession of faith, demonstration of a changed life, and baptism—all of which are designed to maintain the church as “an assembly of believers,” churches also failed to practice biblical church discipline. The result is inevitably a worldly church.

Christ is the Head of the church, and He has stipulated what His body should consist of. We must get many other things right in order to be faithful churches in our generation, but if we get this wrong, we will be building on a shaky foundation. As Hiscox puts it:

Decline, perversion and decay of spiritual life and evangelical doctrine, are more likely to result from the admission of unsanctified and unsuitable materials into its membership than from almost any other deviation from the divinely constituted order of building the spiritual temple.²⁰

Dr. David Saxon is professor of church history at Maranatha Baptist Seminary.



¹ The 1990 reprint by Gano Books renamed it *Manual of Church Order*.

² John L. Dagg, *Manual of Church Order* (Harrisonburg, VA: Gano Books, 1990), Preface.

³ Hiscox oversaw the publication of an expanded edition of this work in 1894, when he was eighty years old, *The New Directory for Baptist Churches* (republished in 1970 by Kregel Publications), and Judson Press published an abbreviated version of the work, giving it the title *The Hiscox Guide for Baptist Churches*, in 1965.

⁴ Dagg, 74.

⁵ Hiscox, *New Directory*, 20 (Kregel edition).

⁶ Hiscox, 65.

Continued on page 26

2018

June 11-13, 2018

98th Annual Fellowship
First Baptist Church of Troy
2601 John R Road
Troy, MI 48083-2399
248.689.4555

July 30-August 1, 2018

Alaska Regional Fellowship
Hamilton Acres Baptist Church
138 Farewell Ave.
Fairbanks, AK 99701
907.456.5995

September 11, 2018

NYC Regional Fellowship
Bethel Baptist Fellowship
2304 Voorhies Avenue
Brooklyn, NY 11235
718.615.1002

September 22, 2018

New England Regional Fellowship
(Meeting with the New England
Foundations Conference)
Heritage Baptist Church
186 Dover Point Road
Dover, NH 03820

September 27-28, 2018

New Mexico Regional Fellowship
Grace Baptist Church
2200 Sullivan Avenue
Farmington, NM 87401
505.330.5632

October 15-16, 2018

Central Regional Fellowship
Midland Baptist Church
4200 N. Church Circle
Wichita, KS 67205

November 5-6, 2018

Southern California Regional Fellowship
Victory Baptist Church
PO Box 2462
California City, CA 93504

2019

January 28-29, 2019

Rocky Mountain Regional Fellowship
Westside Baptist Church
6260 West 4th Street
Greeley, CO 80634

February 18-20, 2019

Winter Board Meeting
Northwest Valley Baptist Church
4030 W Yorkshire Drive
Glendale, AZ 85308

April 1-3, 2019

South Regional Fellowship
Catawba Springs Christian Church
6801 Ten-Ten Road
Apex NC 27539

June 11-13, 2019

99th Annual Fellowship
Red Rocks Baptist Church
14711 West Morrison Road
Morrison, CO 80465

July 29-31, 2019

Alaska Regional Fellowship
Maranatha Baptist Church
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SOUND WORDS

HOLD FAST THE FORM OF SOUND WORDS—2 TIMOTHY 1:13

First Partaker

Robert Murray M'Cheyne's "Reformation"

Memoir and Remains of Robert Murray M'Cheyne (1844), edited by his dear friend Andrew Bonar, went through one hundred sixteen English editions within twenty-five years. By 1910 something like a half million copies were in circulation, including those in foreign language editions. *This is one of the best and most profitable volumes ever published*, C. H. Spurgeon wrote. *The memoir of such a man ought surely to be in the hands of every Christian and certainly every preacher of the Gospel.*

One of the "remains" included in the *Memoir* is a document M'Cheyne commenced just a few months before his death in March of 1843. Entitled "Reformation," it's a searching assessment of his own secret walk with God. He had no inkling, of course, that it would be one of the last papers that he would ever write, much less that it would be published repeatedly and read by hundreds of thousands.

Recently I handed "Reformation" to a group of fifteen ministerial students, ranging from one or two sophomores right up to doctoral candidates. After we'd read portions of it together for nearly an hour, I asked for their thoughts. I was especially interested in their reactions to the exacting expectations its author imposed upon himself. Their response was enlightening: all were sobered, some felt slightly discouraged, and a few were unsure of even the spiritual profitability of such an exercise.

That recent experience argues that a few points of introduction would be helpful. First, one has to keep in

mind that although M'Cheyne was relatively young in years, he was exceptionally mature in spiritual experience. His unusually sanctified walk with God was already nearly proverbial throughout Scotland (which in large part explains

why his *Memoir* was so widely and eagerly read). So the high ambitions expressed in "Reformation" aren't to be misjudged as the lofty naivety of an unseasoned spiritual novice. Instead, they should be valued for what they truly are—the heightened sensitivity of one who has tasted something of Isaiah's experience of beholding the Lord *high and lifted up* and feeling, in turn, the crushing reality of his own remaining sinfulness.

Second, the kinds of scrutinizing confessional exercises that M'Cheyne proposes for himself were much more understood and widely practiced in his day than in ours. And that was due, at least in part, to a more biblically comprehensive view of sanctification than is typical today.

From at least the Puritan era forward, experiential sanctification was understood to include an intentional, relentless effort to mortify remaining sin in the life of a believer (Rom. 8:13). The classic work on the subject, *Of the Mortification of Sin in Believers* by John Owen, counsels deliberate meditations in order to burden conscience with a sufficient sense of the guilt of our sins. Otherwise, Owen warns, we will speak peace to ourselves lightly because we've failed to grasp the enormity of sinning against the majesty and holiness of God. In addition, only an intentional, systematic effort to single out and confess each kind of sin individually makes us fully aware of just how creeping into every crevice of our faculties is the deep, lamentable root of sin (singular). And it is this awareness alone which will send us continually and humbly to the ongoing High Priestly work of our great Savior.

Christopher Love explained, further, that it is only by giving this kind of scrutinizing attention to individual acts of sinning that we will be able to gain victory over any one of them.

"The husbandman that laboureth must be first partaker of the fruits"
(2 Tim. 2:6)

Inside

Bring . . . the Books—Key books for the pastor's study	5
Straight Cuts—An exegetical study	6
Windows—Themed sermon illustrations	7

Think not to compass this great work of mortification by a general, superficial sight of sin, unless you come to a distinct and particular apprehension of your sins. If you take your sins and corruptions all together in a lump, you will never be able to break and mortify them. When a bundle of rods is knit closely one to another, the strongest man to the world is not able to break them; yet, if they are taken asunder, any man may break them all one by one with ease. So it is here: if you take sin apart and labor to have a distinct view and sight of each one, this is the way to overcome and mortify them (*A Treatise on the Mortification of Sin*).

This was undoubtedly the theological understanding which prompted M'Cheyne to urge himself to an even more earnest, detailed scrutiny than he had been practicing heretofore.

What I've included of his reflections for personal reformation is about three-quarters of the whole. I trust that it will be sufficient, not to discourage, but to instruct and inspire a walk with the Lord that is more intentionally sanctified, and thus more joyfully satisfied.

. . . the kinds of scrutinizing confessional exercises that M'Cheyne proposes for himself were much more understood and widely practiced in his day than in ours. And that was due, at least in part, to a more biblically comprehensive view of sanctification than is typical today.

Personal Reformation

I am persuaded that I shall obtain the highest amount of present happiness, I shall do most for God's glory and the good of man, and I shall have the fullest reward in eternity, by maintaining a conscience always washed in Christ's blood, by being filled with the Holy Spirit at all times, and by attaining the most entire likeness to Christ in mind, will, and heart, that it is possible for a redeemed sinner to attain to in this world.

I am persuaded that whenever anyone from without, or my own heart from within, at any moment, or in any circumstances, contradicts this—if any one shall insinuate that it is not for my present and eternal happiness, and for God's glory, and my usefulness, to maintain a blood-washed conscience, to be entirely filled with the Spirit, and to be fully conformed to the image of Christ in all things—that is the voice of the devil, God's enemy,

the enemy of my soul, and of all good—the most foolish, wicked, and miserable of all the creatures.

1. To maintain a conscience void of offence, I am persuaded that I ought to confess my sins more. I think I ought to confess sin the moment I see it to be sin; whether I am in company, or in study, or even preaching, the soul ought to cast a glance of abhorrence at the sin. If I go on with the duty, leaving the sin unconfessed, I go on with a burdened conscience, and add sin to sin. I think I ought at certain times of the day—my best times—say, after breakfast and after tea—to confess solemnly the sins of the previous hours, and to seek their complete remission.

I find that the devil often makes use of the confession of sin to stir up again the very sin confessed into new exercise, so that I am afraid to dwell upon the confession. I must ask experienced Christians about this. For the present, I think I should strive against this awful abuse of confession, whereby the devil seeks to frighten me away from confessing. I ought to take all methods for seeing the vileness of my sins. I ought to regard myself as a condemned branch of Adam—as partaker of a nature opposite to God from the womb, Psa. 51—as having a heart full of all wickedness, which pollutes every thought, word, and action, during my whole life, from birth to death. I ought to confess often the sins of my youth, like David and Paul—my sins before conversion, my sins since conversion—sins against light and knowledge—against love and grace—against each person of the Godhead. I ought to look at my sins in the light of the Holy Law—in the light of God's countenance—in the light of the Cross—in the light of the Judgment-seat—in the light of hell—in the light of eternity. I ought to examine my dreams, my floating thoughts—my predilections—my often recurring actions—my habits of thought, feeling, speech, and action—the slanders of my enemies—and the reproofs, and even banterings, of my friends—to find out traces of my prevailing sin—matter for confession.

I ought to have a stated day of confession, with fasting—say, once a-month. I ought to have a number of scriptures marked, to bring sin to remembrance. I ought to make use of all bodily affliction, domestic trial, frowns of Providence on myself, house, parish, church, or country, as calls from God to confess sin. The sins and afflictions of other men should call me to the same. I ought, on Sabbath evenings, and on Communion Sabbath evenings, to be especially careful to confess the sins of holy things. I ought to confess the sins of my confessions—their imperfections, sinful aims, self-righteous tendency, &c.—and to look to Christ as having confessed my sins perfectly over his own sacrifice.

I ought to go to Christ for the forgiveness of

each sin. In washing my body, I go over every spot, and wash it out: Should-I be less careful in washing my soul? I ought to see that in Christ's bloodshedding there is an infinite overpayment for all my sins. Although Christ did not suffer more than infinite justice demanded, yet he could not suffer at all without laying down an infinite ransom.

I feel, when I have sinned, an immediate reluctance to go to Christ. I am ashamed to go. I feel as if it would do no good to go—as if it were making Christ a minister of sin, to go straight from the swine-trough to the best robe—and a thousand other excuses; but I am persuaded they are all lies, direct from hell. John argues the opposite way—*If any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father*. I am sure there is neither peace nor safety from deeper sin, but in going directly to the Lord Jesus Christ. This is God's way of peace and holiness. It is folly to the world and the beclouded heart, but it is the way.

I must never think a sin too small to need immediate application to the blood of Christ. If I put away a good conscience, concerning faith I make shipwreck. I must never think my sins too great, too aggravated, too presumptuous—as when done on my knees, or in preaching, or by a dying bed, or during dangerous illness—to hinder me from fleeing to Christ.

I must not only wash in Christ's blood, but clothe me in Christ's obedience. For every sin of omission in self, I may find a divinely perfect obedience ready for me in Christ. For every sin of commission in self, I may find not only a stripe or a wound in Christ, but also a perfect rendering of the opposite obedience in my place, so that the law is magnified—its curse more than carried—its demand more than answered.

Often the doctrine of Christ for me appears common, well known, having nothing new in it; and I am tempted to pass it by and go to some scripture more taking. This is the devil again—a red-hot lie. Christ for us is ever new, ever glorious. *Unsearchable riches of Christ*—an infinite object, and the only one for a guilty soul. I ought to have a number of Scriptures ready, which lead my blind soul directly to Christ, such as Isaiah 45, Romans 3.

2. To be filled with the Holy Spirit, I am persuaded that I ought to study more my own weakness. I ought to have a number of scriptures ready to be meditated on, such as Romans 7, John 15, to convince me that I am a helpless worm.

If I am tempted to think that I am now an established Christian—that I have overcome this or that lust so long—that I have got into the habit of the opposite grace—so that there is no fear; I may venture very near the temptation—nearer than other men. This is a lie of Satan. I might as well speak of gunpowder getting by habit a power of resisting fire, so as not to catch the spark. As

long as powder is wet it resists the spark; but when it becomes dry it is ready to explode at the first touch. As long as the Spirit dwells in my heart he deadens me to sin, so that, if lawfully called through temptation, I may reckon upon God carrying me through. But when the Spirit leaves me I am like dry gunpowder. O for a sense of this!

I feel, when I have sinned, an immediate reluctance to go to Christ. I am ashamed to go. I feel as if it would do no good to go—as if it were making Christ a minister of sin, to go straight from the swine-trough to the best robe—and a thousand other excuses; but I am persuaded they are all lies, direct from hell. John argues the opposite way—If any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father. I am sure there is neither peace nor safety from deeper sin, but in going directly to the Lord Jesus Christ. This is God's way of peace and holiness. It is folly to the world and the beclouded heart, but it is the way.

I am tempted to think that there are some sins for which I have no natural taste, such as strong drink, profane language, &c., so that I need not fear temptation to such sins. This is a lie—a proud presumptuous lie. The seeds of all sins are in my heart, and perhaps all the more dangerously that I do not see them.

I ought to pray and labour for the deepest sense of my utter weakness and helplessness that ever a sinner was brought to feel. I am helpless in respect of every lust that ever was, or ever will be, in the human heart. I am a worm—a beast—before God. I often tremble to think that this is true. I feel as if it would not be safe for me to renounce all indwelling strength, as if it would be dangerous for me to feel (what is the truth) that there is nothing in me keeping me back from the grossest and vilest sin. This is a delusion of the devil. My only safety is to know, feel, and confess my helplessness, that I may hang upon the arm of omnipotence.

I daily wish that sin had been rooted out of my heart. I say, *'Why did God leave the roots of lasciviousness, pride, anger, etc., in my bosom? He hates sin, and I hate it; why did he not take it clean away?'*

I know many answers to this which completely satisfy my judgment, but still I do not feel satisfied. This is wrong. It is right to be weary of the being of sin, but not right to quarrel with my present *'good fight'* of faith.

Christ had a body such as I have, yet he never tasted one of the pleasures of sin. The redeemed, through all eternity, will never taste one of the pleasures of sin; yet their happiness is complete. It would be my greatest happiness to be from this moment entirely like them. Every sin is something away from my greatest enjoyment.

I should study those sins in which I am most helpless, in which passion becomes like a whirlwind and I like a straw. No figure of speech can represent my utter want of power to resist the torrent of sin. . . . I ought to study Christ's omnipotence more; Heb. 7:25; 1 Thess. 5:23; Rom. 6:14; Rom. 5:9, 10; and such scriptures should be ever before me. . . . There are many subsidiary methods of seeking deliverance from sins, which must not be neglected—thus, marriage, 1 Cor. 7:2; fleeing, 1 Tim. 6:11, 1 Cor. 6:18; watch and pray, Matt. 26:41; the Word, *It is written, It is written*. So Christ defended himself; Matt. 4. . . . But the main defense is casting myself into the arms of Christ like a helpless child, and beseeching him to fill me with the Holy Spirit; *This is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith*, 1 John 5:4, 5—a wonderful passage.

I ought to study Christ as a living Saviour more—as a Shepherd, carrying the sheep he finds—as a King, reigning in and over the souls he has redeemed—as a Captain, fighting with those who fight with me, Ps. 35—as one who has engaged to bring me through all temptations and trials, however impossible to flesh and blood.

I am often tempted to say, How can this man save us? How can Christ in heaven deliver me from lusts which I feel raging in me, and nets I feel enclosing me? This is the father of lies again! *He is able to save unto the uttermost*.

I ought to study Christ as an Intercessor. He prayed most for Peter who was to be most tempted. I am on his breastplate. If I could hear Christ pray-

ing for me in the next room, I would not fear a million of enemies. Yet the distance makes no difference; he is praying for me.

I ought to study the Comforter more—his Godhead, his love, his almightiness. I have found by experience that nothing sanctifies me so much as meditating on the Comforter, as John 14:16. And yet how seldom I do this! Satan keeps me from it. I am often like those men who said, *They knew not if there be any Holy Ghost*. . . . I ought never to forget that my body is dwelt in by the Third Person of the Godhead. The very thought of this should make me tremble to sin; 1 Cor. 6. . . . I ought never to forget that sin grieves the Holy Spirit—vexes and quenches him. . . . If I would be filled with the Spirit, I feel I must read the Bible more, pray more, and watch more.


3. To gain entire likeness to Christ, I ought to get a high esteem of the happiness of it. I am persuaded that God's happiness is inseparably linked in with his holiness. Holiness and happiness are like light and heat. God never tasted one of the pleasures of sin.

Christ had a body such as I have, yet he never tasted one of the pleasures of sin. The redeemed, through all eternity, will never taste one of the pleasures of sin; yet their happiness is complete. It would be my greatest happiness to be from this moment entirely like them. Every sin is something away from my greatest enjoyment. . . . The devil strives night and day to make me forget this or disbelieve it. He says, *Why should you not enjoy this pleasure as much as Solomon or David? You may go to heaven also*. I am persuaded that this is a lie—that my true happiness is to go and sin no more.

Whatever I see to be sin, I ought from this hour to set my whole soul against it, using all scriptural methods to mortify it—as, the Scriptures, special prayer for the Spirit, fasting, watching.

I ought to mark strictly the occasions when I have fallen and avoid the occasion as much as the sin itself.

Satan often tempts me to go as near to temptations as possible, without committing the sin. This is fearful—tempting God and grieving the Holy Ghost. It is a deep-laid plot of Satan.

I ought to flee all temptation, according to Prov. 4:15—*Avoid it, pass not by it, turn from it, and pass away*. . . . I ought constantly to pour out my heart to God, praying for entire conformity to Christ—for the whole law to be written on my heart. . . . I ought stately and solemnly to give my heart to God—to surrender my all into his everlasting arms, according to the prayer—Ps. 31, *Into thine hand I commit my spirit*—beseeching him not to let any iniquity, secret or presumptuous, have dominion over me, and to fill me with every grace that is in Christ in the highest degree that it is possible for a redeemed sinner to receive it, and at all times, till death. 

Bring . . . the Books

David Powlison, *Good and Angry: Redeeming Anger, Irritation, Complaining, and Bitterness*

The expression “the cure of souls” has historically applied to pastoral ministry. The phrase captures one of the primary aims of all of our communications.

The cure of souls is a demanding, personally costly lifestyle that men of God are called to fill by spending and being spent in ministering edifyingly to their sheep. So when a pastor finds a skilled “soul physician” whose biblical wisdom and accompanying gift of wielding the dual-edged blade of the Word of God in applicational precision, he would do well to sit at his feet and watch him exercise Christlike ministry.

Such a find is David Powlison, executive director of Christian Counseling and Educational Foundation and author of *Good and Angry: Redeeming Anger, Irritation, Complaining, and Bitterness* (New Growth Press, 2016). His book surgically examines the soul; provides clear scriptural diagnosis; prescribes a theologically rich, biblical response; and ministers to every one of us in an area where we all need more transformation.

Good and Angry divides into four major sections, each of which probes the possibility of our displaying anger the right way and our tendency to display it sinfully. The first section focuses on diagnosing and assessing our need in clear, inescapable terms. Its objective is to help us discern in ourselves which kind of anger we might typically display—is it Godlike or fleshly anger? If Godlike, how can we continue displaying mercy and peace constructively? If fleshly, how can we repent and see God transform it to the right kind of anger and prevent the destruction we typically cause? Is our anger typically mild? Buried? Intense? The solution needs to go as deep as the anger. In our anger, how is our own will, agenda, or ambition being asserted? What real or perceived wrongs might we be stumbling over?

The second section concentrates on developing our understanding of both obedient and sinful anger. Powlison distills our understanding of anger into this working principle: anger is “active displeasure toward something that’s important enough to care about.” Each of us and all of us participates in anger, with our bodies (47), emotions (49), mind (50), actions (51), and most importantly with our motives (53–60).

Motives are your core values and commitments, what you base your identity on. They shape and energize your emotions, thoughts, and actions. They determine how you treat people. They determine how you react to pain, loss, or threat (the provocations to anger). They determine how and why you get angry—and whether your anger is radiantly healthy or somehow diseased (55).

Anger is both a natural response (61–66) because we are made in God’s image and also a learned response (66–76). Four chapters map out from a Divine perspective what “good anger” looks like, including patience

(77–80), forgiveness (80–87), active charity (88–94), and constructive conflict (94–98). We learn best about anger when we see how it is displayed in a holy God (chapters 9–10).

The third section finally answers the first question most readers might have on their minds when they pick up the book—how do we change? Powlison spends two chapters (11–12) working carefully with James 3 and 4 to expose the root of anger and to learn how to see God’s grace ministered in our needy moments, particularly in relational conflict.

To find God’s solutions to conflicts, you must ask and answer the questions, What do I want? and How am I playing God in asserting my will? Such a profound and explicit analysis of the vertical dimension in interpersonal conflict will provide the key to begin to unlock anger. As long as we remain only in the horizontal dimension, there will be no genuine and lasting peace (130).

I’ve noticed that when people genuinely repent of sinful anger, two amazing things happen: They become able to discuss their own sins accurately—after all, such sins now exist in the light of Christ’s grace and will be progressively dismantled by grace. Simultaneously, they become able to talk about other people’s sins charitably. There are no more axes to grind, but an emerging desire for the well-being of the other in the hand of the merciful Redeemer (143).

A series of questions (ch. 13) attempts to slow down the process by which sinful anger develops and to help us work through it frame by frame. The eight diagnostic questions unpack where our thinking goes wrong and help us substitute truth in its place.

“Tackling the Hard Cases” brings the book to a fitting applicational focus on some of the most stubborn battles associated with anger: when we think we may never get over an anger issue (ch. 14), when everyday events routinely ensnare us in anger (ch. 15), when we are angry at ourselves and keep seeking solutions that are not designed to help us attain spiritual victory (ch. 16), and when we struggle with anger at God (ch. 17).

Powlison thankfully talks about righteous anger that needs to be displayed against sin but often isn’t (21, 38, 63).

If you want a warmly ministered book that will nurture a richer dwelling of the Word in your life, or if you need a tool that will further equip you to minister to others in an area in which we all struggle . . . get *Good and Angry*. ☞☞

Dr. Robert D. Vincent is an assistant pastor of Education and Outreach at Mount Calvary Baptist Church in Greenville, South Carolina.

“ . . . when
thou comest,
bring with thee
. . . the books”
(2 Tim. 4:13)

Straight Cuts

Answer a Fool? (Proverbs 26:4–5)

Proverbs 26 contains two sayings that have long puzzled Bible students: “Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest thou also be like unto him. Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own conceit” (vv. 4–5). Should we or shouldn’t we answer a fool according to his folly?

The seeming contradiction between these verses troubled many Jews. The Babylonian Talmud, for one, suggested a content distinction between the two sayings (*Shabbat* 30b). Verse 4 refers to arguments over mundane issues, while verse 5 to debates about the teaching of the Torah.

Perhaps the most common Christian understanding is that Proverbs 26:4–5 should be taken situationally and that the passage requires discernment to apply. Tim Challies explains:

A wise person will know that there are times when a person needs to be answered and there are times when it is better to remain silent. A discerning man, though, will know *when* he should give an answer and when he should know better. The wise man knows that both of these situations can be true, but it is the discerning man who understands which is best to use in a given situation. Discernment skillfully applies wisdom to a real-life situation (*The Discipline of Spiritual Discernment*, 57).

This approach is certainly true to life. It also coheres with other teachings of Proverbs. Take 17:28, for instance: “Even a fool, when he holdeth his peace, is counted wise: and he that shutteth his lips is esteemed a man of understanding.” In addition, other Proverbs passages appear to be situational. Sometimes one should “wound” a friend by confronting his wrongdoing (27:6). At other times, however, Proverbs 19:11 is apropos: “The discretion of a man deferreth his anger; and it is his glory to pass over a transgression.” It can be difficult to know which verse applies when, and one often feels in desperate need of discernment. Such discernment comes through prayer, counsel, and life experience.


But is this what Proverbs 26:4–5 is dealing with? A closer look at the text points in a different direction. The English expression “according to” has different meanings, and so does the underlying Hebrew preposition *kā*. Solomon seems to be engaging in a play on two nuances of this preposition.

This is how the Septuagint understood the passage. In verse 4 it translates *kā* with the preposition *pros* but in verse 5 it translates *kā* with *kata*. Though each Greek preposition can be translated “according to,” the use of both of them suggests that the translators saw

the two verses are communicating contrasting ideas. It also seems significant that the Septuagint has the demonstrative pronoun *ekeinos* in verse 4 but the more expected *autos* in verse 5, even though the Hebrew uses the same third-person masculine pronoun in both cases. An expanded translation of the Septuagint would read something like this: “Do not answer a fool *in a way that corresponds to the folly of that fool*, lest you become like him. But answer a fool *so as to correct his folly*, lest he seem wise in his own estimation.”

In each verse the precise nuance of “according to” in the first half depends on the consequence expressed in the second half. Bruce Waltke argues for this interpretation:

It is unfitting to meet the fool’s insult with insult (2 Pet. 3:9). Should the disciple reply vindictively, harshly, and/or with lies—the way fools talk—he too—“yes, even you”—would come under the fool’s condemnation. Rather, without lowering himself to the fool’s level in a debate, but by overcoming evil with good (25:21–22), the wise must show the fool’s folly for what it is. The wise do not silently accept and tolerate the folly and thereby confirm fools in it. Both proverbs are absolute and applicable at the same time, contrary to the opinion of many commentators, who think they are relative to the situation. To be sure, there is a time to be silent and to speak (Eccl. 4:5), but one must always, not in only certain situations, answer a fool to destabilize him, but always, not sometimes, without becoming like him (*The Book of Proverbs, Chapters 15–31*, 349; cf. Eric Lane, *Proverbs*, 337).

This understanding is helpful not only in conversations over personal matters but also in discussions of ultimate issues. Following a parallel approach, Richard Pratt applies Proverbs 26:4–5 to Christian apologetics. Based on verse 4, “we are to answer the non-Christian without forsaking our dependence on God’s revelation; we must answer from the perspective of Christian philosophy. . . . Too often, Christians try to justify Christianity by denying it in their apologetic method and thus become like the foolish unbeliever” (*Every Thought Captive*, 85–86). But based on verse 5, “we are to answer the unbeliever by his own precepts and ideas. Yet, the purpose for such argumentation is not the positive establishment of the Christian view but the demonstration of the foolishness of sinful thought. . . . The Christian apologist seeks to use the evidences and arguments acceptable to the unbeliever’s system in order to remove the non-Christian’s confidence in himself” (ibid., 92–93). 

“Rightly
dividing
the Word
of Truth”
(2 Tim. 2:15)

Ken Casillas, PhD, is a professor of Old Testament Interpretation at Bob Jones University Seminary and senior pastor of Cleveland Park Bible Church in Spartanburg, South Carolina.

Windows

Wellsprings of Illustrations: A Strategy for Acquiring and Implementing Illustrations

As a minister of God's Word for well over three decades, I have never thought of myself as a particularly good illustrator, though I have worked very hard at this discipline. Even Haddon Robinson, in *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages*, admits the same weakness. Preachers understand the importance of helping people visualize truth through pictured illustrations but, man, do we all struggle to do it well! Over the years, multiple students and colleagues have asked, "Where do you find illustrations?" The question forced me to analyze my own method, and then to categorize it in four elements: *imagination, sources, phraseology, and the Internet*.

Imagination: The Key to Tapping the Wellspring of Illustrations

By imagination, I don't simply mean the ability to conjure up in the mind fictional stories or anecdotes—though, when done well, that can be an excellent way to illustrate. Rather, I mean imagination as the process of thinking through *what* in the sermon begs illustration and then conceiving *how* to do it. Here's an example of using imagination in securing a good illustration. You're preaching on the subject of intercessory prayer in 2 Corinthians 1:11. You want to illustrate the words "helping together by prayer"—a triple compound combining the words "together," "under," and "work." As part of the introduction to help people visualize the threefold impact of intercessory prayer, an imaginative anecdote might go something like this:

Picture a haggard man centered under the weight of a massive boulder and feeling every ounce of its crushing burden. He toils to move it off his shoulders. Dejected, cast down, and with a face as pale as the horse of the Apocalypse, he appears half-dead. The convulsions of body and the profuse sweat pouring off his face give every indication he is near total collapse. Suddenly, the scene changes. Rushing to him from every angle are ten other people who unite *together* with him, put their shoulders *under* the burdensome weight, and *labor* successfully to move it off of his back.

C. H. Spurgeon's *John Ploughman's Pictures* provides excellent examples of homespun illustrations. To illustrate a proper way to reprove, you might quote "A Handsaw Is a Good Thing, But Not to Shave With."

Our friend will cut more than he will eat, and shave off something more than hair, and then he will blame the saw. His brains don't lie in his beard, nor yet in the skull above it, or he would see that his saw will only make sores. There's sense in choosing your

tools, for a pig's tail will never make a good arrow, nor will his ear make a silk purse.

Sources: Wellsprings of Illustrations Surface Everywhere

Broad reading is the motherlode of good illustrations. Recently, after preaching from Zephaniah 3:17 ("he will rejoice over thee with joy; he will rest in his love, he will joy over thee with singing"), a pastor recommended a book by Sam Storms titled *The Singing God*. From simple illustrations on forgiveness (like how an Etch A Sketch completely removes the writing of sin in our lives) to more elaborate stories on adoption, love, marriage, and transformation, the book is a wellspring of illustrations. On the goodness of God he comments, "The only thing God has up His sleeve is another gift." On God's compassion he notes, "Your knowledge that God's knowledge of you moves Him to compassion ought to move you to commitment."

Another massive source for illustrations is *A Puritan Theology: Doctrine for Life* by Joel R. Beeke and Mark Jones—probably the largest anthology of Puritan writings ever gathered. In a chapter on Puritan casuistry, which they define as the art of moral theology applied to issues of conscience, the book cites the story of William Perkins, who demonstrated immense care for a condemned prisoner struggling with the wounds of a violated conscience.

"What man! What is the matter with thee? Art thou afraid of death?" The prisoner confessed that he was less afraid of death than of what would follow it. . . . "Come down again man and thou shalt see what God's grace will do to strengthen thee." When the prisoner came down, he and Perkins knelt together, hand in hand. Perkins then offered "such an effectual prayer in confession of sins . . . as made the prisoner burst out into abundance of tears." Convinced that the prisoner was brought "low enough, even to Hell gates," Perkins presented the gospel in prayer. . . . The prisoner's eyes were opened "to see how the black lines of all his sins were crossed and canceled with the red lines of His Crucified Savior's precious blood; so graciously applying it to his wounded conscience."

Such an illustration must be, for any preacher who is himself deeply moved by the gospel, an easy pad from which to launch into the most ardent proclamations!

"To every preacher of righteousness as well as to Noah, wisdom gives the command, 'A window shalt thou make in the ark.'"

Charles Spurgeon

Phraseology: Crafting the Entire Sermon into a Wellspring of Illustrations

We think of illustrations as isolated segments of a sermon where we break out of the message in order to elucidate a truth. Illustrations certainly serve this purpose, but it is helpful rather to think of the entire language of the sermon as being illustrative. Jesus was the master of interspersing inherently illustrative language into His teaching.

Trying to illustrate the prominence of grace in God's eternal scheme of salvation (Eph. 2:7), phraseology can be used that will add color and meaning beyond raw explanation: "God's goodness is the infinite ocean from which all the rivers of His mercy, love, and grace flow."

The Puritans preached in such a way that their phraseology created illustration-laden sermons. Nathaniel Vincent, in *The Doctrine of Conversion*, uses phraseology so picturesque as to make the listener feel the point.

Pleasures are *delightful dreams*, but how short are they, how soon does affliction, death, if not hell awaken us? . . . Pleasures are the *baits* which cover sin, and make it *swallowed down* with eagerness, they are the *fatal potion* which stupefies the soul, and makes it senseless and helpless in extreme danger; they are the more fine and yet most *strong cords*, by which Satan draws men to the *chambers* of death. No, they are the *fuel* that heat the burning lake.

It takes time and effort to learn to communicate with a metaphorical quality to our phraseology, but the effort is well worth the time.

The Internet: A Veritable Wellspring of Illustrations

While preaching from 1 Corinthians 2:6–16, I needed an illustration to convey the idea that gaining spiritual understanding does not come naturally but is dependent on the illuminating operation of the Holy Spirit. In this case, I typed into Google something like "great discoveries of lost items." Part of the method is narrowing your search to find something analogous to your point. Then you must reword the information so that its terminology flows with the sermon. In this case, I had to comb through various options, but the following example served the purpose of the message exactly.

In ancient Egyptian records, Cicero and Tacitus wrote of something they called *virgula divina*. We know it by the term "divining rod." In Germany it was called a "wishing rod." In England it became known as a "dowsing rod." It is an invention aimed at one thing—the discovery of hidden water or underground mineral deposits. Imagine that a V-shaped hazel twig is taken in hand. The person walks around


with it, and suddenly feels a sensation of tingling in the arm and legs, muscular contractions, giddiness, or profuse perspiration. Then it begins to twist downward revealing a treasure trove of concealed water or mineral lodes. There have actually been attempts to justify this practice scientifically, by electrical and magnetic theories. But it has been largely proven to be a mixed hodgepodge of cultic superstition and psychic perception often used by tricksters to gain advantage of people. From our text, the one overwhelming point is that gaining spiritual understanding and the discovery of the hidden wisdom of God cannot be divined by the rational powers of human reason or intellect but must be made known to man by a supernatural operation of the Holy Spirit.

Needing an illustration for a sermon from Galatians 4:19–20 ("My little children, of whom I travail in birth again until Christ be formed in you") I typed into the search bar something like "great examples of deep human concern." I placed the reworded information in the introductory section of the sermon:

Back in June of this year, the *Huffington Post* ran an article about Bethany Van Delft, a comedian, who related to an audience her perfect pregnancy, her weekly ultrasounds, the expectation of that rush of love that new mothers talk about, and then the terrifying moment when she learned her daughter, born in November 2011, had Down syndrome. "That first few weeks is just a blur of tears and forms and doctors' appointments and lists I made of all the things that were never going to happen now and all the things that she would never do," she said. The article reported that she remained heartbreakingly truthful in her speech as she told the audience that for months she never saw her daughter as actually being her baby. "I slept on the couch with her for months with her skin on my skin so she could feel loved, but every time I looked at her all I thought was, 'Where is my baby? Whose baby is this? When do I get to see my baby?'"

I then transitioned to the exposition of the main body of the sermon this way:

This story reveals the profoundly disturbing emotional impact experienced by parents who learn their child will never develop physically in a normal way. In the same way, the scriptural writer confessed his profound concern that those confessing Christians with whom he is intimately connected experience the normal progression of spiritual life all the way from the new birth to full-blown Christian maturity—what he calls "Christ being formed in you."

Good illustrations require the imagination to envision what begs illustration, the discipline to locate where it might be found, and a careful method to employ language that seamlessly weaves it into the language of the sermon. 

Todd Samuel Nye is the founder and director of Grace Gospel Ministries. He served in pastorates in South Carolina and Ohio for the past twenty-five years.



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O be not too quick to bury the Church before she is dead.—John Flavel

All the glory that He [God] looks for to eternity must arise out of this one work of building Zion [the Church]; this one work shall be the only monument of His glory to eternity.—Stephen Marshall

Baptists who once went to church but no longer do are harder to reach than non-Christians.—Tom Lee, Southern Baptist Sunday School Board

In Indonesia the traffic is so bad that entrepreneurs hire themselves out by the hour to help the driver of the car reach the quota required for the fast lane. This kind of thing has been going on in the church for centuries. The pews have plenty of people who are professional passengers. For a price they will ride with you in ministry, but there is always a price, and their only interest is in what they will get in return.—*Houston Chronicle*, October 9, 1995

You say you can profit as much by staying at home and reading the Scripture or some good book. . . . Is it not horrible pride in you to think that you are able to understand the Word of God as well without a teacher as with one?—Richard Baxter

Like trees in a forest, Christians in the church need and support one another.—Blair F. Rorabaugh

As Christ hath His saints in Nero's court; so the devil has his servants in the outer court of the visible church.—William Gurnall

Calvin taught that "to the partaking of the bread is attached by divine appointment a special spiritual blessing which is received by all who take the bread in faith and which cannot be had without taking it." (John A. Broadus, *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, p. 529). This view . . . does strongly imply that the partaking of the Lord's Supper has connected with it the recipient of grace. This would make the Lord's Supper a sacrament which it is not according to our understanding of the Bible teaching on the subject.—James T. Jeremiah

We read that Christ only exercised force but once, and that was to drive profane ones out of His Temple, and not to force them in.—John Milton

Even though I had stopped playing the dating game with girls, I was perfectly happy to keep playing it with the church. . . . Though I gave the appearance of commitment, I mostly just flirted with different churches and kept my options open.—Joshua Harris in *Stop Dating the Church*

There is a peculiar sense . . . in which the Word of God says the church becomes the living place, the habitation, of the Spirit.—Wendell Zimmerman

Compiled by Dr. David Atkinson, pastor of Dyer Baptist Church, Dyer, Indiana.



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Dr. Earnest Pickering on the Dangers of Celebrity Christianity

“It’s not the 1970s anymore.”

“Why should I fight the battles of my grandfather?”

When I hear these comments, I wince. Bible principles are timeless. God’s people are foolish if they ignore the battles of the past. Yes, certainly things change, but Bible principles do not. Listening to the voices of the past is essential, especially when they have expressed biblical truth in a timeless way.

One of the greatest unsung leaders of fundamentalism throughout its most difficult and divisive years was Earnest Pickering. Dr. Pickering was an intellectual giant. He earned his BA from Bob Jones University in 1948 and went on to get a ThM and ThD from Dallas Theological Seminary.

Over a long ministry Dr. Pickering pastored several large churches and served in executive leadership with the Independent Fundamental Churches of America and the General Association of Regular Baptists. He taught and served as president of several seminaries, including Baptist Bible College and Seminary in Pennsylvania, Central Baptist Theological Seminary in Minnesota, and Northwest Baptist Seminary in Washington. He also served on the Boards of Trustees for Pillsbury Baptist Bible College and Baptist World Mission.

Dr. Pickering was a prolific writer, constantly producing Sunday school curricula for Regular Baptist Press, magazine and journal articles, and books and pamphlets. Perhaps his most important book was entitled *Biblical Separation: The Struggle for a Pure Church*. Every fundamentalist, no matter his age or background, should not just read this book but study it. We want to include one excerpt from it that we think would be tremendously helpful in informing our choices for speakers in our celebrity-driven culture.

Some leaders operate on the principle that they will use speakers who are well-known even though they may be shaky in their convictions in some areas—because they have special abilities that are helpful and thus can be a blessing to their congregations. The wisdom, however, of following this course of action is very doubtful. For instance, the president of a separatist school may be asked to consider using some outstanding Bible preacher in his chapel or Bible conference. The man may have expertise in the Scriptures, be fundamental in doctrine and possess a tremendous gift of communication. He may also be one who goes everywhere, evidencing little discernment in the choice of places he ministers, speaking one week at the separatist college and perhaps the next at a Bible conference controlled by new evangelicals or their sympathizers.

Some see no harm in using such a man. They look only at the messages he delivers from the platform which, in themselves, may be without fault.

But a man is more than his pulpit message. He brings to the pulpit a lifetime of associations, actions and perhaps writings. He comes as a total person. Is he in his total ministry the type of person you would want the young people at the separatist college to emulate? Perhaps you, as an adult, mature believer, could make the necessary adjustments in thinking and divorce what he is from what he says. Most of the youth would not be able to do that. The same would be true of most church members. They would be influenced by the man’s example as well as by his preaching. If he is a compromiser, his example would be harmful, and the college president would be at fault for setting him up as such. The separatist cause is not advanced by featuring non-separatists (Ernest Pickering, *Biblical Separation: The Struggle for a Pure Church* [Schaumburg, IL: Regular Baptist Press, 1979], 229).

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Historic Church Membership

Continued from page 19

⁷ Dagg, 79.

⁸ It is beyond the scope of this article to review that argumentation.

⁹ Dagg, 95.

¹⁰ Hiscox, 69, emphasis in the original.

¹¹ Ibid., 64.

¹² Hiscox, 70.

¹³ The classic statement of the Regulative Principle is found in the Westminster Confession, chapter 21, paragraph 1 (virtually quoted in the Second London [Baptist] Confession of 1689): "The light of nature shows that there is a God, who has lordship and sovereignty over all, is good, and does good unto all, and is therefore to be feared, loved, praised, called upon, trusted in, and served, with all the heart, and with all the soul, and with all the might. But the acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by Himself, and so limited by His own revealed will, that He may not be worshipped according to the imaginations and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representation, or any other way not prescribed in the holy Scripture." Baptists have widely held to this principle since the seventeenth century.

¹⁴ Dagg, 269. Unfortunately, Dagg's example of professors not being received comes from the ministry of John the Baptist, who refused to baptize those who did not evidence repentance.

¹⁵ Dagg, 80. "Of one heart" is quoted from Acts 4:32.

¹⁶ Hiscox, 71.

¹⁷ Ibid., 72–73.

¹⁸ Dagg, 80.

¹⁹ See John Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2005), 109–31, for an expression of concern over this issue in the Southern Baptist Convention as well as other North American Baptist bodies. He states, "With no serious consideration of baptismal candidates, many nonregenerate individuals have been baptized and ushered in the front door into Baptist church membership. With church discipline all but extinct, the back door is firmly closed, and those persistently acting in nonregenerate ways are retained on church rolls. The result is that a claim to regenerate church membership is no longer credible for most Baptist churches in North America" (113–14). One would like to think that the situation is less dire among Independent Baptist churches, but we must be ever vigilant to guard the purity of the assembly.

²⁰ Hiscox, 62–63.



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Are We Listening?

Little eyes dance about the room and feet fly across the carpet on a mission all their own.

"Are you listening?" I say to the toddler as her bobbing pigtails continue their erratic rhythm, giving me the answer that I already know. I repeat the question to her twin brother. He is in his own world, probably mentally tromping through the countryside with *Little Blue Truck* helping him save the day.

I am a nanny for two-year-old twins, and as any mother knows, when you ask a toddler, "Are you listening?" the answer is probably "no." Their minds are busy learning, exploring, and imagining innumerable possibilities. It's usually the things we don't want them to hear that they end up listening to.

But what about me as their caretaker? Have I sharpened my own listening skills where the children are concerned? Do I hear the needs in their little hearts? Do I always know when to hold a bubbly girl still on my lap and when to let her dash wildly from discovering a puddle in the grass to following the rogue ant who stole her cookie crumb?

I need the wisdom to guide the fun-loving little boy who likes to play alone and discover the adventure of turning the patio table into his very own submarine. When do I leave him to play alone, and when do I encourage him to come out of the corner and meet new friends?

I need wisdom to teach and guide without crushing their little spirits. So much of this teaching is done through my example. How do I sound when I talk to them? What do I allow them to get away with? What is my overall attitude throughout the day? Wow. It's convicting.

I love how all this makes me think of my own Christian walk, and I can't help but draw a parallel to believers within a church body. How well do we as Christian women listen to each other? Scripture is full of passages encouraging us to teach, encourage, and exhort one another in the body of Christ. In the Book of Hebrews we are told to "consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works" (Heb. 10:24). That word "consider" also can mean "to observe fully, to behold, . . . discover or perceive" (*Strong's Greek Dictionary of the New Testament*).

When was the last time we stopped to observe where someone else is spiritually or to take the time to discover a need or hurt that he may have? Just like a mother might observe how a small child is interacting with her peers to

see how she might encourage a better friendship for her, so too should we be considering how to encourage each other unto love and to good works. We look for the need or the pain in order that we might encourage spiritual growth in their life.

I still remember many Christian women who provoked me in my Christian walk:

- **Women who faithfully taught little ones Sunday after Sunday.** I saw their love and faithfulness, and I strived more to be found faithful as well.
- **Women who humbly ministered with their voice in song.** I heard their reverence and respect for God and developed a better fear of God in my own life.
- **Women who never had a negative word to say.** I heard their joy and began to count my blessings.
- **Women who suffered great physical pain.** I could see their faith and trust in God's plan, and slowly I took my eyes off my problems in order to focus on God.
- **Women who poured over their Bibles daily and shared with me the truths that they read.** I heard their knowledge and love for the Scripture, and I opened my Bible to find the coveted treasures inside.
- **Women who fought battles on their knees before God.** I heard their confidence, love, and faith in their conversations before God's throne, and I learned better to pray in faith.
- **Women who faced death with great peace despite intense pain.** I watched their eagerness to see Jesus, and I began to focus on eternity.

I don't know if these women were listening to the spiritual needs in my life, or if they considered my vast immaturities along the way, but I was listening to them. They provoked me to a more godly walk through their words and actions. Their examples have guided me along the way, and I'm left with the desire to do the same for others.

What does our life provoke in other women in our own church? Are we listening to each other?

Trisha Brown is a graduate of Faith Baptist Bible College. She attends Westside Baptist Church in Greeley, Colorado. In her spare time she enjoys writing; spending time with her border collie, Zoe; and exploring the Rocky Mountains.



Northwest Regional Fellowship

Don Johnson

On March 19–20, 2018, the men connected with FBFI in the Northwest—who serve in churches many miles apart—met at Pastor John Stima’s church, Monroe Baptist Church in Monroe, Washington, for the Northwest Regional FBFI Fellowship. This annual opportunity enabled them to meet, encourage one another, find out what the Lord is doing in distant locations, and hear challenging preaching. The time of fellowship builds them up for the Lord’s service. Twenty churches in the Pacific Northwest were represented.

South Regional Report

Doug Wright

Reversing their roles this year, Pastor Tony Facenda took the lead as the FBFI South Regional Coordinator and Mike Yarborough assisted. Pastor Scott Bishop and his wife, Blair, and the members of Swan Creek Baptist Church did a wonderful job of hosting the fellowship. In addition to the speakers, musicians, and youth workers who made the week such a blessing, the delicious meals provided by the church each day and the beautiful rural setting of Swan Creek lent themselves to the good fellowship for which FBFI is known. Although we may see each other only once a year at these regional fellowships, we always pick right up where we left off the year before. Over seventy-five adults attended the meeting (not counting church members from Swan Creek and other churches in the area at night). In addition, we had

The two keynote speakers, Ken Endean and Bob McQueary, delivered outstanding messages and challenged the attendees on reaching the lost and teaching the saved both at home and abroad. Dr. Endean serves as president of International Baptist College and Seminary in Chandler, Arizona. His lengthy pastoral ministry in Maine and his recent experience in the college give him an understanding of the heart of local church ministry and our hopes for the future. Bob McQueary, currently serving in missions through Worldview Ministries, is a ministry veteran of church planting, college ministry, and missions. His preaching likewise touches us where we live as local church pastors.

over seventeen young people in the youth group and nursery. FBFI president Dr. Kevin Schaal flew in from Arizona, spoke on “The Power of a Godly Vision,” and spent valuable time getting to know the FBFI members and friends in this area of the country.

As one might expect, the messages by Dr. Ken Collier from the Wilds and Evangelist Brent Sivnksty were biblical and very practical. The theme of the conference was “Bringing Church Home & Helping the Church Grow.” The variety of men’s and ladies’ workshops focusing on one of those two ideas offered the participants practical tools.

Next year’s South Regional Fellowship is already on the calendar for April 1–3, 2019, at Pastor Chuck Woodruff’s church, Catawba Springs Christian Church in Apex, North Carolina. Dr. Alton Beal from Ambassador Baptist Bible College and Dr. Bud Steadman, executive director of Baptist World Missions, will be the keynote speakers.



NOTABLE QUOTES

Children are the living messages we send to a time we will not see.—Neil Postman

There is no truth but God's truth. You cannot have your own private truth.—Dan Pelletier

Many Christians estimate difficulties in light of their own resources, and thus attempt little and often fail in the little they do attempt. All God's giants have been weak men who did great things for God because they reckoned on His power and presence being with them.—Hudson Taylor

The greatest thing any man can do for God and for man is to pray. You can do more than pray after you have prayed, but you cannot do more than pray until you have prayed. Prayer is striking the winning blow . . . service is gathering up the results.—S. D. Gordon

God has appointed this whole life to be as a race or a battle; the state of rest, wherein we shall be out of danger as to have no need of watching and fighting, is for another world.—Jonathan Edwards

Let no man think to kill sin with few, easy, or gentle strokes. He who hath once smitten a serpent, if he follow not on his blow until it be slain, may repent that ever he began the quarrel. And so he who undertakes to deal with sin, and pursues it not constantly to the death.—Richard Baxter

Every man must give account of himself to God, and therefore every man ought to be at liberty to serve God in a way that he can best reconcile to his conscience. If government can answer for individuals at the day of judgment, let men be controlled by it in religious matters; otherwise, let men be free.—John Leland

Compiled by Robert Conduct, FBFI Executive Board member and pastor of Upper Cross Roads Baptist Church, Baldwin, Maryland.

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ON LANGUAGE & SCRIPTURE

By the power vested in me by, uh, my second-grade Spelling bee victory in 1988, I am declaring a five-year moratorium on this phrase we Bible teachers commonly utter: "In the Greek, this word is _____."

I'm not talking only to preachers but to everyone who teaches the Bible even in the most informal ways. I'm talking to the extra-diligent Bible students who go to the trouble to look things up in *Strong's Concordance* and are eager to share the nuggets they discover with friends. That's Bible teaching too. It is. (And more power to you!)

Actually, I have very little power to declare anything—as any parent of toddlers knows—so let me just make a suggestion: every time you're tempted to mention Greek in any kind of Bible teaching to people who don't know Greek, try asking yourself the question, "Does what I'm doing work elsewhere?"

Where Bible teachers and Bible students of all sorts are most tempted to mention Greek may be in the area of what are called "cognates"—related words in two different languages. Many preachers take note that the Greek word for "cheerful," *hilaros*, sounds a lot like our word "hilarious." And, in fact, we got our word from theirs. Ooh! That'll preach! *God loves a "hilarious" giver!*

You may have heard already that *hilaros* did not mean "hilarious" when Paul chose that word, so to stop yourself when you feel like mentioning it anyway—it's so tempting; just ask the question I've suggested: "Does what I'm doing work elsewhere?"

For example, the Greek word for "amber," the golden resin, is *elektron*. The Greek word for "rod," as in the stick applied to the back of fools, is *bakteria*. But don't say so.

Because if you preach these points, you'll get this: "Did you know that when Ezekiel uses the word 'amber' here in 1:4, the ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament used the word *elektron*? Apparently, the great cloud Ezekiel saw had electricity in it!" Or, "Did you know that when Solomon uses the word 'rod' here in Proverbs, the Greek translation is *bakteria*? The rod, apparently, is like a germ that makes people sick."

Just to be clear, I'm being ridiculous: what a word meant in Bible times may have no real relationship to what it means today—or a very odd one you couldn't predict. In fact, we do get our word "electricity" from the ancient word for "amber," because rubbing amber on something creates static. And we get our word "bacteria" from the ancient word for "rod," because many bacteria are rod-shaped. But that won't preach: I suggest you *not* mention cognates in Bible teaching.

Dr. Mark L. Ward Jr. is the author of *Authorized: The Use and Misuse of the King James Bible*.



Select Studies in Isaiah

Whose fall is being described in Isaiah 14? Satan's? The historical king of Babylon's? The future Antichrist's? Interpreters divide between those who see a reference here to a spiritual being or concept and those who see a reference to a mortal being.

A Spiritual Being?

The traditional view of Isaiah 14 sees it as the fall of Satan. Some early Church Fathers took this view (Tertullian, Origen, Augustine, Gregory, Jerome). The nearly universal equation of "Satan" and "Lucifer" confirms the pervasiveness of this idea. J. A. Alexander, though an opponent of this view, calls for a little exegetical humility: "As erroneous as this exposition is, it scarcely deserves the severe reprehension which some later commentators give it who receive with great indulgence exegetical hypotheses much more absurd" (*Isaiah*, 295). Ouch.

A more recent twist on this approach sees Isaiah 14 as the fall of neither Satan nor any particular monarch. Webb sees the king of Babylon as "the embodiment of a worldly arrogance that defies God and tramples on others in its lust for power" (*Message of Isaiah*, 83). This seems so abstract as to render meaningless virtually all the details of the entire passage (on which Webb spends a mere half-page). There may be room for such an application from the principles that surface in the passage. But as I've pointed out in this column before, there is a difference between *application* and *interpretation*. The passage includes far too much wasted specificity if it is primarily intended to teach the principle of disdain for an arrogant power-mongering spirit.

A Mortal Being?

The other major view on this passage is to see it as a reference to a mortal. The most obvious candidate is the king of Babylon (14:4). But which? Again, Nebuchadnezzar seems the obvious choice, but he's long dead by the time Babylon falls; also, he seems to have been, if not genuinely converted, at least genuinely humbled by Yahweh. Daniel closes the first half of his book leaving us positively disposed towards Nebuchadnezzar. Other suggestions (Nabonidus, Sargon, Sennacherib) are equally unconvincing for various reasons (Dan. 4).

Motyer thinks there's no need to identify any particular Babylonian monarch. But this seems strange, given the length of the taunt, the unparalleled nature of this personage's claims, and the fact that many commentators identify this as the greatest piece of poetry not only in

Isaiah but in the entire OT. (To paraphrase the man in John 9: "Why here is a marvelous thing: the greatest poem, and yet we have no idea whom it is about!") The failure to definitively identify this "king of Babylon" with any historical human ruler suggests another possibility: an eschatological personage. Some think that Isaiah 14 has the eschatological Antichrist in view.

Setting and Context

Isaiah 14:1–4 introduces a taunt-song over a fallen "king of Babylon." Who voices this taunt, and when? Some say ancient Israel when Judah returned from the Babylonian captivity (Grogan). Some say modern Israel, to celebrate their historical deliverance from Babylon (Oswalt). Some say the Church when it reigns triumphant in the earth (Alexander). The passage seems to answer both of these questions.

The speaker of the taunt-song is identified as both (the house of) Jacob and (the house of) Israel (14:1–2). But is it historical or eschatological Israel? The taunt is voiced when God resettles them "in their own land" (14:1), when the nations return Israel "to their place" and become Israel's "servants" (14:2). Premillennialists (Grogan) and amillennialists (Motyer) agree that this was not fulfilled historically in 536 BC. From the broader context of prophetic Scripture, there are other passages that also describe this time (Isa. 49:22–23; 60:5, 9–10; 61:5–6)—passages that lead us to expect an eschatological fulfillment.

Textual Overview

The taunt-song divides into four sections or stanzas.

Stanza 1 (14:4b–8) describes a scene on the earth: the whole earth rejoices over the violent downfall of this wicked king whose overthrow is orchestrated by God Himself.

Stanza 2 (14:9–11) shifts the scene to beneath the earth in Sheol, the realm of the dead. Sheol is the OT term for the realm where the undying spirits of the dead are confined. The wicked dead can see and feel and describe their circumstances (cf. Luke 16); and here they are amazed that this one-time potentate has become as weak as they are. Sheol can sometimes refer to the grave, but not here—spirits don't stay in the grave. These are not rotting bodies talking in their graves—the body without the spirit is lifeless; bodies without spirits don't talk.

Stanza 3 (14:12–14) describes a scene above the earth in heaven. It's no wonder so many have seen this as a reference to Satan. Verse 12 describes this powerful personage as falling from heaven, and even gives him a

—Chapter 14: Who Is “Lucifer”?

celestial description: “day star” and “son of the dawn.” These are taken by many to be a reference to the “morning star” Venus; its Latin name is “Lucifer.” Whatever else you conclude, such language is never used of anyone else in Scripture (apart from Christ). The passage attributes to this person the highest possible ambition: “I will be like the most High.” Archer notes that “the titanic pride and ambition expressed are out of place on any lips but Satan’s.” Actually, they’re out of place on his lips too; but does Scripture suggest anyone else whose mouth is full of such blasphemies? (Think Daniel 7 and Revelation 13.) To what do the “mount of the congregation” and “the sides of the north” refer? Alexander notes that “the mount of the congregation” is homonymous with “the tent of the congregation,” suggesting the temple site; and Psalm 48:2 identifies “the sides of the north” as “Mount Zion, the city of the great king.” If 14:13 is a reference not to heaven but to Mount Zion as the earthly seat of the Most High God, interesting possibilities open up. (Think 2 Thess. 2.)

Grogan (“Isaiah,” *EBC*) remarks that

this passage itself seems to be echoed by the Lord Jesus in Luke 10:18 where language applied here to the king of Babylon is used of Satan. . . . When Satan works his malign will through rulers of this world, he reproduces his own wicked qualities in them, so that they become virtual shadows of which he is the substance.

This is a promising line of thought. Grogan then explains that “the passage points to Satan, not directly but indirectly. All [such] rulers of international significance . . . illustrate both the satanic and the Antichrist principles, for these principles are really one.” Isaiah 14:13 harks back not only to the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11 but to Genesis 3, Grogan observes, where “Satan first sought to reproduce in human life his own proud aspirations for equal status with God.” Consequently, Grogan interprets Isaiah 13–14 historically as “a prediction of the downfall of the Neo-Babylonian empire and its monarch,” though he acknowledges that “elements of the prophecy . . . were not fulfilled at this time” but “are properly eschatological.”

Stanza 4 (15–21) describes how the bodies of all the kings of the earth “sleep” in their own “house” or tomb (where their bodies remain until the final resurrection and judgment); but this personage has no tomb, no grave (14:18). He is not united to others in the grave, but is trodden underfoot (like Jezebel’s corpse)—utterly despised and desecrated (14:19–20).

Intersections with Revelation

Given the eschatological orientation of the larger context of this Babylonian oracle, it’s fair to at least compare with the ultimate eschatological oracle in the Bible, just to see if there are illuminating points of comparison.

In Revelation 13 Satan gives to the Beast his power, his throne, and great authority (vv. 1–2). This Satanic human mouthpiece is worshiped, “given” his blasphemous mouth (vv. 4–6; cf. 2 Thess. 2:3–4), and “granted” ability to attack and overwhelm the saints, acquiring universal authority (vv. 7–8). But this is not the first time a beast has been mentioned. Back in 11:7, a beast ascends from out of the abyss (cf. 9:1–11; 20:1) to attack and overwhelm the two witnesses. Some say this beast from the abyss is Satan (Walvoord); others think it is Antichrist (Thomas). The point is, Antichrist and Satan are so closely identified as to suggest, perhaps, not an incarnation but an inscrutable perichoresis between Satan and the Antichrist.

Revelation 17 and 18 tightly connect Babylon (the debauched and persecutorial whore) and the Antichrist-Beast she rides (17:17). Is it purely coincidental that in a vision God gives John of end-time events, after seven centuries of non-mention, Babylon figures centrally as a world kingdom ruled over by a satanically empowered king with blasphemous delusions of deity, who targets Israel for persecution and destruction, culminating in the total and final destruction of Babylon, its Antichrist king, and Satan himself?

Conclusion

It’s easy to think of Antichrist as merely a really, really evil man, but he’s worse than that. He is the Anti-Messiah, the very farthest possible point on the spectrum of humanity from Christ Himself, the incarnate God. It makes sense, then, that Isaiah 14 describes Israel in millennial conditions taunting the Antichrist, the ultimate final king of the ultimate eschatological Babylon whose ambitions of deity echo those of Satan himself, the supernatural spirit who empowers him and his throne in this worldwide rebellion against God. Antichrist is the predominant personage in view in Isaiah 14, and Satan’s possessive indwelling of him accounts for Antichrist’s speaking and acting in superlatively Satanic ways. After all, they share the same doom, though, interestingly, Antichrist precedes even Satan himself in that doom (Rev. 19:20; 20:10).

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JESUS' TEACHING AIMS

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Understand Biblical ethics. Jesus instructed His students to live according to moral values. These values provided them with the tools to make wise decisions.

Internalize godliness. Jesus taught His followers to be godly on the inside. He warned them not to become like Pharisees, with a mere outward appearance of godliness.

Learn doctrine. Jesus knew the importance of

teaching His students the truth, and He identified doctrine as one of the means for spiritual growth. Wishy-washy doctrine leads to faulty practice.

Develop life skills. Jesus taught His followers to meet life's challenges in a way that honored and glorified God. He gave them the skills to navigate those challenges successfully.

Uplift others. Jesus' life was all about others. Leading by example, He taught His followers to be all about others too.

Prepare to serve. Jesus prepared His followers to serve in the context of local churches that were established soon after His ascension. He emphasized sacrifice and dedication.

The Skies of Vietnam

In July 2007 my dad called asking if I knew an Air Force Chaplain named Chuck Baldwin. As a Navy Chaplain, I can see why my dad thought I might, but I told him I, unfortunately, did not know many of the Air Force chaplains. Of the few I knew, Chaplain Baldwin was not one of them. But, after asking why he wanted to know, my dad told me a story that changed my perspective of military ministry and the power of the God's Word.

Pilot and Copilot

The story began in 1972 when my father, a graduate of the United States Coast Guard Academy and a young Lieutenant in the Coast Guard, volunteered for the Air Force Aviator Exchange Program. He was one of twelve Coast Guard aviators to fly for the Air Force in Vietnam as part of the 37th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Service in Da Nang, whose mission was search and rescue using the HH-53C, nicknamed "Super Jolly Greens" for their massive shape and color.

One of my dad's copilots while in Vietnam was an Air Force Captain named Chuck Baldwin. CPT Baldwin was the son of an Air Force Chaplain; and, ever since his junior year at the United States Air Force Academy when he surrendered his life to full-time ministry, he

had aspirations of becoming a chaplain himself. It was CPT Baldwin who faithfully, patiently shared the gospel with my father who, admittedly, was not thrilled with CPT Baldwin's evangelistic fervor. After all, my dad was boisterous, rowdy, and an entrenched skeptic who held only intellectual disdain for Christianity.

One of the last things my father remembers about CPT Baldwin was that when CPT Baldwin left Vietnam, he told my dad that he was going to get out of the Air Force, attend seminary, and return to the military as a Chaplain. That was the last time my dad saw CPT Baldwin. But just before CPT Baldwin left Vietnam, he gave my dad a Bible and told him that he could find everything he was looking for in the pages of that book. My father decided he would read the Bible so that he could find the logical fallacies for himself, but as he read it and critiqued it, he became more and more convinced of the credibility of the gospel. It was by the reading of God's Word that my father decided to trust Christ as his Savior. While many men were leaving Vietnam with the physical, emotional, and spiritual wounds of war, LT Long was coming home a regenerated, born-again, child of God!

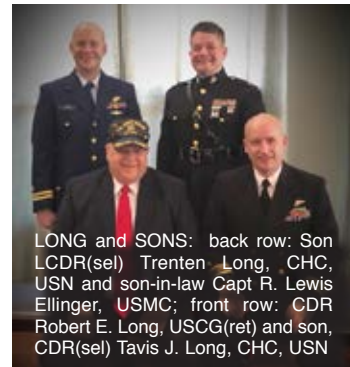
My dad redeployed in late 1972 and returned to the United States. His tour in Vietnam earned him two Distinguished Flying Crosses and eight Air Medals; furthermore, for its size, his squadron was one of the most decorated squadrons in the Vietnam War. But it was not the missions or the medals that defined his legacy. My dad continued his career with the Coast Guard, finally retiring from active duty with the rank of Commander in 1987. He went on to earn his doctorate in theology and became a college professor and author. He married and raised a family of seven



Coast Guard Cadet
Robert Long 1968



LONG in VIETNAM: Air Force Squadron PJs presenting the Ship's Bell to the Coasties. LT Long is on the far left.



LONG and SONS: back row: Son LCDR(sel) Trenten Long, CHC, USN and son-in-law Capt R. Lewis Ellinger, USMC; front row: CDR Robert E. Long, USCG(ret) and son, CDR(sel) Tavis J. Long, CHC, USN

children, being careful to teach them the same gospel he had learned in Vietnam.

Evangelist and Convert

CPT Baldwin never knew the impact he had on my father's spiritual awakening—at least, not until 2007, when my dad called to ask whether I knew Chuck Baldwin, the Chaplain. My dad had seen the picture of a Major General Charles Baldwin, United States Air Force, in a magazine called the *Military Officer Association of America* (MOAA). This General Baldwin was currently serving as the Air Force Chief of Chaplains, and my dad was convinced this was the same man he had flown with thirty-five years before.

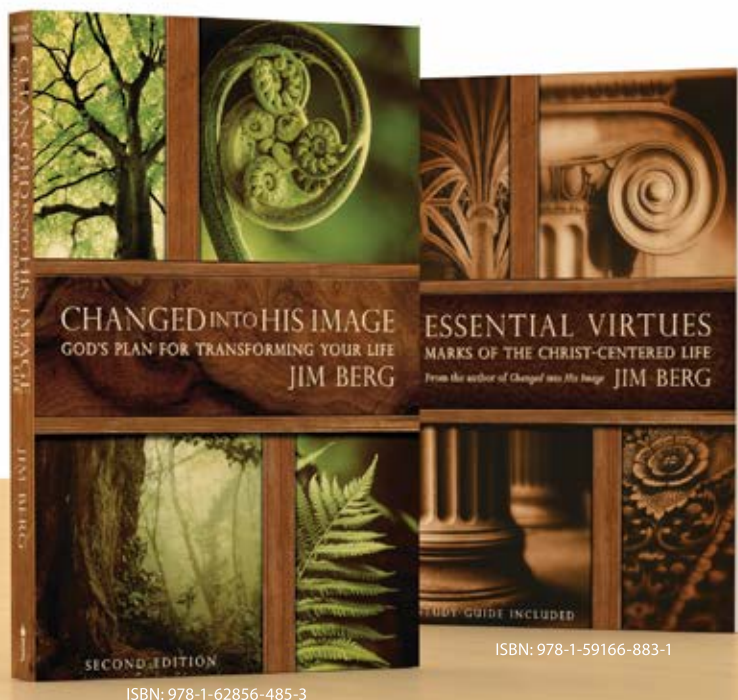
After getting a few details from my dad and then “Googling” “Air-Force-Chief-of-Chaplains-phone-number”—I called the Pentagon and spoke to the General's executive assistant. I briefly told the Colonel the story of my dad in Vietnam and how he thought his copilot might have been the current Chief of Chaplains. She politely heard me out and said she would pass along the message; but, within the hour, my phone was ringing. It was Major General Charles Baldwin, and he was asking if I was “really Bobby Long's son?” We spoke briefly and I provided the General with my father's contact information.

After thirty-five years, the two pilots—evangelist and convert—reconnected, and Chaplain Baldwin finally heard the results of the simple act of handing a Bible to my dad and encouraging him to read it. True to his word, Chaplain Baldwin had gotten out of the Air Force and attended the Southern Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. After seminary, he came back into the Air Force as a chaplain endorsed by the North American Mission Board and had risen to the rank of Major General and Air Force Chief of Chaplains before retiring in 2009. He and my father still communicate with each other often.

Today my brother and I both serve the nation as Navy Chaplains. Trenten is the Command Chaplain for the United States Coast Guard Sector St. Petersburg and I serve aboard the USS JOHN C. STENNIS (CVN 74). We both agree that my father's military legacy inspired us to serve our nation, but we also cherish the legacy of faith he left to us—a faith that was introduced to our family over the skies of Vietnam when one man gave another man a Bible.



Christmas 2017. Robert and Stephanie Long with their 7 children, 3 sons-in-law, 3 daughters-in-law, and 17 grandchildren.



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The Sufficiency of the Lord in Difficult Times

In 2 Corinthians 12:7–9 the apostle Paul wrote under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit,

And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure. For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me. And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

The apostle Paul was not exempt from the trials of this life; he clearly stated that he had a “thorn in the flesh,” apparently some physical problem. Some believe it was his eyesight. Before Paul was saved, he was on a journey to persecute Christians and even kill them. Acts 9:3–4 tells us, “And as he journeyed, he came near Damascus: and suddenly there shined round about him a light from heaven: And he fell to the earth, and heard a voice saying unto him, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?” Some believe it was the brilliance of Christ’s glory that permanently affected Paul’s eyesight. Years later in his letter to the church in Galatia, Paul mentioned his eyes in Galatians 4:15: “Where is then the blessedness ye spake of? for I bear you record, that, if it had been possible, ye would have plucked out your own eyes, and have given them to me.” The Scriptures don’t tell us whether it was Paul’s eyesight or some other physical affliction that was his thorn in the flesh, but we do know it was a trial that lasted all of Paul’s earthly life.

In the Old Testament we have the account of one of the most godly men who ever lived on this earth, Job. God said of him in Job 1:8, “And the LORD said unto Satan, Hast thou considered my servant Job, that there is none like him in the earth, a perfect and an upright man, one that feareth God, and escheweth evil?” Satan said to God in verse 11,

“But put forth thine hand now, and touch all that he hath, and he will curse thee to thy face.” God answered in the next verse, “Behold, all that he hath is in thy power; only upon himself put not forth thine hand. So Satan went forth from the presence of the LORD.” He proceeded to attack Job’s family; all ten of his children (seven sons and three daughters) were killed at one time. Then the Devil attacked Job’s wealth and took from him 7000 sheep, 3000 camels, 500 yoke of oxen, and 500 donkeys. Finally, the Devil attacked Job’s health by inflicting his body with painful boils from his head to his feet. If we could ask Job, “Was the Lord’s grace sufficient for you in your total devastation?” he would reply with the words from his own mouth recorded in Job 13:15: “Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him.” He would no doubt also repeat what he said in Job 23:10: “But he knoweth the way that I take: when he hath tried me, I shall come forth as gold.” Yes, the Lord’s grace was enough for this godly man.

I have a friend who pastored a church in Pennsylvania. One day as the school bus stopped in front of his house to drop off his two daughters, a truck failed to stop and killed both of his girls. Was the sufficiency of the Lord’s grace enough for Pastor Pfaunmiller and his wife? Yes! This man of God would testify to the validity of God’s sufficient grace.

Another pastor friend of mine had two daughters driving home from a Christian college during Christmas break. A drunk driver was going the wrong way in the interstate; he hit them head-on, and both girls were killed. Pastor Phil Neuman and his wife in Illinois would voice strongly, “Yes, the sufficiency of God’s grace was exceeding abundant!”

When we all experience troubling times in our lives, let us remember the promise of our Lord in 2 Corinthians 12:9, “My grace is sufficient for thee.”

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A close-up portrait of Mark Herbster, a man with short dark hair and blue eyes, smiling warmly at the camera. He is wearing a light purple button-down shirt. The background is a soft-focus green, suggesting an outdoor setting.

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Mark’s roles extend beyond his title as Dean of the Seminary to include responsibilities as Director of Student Discipleship. His experience in itinerant, local church, and camp ministry has equipped him to enhance the leadership development process on campus.



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