

which captures a historic Baptist emphasis well. I will say more about this in Chapter 7.

The holiness of the church has often been understood ‘positionally’; that is, the church is holy because set apart for God, not because of any particular ethical perfection. This, historically, is a response to the reality of mass Christianity and state churches, and the creation of Christian communities which chose not to police their ethical boundaries with any particular energy. For Baptists, while they would not deny the positional holiness of the church, there is a need for a visible holiness also, which manifests itself in two ways. First, Baptist churches are believers’ churches, requiring a profession of faith in Christ, and a commitment to follow him, of every member. Second, the practice of church discipline maintains the holiness of the church by requiring true repentance of anyone who commits visible sin and excluding the unrepentant. Again, I will have much more to say about this in Chapter 7.

Finally, the catholicity of the church is a claim concerning universality. The church is not limited to a particular culture or locality, but exists in all places. For Baptists, this would be seen as a critique of the practice of state churches, which over-identify with particular cultures. The Christian’s primary loyalty is to the church catholic, not to his or her own community or nation. Roman Catholic accounts of the catholicity of the church have seen a call to mission in this claim: because the church should exist in all cultures and places, there is a need to plant churches in places where they do not currently exist. I am not aware of any Baptist borrowing of this idea, but it would fit well with a Baptist insistence on the missional essence of the local church. I will have more to say about Baptist commitment to a practical catholicity at the end of the next section (on church government).

### Congregational Church Government

In Baptist practice, the local church is governed by the church meeting, when all members gather to seek together the mind of Christ. Church meeting has been a remarkably varied practice through history: formal mechanisms for decision-making vary from a requirement to find consensus through the following of

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*Robert's Rules* (which codify parliamentary procedure and guide the running of formal meetings of all sorts) to varieties of secret ballot, possibly including postal voting. Agendas vary from a focus on policing the behaviour of members of the church to a concentration on managing the assets of the church, both finance and fabric. Frequency and timing vary widely; historically some churches restricted formal participation to male members only. In some contexts, the church meeting does little more than appoint officers (typically elders and deacons) who then, in practice, run the church. Given all this variation, why do Baptists place such emphasis on the church meeting as a defining part of their identity?

The primary doctrine of the church among Baptists is a stress on the Lordship of Christ. Of course, all Christian denominations will claim this; the Baptist distinctive is applying this resolutely to the local congregation. Polemically, this gives rise to the insistence on the primacy of the local congregation already discussed: anyone, king, magistrate, pope or bishop who seeks to control the local gathered church is, on a classical Baptist understanding, simply and precisely usurping the place of Christ. In terms of positive polity, this teaching raises a question: how is Christ's Lordship experienced or known in the local church? It would be possible to point to a particular congregational leader, or a group of leaders, who are believed to have particular insight into Christ's will for the congregation; Baptists have traditionally resisted this. All the members of the local church are corporately responsible for discerning the mind of Christ for that people. Church meeting, however practised, is the organizational expression of this belief.

Whence the belief? I have noted already that the practice of believers' baptism gives rise to a certain sort of individualism in Baptist ecclesiology. Christ deals directly, or perhaps mediately, through the Holy Spirit, with every particular believer. From this claim it is an easy step to insist that every particular believer in a given fellowship should be involved in the discerning of Christ's call on the fellowship, and so in the governance of the church. In recent years it has been easy to conflate the belief with modern Western individualism, and the practice with democracy,<sup>10</sup> and so to see Baptist polity as merely aping or echoing the culture of the day. Baptist commitments to such positions pre-date contemporary

democratic structures by many decades, however, and more often served as prophetic protests in favour of recognizing the intrinsic worth of every human being, rather than as mirrors of what was current in culture.

The first manual on Baptist church order to commend balloting as good procedure was Charles Stovel's *Hints on the regulation of Christian churches . . .* published in England in 1835; in 1832, the Reform Act had been passed, extending the franchise in England to about 650,000 men, or about 10 per cent of the male population. Stovel thus takes a cultural practice which is available only to a cultural elite of male property owners, and puts it in the hands of all believers, male and female, regardless of their social class or economic situation. This was no passive aping of contemporary political mores; rather it was a profoundly subversive remodelling. (The practice of only allowing male members to vote, known mainly in the second half the seventeenth century in a few British Baptist churches, seems to be an implicit recognition of, and revulsion at, this basic egalitarianism implied in the practice of church meeting.)

The practice of church meeting is not democratic, secondly, because the task of all present is not to express a preference, still less to gain a majority, but to discern together the mind of Christ. The church gathers corporately to seek to hear its Lord's voice and to commit itself to obey what it has heard. Where it is practised, the insistence on finding consensus in church meeting reflects this: church members are called to submit themselves to the will of Christ, not to indicate their own preferences or desires. That said, this consensual practice is fairly rare among Baptists (Quakers and some Anabaptist groups would be more often committed to something like this), perhaps because of a healthy dose of Augustinian realism about the lack of growth in holiness of at least some church members. In this or that area, one or another member may be deaf to the call of Christ, and so a majority is acceptable.

As noted in passing above, some Baptist traditions permit postal or proxy voting by members on key decisions; in straightforwardly democratic terms, the logic of this is impeccable, so much so that resistance to it demands explanation; where it is resisted, it is because of an awareness that the task of church meeting is knowing the mind of Christ, and a sense that this can only be done in the gathered body. Again, Baptist practices, when interrogated, make it clear

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that the basic impetus is not a belief in democracy, but a belief that it is the corporate responsibility of all to discern the mind of Christ.

This account of the theological importance of the practice of church meeting for Baptists is perhaps most vulnerable to the observation of widely varying agendas across time and tradition. In the British Baptist tradition, for instance, church meetings prior to circa 1800 were almost always focused on policing the Christian conduct of members, whereas by 1900, and down to the present day, agendas will more typically be focused, at least in large part, on financial and fabric issues. Has Christ changed his mind about what matters in his churches?

The answer, of course, is more that the churches have changed their minds about, in some cases what is primary to being church, and in other cases how to fulfil Christ's calling. Almost all British Baptist churches would still take seriously the need to watch over the behaviour of fellow members, but much of the informal encouragement and rebuke that was previously done in church meeting would now be done quietly by those to whom the low-level pastoral tasks of the church have been assigned, typically pastors and elders. (Excommunication is still a matter for the church meeting; in practice, in contemporary Britain, a member is very likely to disassociate him- or herself from the church, and probably to find a welcome in a different local fellowship, long before the point of a formal consideration at church meeting is reached.)

The twentieth-century focus on matters of fabric can perhaps best be read as part of a concern for mission. Around the beginning of the twentieth century many urban and suburban Baptist churches found that mission through a variety, in some cases a plethora, of community organizations – youth clubs, sports clubs, women's meetings and so forth – was effective. The maintenance of such a programme of mission, however, demanded the upkeep of an extensive church plant, and so a degree of focus on fabric matters. (If this analysis is correct, then we might expect to see matters of fabric dropping off church meeting agendas slowly, at least in Britain and America, as the contemporary emphasis on mission among Baptists in those countries is far more of the 'church without walls' variety.)

One final comment about the practice of church meeting is worth making, returning to the catholicity of the church discussed

briefly above. It has sometimes been difficult, operating at the level of doctrinal abstraction, for Baptists to give an account of how their commitment to (a measure of) catholicity works out in their ecclesiology. If each local congregation governs itself, without intervention from the wider church, how can Baptist churches reflect the riches of whatever broader Christian church they recognize (and even in the extreme case of Landmarkist sectarianism, at least other Landmarkist churches are recognized, and so there is some small measure of catholicity to be expressed). The actual practice of church meeting, however, makes a measure of informal but real catholicity obvious, as in the course of their discussions members will bring insights borrowed from other Christians they have read or talked to, from conferences they have attended, from other fellowships they have been part of and so on, as well as perhaps the leadership bringing insight from consulting other fellowships or denominational bodies, and/or those with a measure of formal theological training bringing knowledge from their studies to bear.

### The Independence and Interdependence of Local Churches

This question of practical catholicity of a Baptist church suggests that the next issue to be considered is the interdependence of local churches, or 'associationalism', as it is known in Baptist life. As stated above, the principle of the independence of the local church is the claim that a particular congregation needs nothing beyond itself to be a true church of Christ; that does not mean that it is free to ignore whatever lies beyond the bounds of its own fellowship. Instead, Baptists have, virtually from their foundation, held that true churches have a duty to unite together for support and instruction. The most famous statement of this imperative is unquestionably the founding minute of the Abingdon Association, written in October 1652:

That perticular churches of Christ ought to hold firme communion each with other in point of advice in doubtful matters and controversies . . . because there is the same

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relation betwixt the perticular churches each towards other as there is betwixt perticular members of one church.<sup>11</sup>

Given the importance for Baptist accounts of discipleship of the local church, particularly of the act of covenanting together to watch over one another, this is a remarkably strong statement. There is, on this account, both a theological duty for churches to associate and a need for them to associate for their own growth and good health. While association has not been a universal Baptist practice (there are everywhere a small number of independent churches, unassociated with any other), Smith's claim that 'it is demonstrably true that the Baptist association, as an institution, has given continuity to the Baptist movement for more than three centuries' is generally justified, and not just in America (the context he was describing in writing the comment).<sup>12</sup>

The universality of associating does not imply a uniformity of practice. Churches come together to support and help one another; the expectations and limits placed upon the association, the patterns of meeting, the selection of delegates – all are practices almost endlessly varied in Baptist life. To offer only one example, I have already noted controversies over the extent of associational power to form mission societies and the like. It is worth repeating, however, that anti-mission churches, even at the moment they are most virulently opposed to attacks on their autonomy, and so are withdrawing from their former associations, almost invariably tended to form or join new associations that more adequately upheld their views (as in the example of the founding of the Ebenezer Association in Alabama, noted above). Baptist churches seem to believe that they belong together, not apart, and to act on that belief.

I am not especially interested here in the varying organizational principles of associations, although these have been important historically (at least a part of the sectional controversy, leading to the split of the Southern Baptist Convention from the Northern churches, was over tensions concerning different preferred modes of organizing associational life). My focus must be on the theology that underpins every mode of organization, and in disputes such as the sectional controversy, there is little debate or disagreement about the underlying theology. The Abingdon doctrine gives us

a way of reflecting on that theology. Most Baptists would agree that a Christian believer who finds him- or herself deprived of any Christian fellowship is in an uncomfortable place, but not an impossible one. Christian fellowship, paradigmatically expressed in church membership, is a great benefit to Christian discipleship, and should certainly never be wilfully withdrawn from or spurned, but in the extreme case (shipwreck on a desert island? In Baptist history, solitary confinement by persecuting authorities has been the more pertinent, if generally less permanent, example) the lone believer's faith is not rendered impossible by his or her aloneness. Just so, the Christian church, which finds no other true church with which to have fellowship, can exist as a church; the repeated incidences of 'self-baptism' among Baptist pioneers in various contexts suggests that they repeatedly felt themselves to be in such a place. However, where fellowship with other true churches is possible, then it is both a duty and a benefit to enter into it. (And those who self-baptized often later repented of the practice when they discovered that there were in fact churches they could recognize as truly Christian, even if they had previously been unaware of them.)

The benefit of association can be explained by reflecting on the catholicity of the church, as discussed above. In the context of a difficult and acrimonious congregational dispute, perhaps, a fellow congregation might offer disinterested, and so perceptive, advice, or might have struggled with similar questions and so have counsel to offer. Certainly the records of associational life are full of queries from local churches about what to think about this, or how to act concerning that. Sometimes the association has a ready answer, having met the question before; more often it serves as a context in which members of several congregations can pool their insights and resources to generate new wisdom to pass on. (The advice thus gathered can never be binding on the church that raised the question, of course, but has usually been received with gratitude and acceptance.) Continuing this theme of catholicity, an association can also represent the wider church in the life of the local congregation. It is common Baptist practice to invite other local pastors to share in a service of ordination or induction of a new pastor, for instance; not because the congregation is not competent to ordain its own ministry, but because it is appropriate

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that, if it can, it opens such central and formative acts to receive the prayers and approval of the wider fellowship of Christ's church.

Beyond this, and beginning to stray into the territory that was found controversial in mid-nineteenth-century America, an association can offer local churches the ability to do things they could not do alone. Perhaps most commonly in Baptist life, associations of churches acted together to found institutions for the training of ministers and other workers. While the earliest training institutions tended to be founded through the vision and energy of an individual pastor and church (as Bristol Baptist Academy, the earliest denominational institution, was), and this pattern never wholly disappeared (Spurgeon's Pastor's College in the mid-nineteenth century; examples of similar proposals are not difficult to discover in Baptist life today). Generally, however, the founding – and certainly the later maintenance – of an educational institution has been a task churches have cooperated in, often through existing associational structures. Associations have sometimes been conduits of missionaries and financial support for missions; more often in Baptist life foreign missions, in particular, have been the provenance of mission societies, separated from associational structures, although of course drawing on the same churches and as often as not relying on the very same volunteers for their upkeep. However, mission societies are also a product of the impulse to associationalism: churches choose to band together to further their mission and ministry.

One striking feature of a Baptist doctrine of association is the ease with which it transfers to the contemporary ecumenical arena. I have already commented on the willingness of British Baptists, in particular, to make common cause, even to the extent of shared membership of organizations, with other churches, first other Dissenters, and later other evangelicals. This can be seen as a further outworking of the basic associational theological impulse: to the extent that a non-Baptist fellowship can be recognized as a genuine, if imperfect, church of Christ, there is a positive duty for the Baptist church making that recognition to act on it, to form a relationship of mutual edification and support with the non-Baptist fellowship.

Understood like this, it will be obvious that a Baptist ecumenism will look rather different from the general practices

of the ecumenical movement (in which, however, at least some Baptists and Baptist denominations participate). A Baptist ecumenism would be built on growing and organic relationships of understanding and trust between particular local congregations that are able to recognize one another as true gospel churches, leading to shared worship and mission. National and international bodies working at the level of reconciling ancient confessional differences could be an important aid or spur to the formation or furtherance of such local arrangements (more often for Baptists they might be an attempt to formalize already-existing local realities), but are not the primary vehicle for ecumenism.

### The Word of God; the Spirit of God

The centrality of the Bible to Baptist ecclesiology will already be evident; this finds practical expression in the centrality of preaching within Baptist worship. This centrality is already evident in the seventeenth century – the 1644 London Confession, for instance, noted (Art. XLV) that some are to ‘prophesie . . . to teach publicly the Word of God, for the edification, exhortation, and comfort of the Church’. Of course, Baptists were hardly unique among Protestant traditions in this stated stress on preaching; however, the relative importance for Baptists might be illustrated by noting that preaching is mentioned in six Articles of the confession, whereas the Eucharist is not mentioned directly at all (Art. XXXIII speaks of the ‘[o]rdinances commanded by Christ,’ a reference to Baptism and Eucharist; Baptism is later discussed, of course, but the Eucharist is nowhere else mentioned). Most Baptist acts of worship will be non-Eucharistic: while traditions vary widely, and some churches will celebrate the Eucharist every week (Spurgeon would be the most famous defender of this practice), a monthly celebration is probably most common. It is much more difficult to find a Baptist service of worship where there is no sermon preached.

Equally, the most honoured Baptist leaders are generally the great preachers: from Bunyan and Keach through Spurgeon and Fosdick to Billy Graham, most leaders who have risen to lasting prominence in the movement have built their reputation in large

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part on a preaching ministry. Baptist worship almost universally lacks a fixed liturgy, or any recitation of creedal statements; in this context, the sermon almost inevitably assumes a centrality in expressing and defining the faith of the church, and in expressing and modelling an authentically Christian response to issues or events that are significant in the life of the church and community. This can sometimes be challenged by a developed liturgical practice, but, in general, it is not unreasonable, however, to assert that across the world and across history, the sermon has been the central focus of Baptist worship.

Liturgical practices beyond the sermon have varied for Baptists. In the first century of the movement, an argument over the propriety of singing hymns, as opposed to just metrical psalms, was decisively won by Benjamin Keach (remarkably, given the sheer awfulness of many of Keach's published hymns), and some practice of congregational singing has remained the norm. Where the liturgy has become more significant, it has generally been as a result of a Baptist adoption of a broader development in Christian worship. In recent years, for instance, we might think of the liturgical movement of the mid-twentieth century, which was less influential among Baptists than almost any other tradition, but nonetheless shaped the worship of some fellowships in significant ways, leading to a new attention to the construction of the liturgy and a new importance accorded to the Eucharist. Charismatic renewal, and the tradition of contemporary worship more broadly, has been far more influential, and has affected many churches, leading to a new emphasis on extended times of sung worship within the service. Most recently, perhaps, 'seeker-sensitive' worship, a model developed by Willow Creek Community Church near Chicago, has been adopted for at least some services by Baptist churches in various parts of the world. In this model performance – solo or choir singing, drama, dance and so forth – assumes significant importance as being (perceived to be) more accessible to outsiders who are being aggressively invited to attend the services.

Patterns of Baptist preaching have varied across the centuries, of course, just as wider Christian traditions of preaching have. It is probable that Baptists have generally been more hospitable to more narrowly expositional preaching than to broader discursive modes, but the example of Fosdick demonstrates that this