

Corruptions of Baptist Polity

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"**Polity**" is defined as referring to the governmental organization of some institution. In this study we are using it in reference to the Divinely ordained organization of the Lord's churches. And we are well aware that many claim that the Scriptures do not set forth a distinct form of church government to be practiced by all churches. However, it is noteworthy that those that make such a claim generally want to impose some sort of dictatorial rule by men over the churches. Self-interest too often shapes the theology of people, and this ought never to be. In this, or in any other matter, only a "Thus saith the Lord" can give a clear conscience.

Through the centuries there have been three basic forms of church government thought to be found in the New Testament. The **Papal**, which is a rule by the Pope, and is a form of the **Episcopal** form, which is rule by bishops, the Presbyterian, which is a rule by a body of Elders, and the **Congregational**, which is a rule by the entire church body. Though some have sought to establish the Episcopal and Presbyterian forms from the authority that the Apostles had, this could not be so, for several reasons. (1) The Apostles passed off the scene with the death of John, the last one to die, and they had not, nor could they have, any successors, since one could only be an apostle if he had known Jesus both before and after His resurrection (Acts 1:21-22; 1 Cor. 9:1). (2) Paul, the foremost apostle, distinctly disclaims authority over the faith of churches (2 Cor. 1:24). He had the care of churches (2 Cor. 11:28), but not authority over them. So it was with all the Apostles. (3) Jesus' own statement to the effect of the equality of all believers under the Lordship of Christ (Matthew 23:8-11).

In relationship to God, a church is to be a **theocracy**—a rule by God—but in its inter-human relationships, it is to be **congregational**—ruled by a majority of the members of the church. This is the only form of church government that is to be found in the New Testament, for even Apostles put matters to be decided before the churches for them to make the final determination. Pastors made recommendations, but the churches made the final decisions, as we see in Acts 1:15-26; 6:1-6, etc. It is important that this be kept in mind, for the continuing influence of the depraved flesh even in genuine believers tends to be a temptation to church leaders to sometimes become dictatorial over churches. And while churches ought to follow the leadership of faithful men whom the Lord has given to guide them (Heb. 13:7, 17), yet no church ought ever to tolerate a popish pastor, nor any dictatorial group within a church that tries to dominate its decisions.

Baptist churches used to be generally pretty sound on their polity, and church decisions were recognized to be the last word, being ratified by Jesus' own authority if properly conducted, as the Head of the church Himself taught in Matthew 18:17-20. But during the more than forty years that this writer has been in the ministry there has come about a serious trend toward the corruption of the polity of Baptist churches. And the sad thing about all this is that this corruption has not been forced upon Baptist churches by outside authority, but it

has been voluntarily brought about by the churches themselves. That says something about the spirituality of the churches.

Whether this corruption is grounded in ignorance, or in a selfish materialism, or both, cannot be said. However, it is certain that there is presently a woeful lack of teaching in most Baptist churches relative to church doctrine, so that the average Baptist church member has little understanding of what a true Baptist church should be, and should do.

At the same time, there is a lamentable tendency in Christians, as they imitate the world, to seek security and the easy way of doing things. The desire for "something for nothing" has crept into churches so that few are willing to sacrifice and suffer for the sake of Christ and His church. All too many will compromise doctrinally and devotionally before they will give up the soft pew and air conditioned building in which they are accustomed to worship, if we could call their activities worship. This very emphasis upon materialism looks very much like this is their idol.

In the early days of this writer's ministry there were several cases of church trouble that were taken before the civil courts for settlement. These all received nationwide publicity for their carnality because of the very rarity of such cases being taken to the civil courts, and at the same time, they set bad examples for other Baptist churches.

One of these had to do with a church in Rocky Mount, North Carolina that split over whether or not to withdraw from the Southern Baptist Convention. The minority took the case to the civil courts to prevent this. Then a Baptist church in Wichita, Kansas had a similar split over membership in, and support of, the American Baptist Convention. A church in Traskwood, Arkansas, in a dispute over the teaching of the pastor, refused to accept the majority decision, and chose instead to seek redress from the civil authorities. Finally, an injunction was filed in the civil courts by a Baptist church in Colorado Springs, Colorado against its former pastor who refused to recognize the church's authority to vacate its pulpit.

So far may we judge the spiritual declension in Baptist churches when we consider how that instances like these have become commonplace and widespread, whereas they were once so rare as to make the news when they happened. These cases were not just in one particular Association, Convention or Fellowship, but were in all ranks of Baptists. And when even the pastors of churches do not recognize churches' authority and autonomy how can we expect the lay members to do so?

It is not necessary to enter into the right or wrong of each dispute in this article. It is sufficient to say that both parties in all cases were wrong in taking any church matter outside of the church and to the civil courts. It is a violation of Baptist polity and practice to take any decision beyond the church (Matt. 18:17-20), and it indicates a serious apostasy in our ranks.

Until only a century and a half ago Baptist churches were always sovereign, autonomous and independent, and there was no higher earthly authority recognized by them than the voice of the local congregation. Boards, Conventions, Associations, Fellowships, and other such organizations that presume to dictate to churches, whether by command or only by "suggestion," are of very late date, and have no scriptural authority. But these super-church organizations exist and have no doubt contributed much toward the disregard for the authority of the local congregation. Indeed, often the "headquarters" will send representatives to counsel with the minority about how to get the decision overturned if the church's decision is detrimental to the financial support of the Organization. This indicates that Mammon—the god of riches—rules more in their minds than the Lord does.

From whence does this contempt of church polity come? It is but natural for church members to reject the authority of the church in such matters of dispute if the church's authority has been daily set aside in mission work, ministerial training, church programs, etc.,

by the "suggestions" of the superchurch organization to which the church has submitted itself superceding the church's authority.

Let us hear what Scripture says about going to law before the civil authorities. "Dare any of you, having a matter against another, go to law before the unjust, and not before the saints? Do ye not know that the saints shall judge the world? And if the world shall be judged by you, are ye unworthy to judge the smallest matters? Know ye not that we shall judge angels? How much more things that pertain to this life? If then ye have judgments of things pertaining to this life, set them to judge who are least esteemed in the church. I speak to your shame. Is it so, that there is not a wise man among you? No, not one that shall be able to judge between his brethren? But brother goeth to law with brother, and that before the unbelievers. Now therefore there is utterly a fault among you, because ye go to law one with another. Why do ye not rather take wrong? Why do ye not rather suffer yourselves to be defrauded?" (1 Cor. 6:1-7).

This leaves nothing to be said in defense of Christians going to law with other Christians. Yea, it clearly condemns any civil arbitration between Christians in any matter whatsoever. Jesus said of His people, "They are not of this world" (John 17:14), and this world can neither rightly understand, nor judge spiritual matters.

Perhaps some would argue that 1 Corinthians 6 deals with personal differences between brethren, and not with schisms within a church. However, there is no difference except in degree. Personal disputes always attract partisans, and it only takes a short time for a rift between two brethren to escalate so as to engulf the whole church. Very, very few church members will remain completely neutral and unbiased toward both parties in such a situation. Therefore, it matters not whether the rift is between two individuals, or two sects within a church. The condemnation of going to civil courts for redress applies equally in either case, for the principle is the same in both instances.

In this we may again see the folly of failing to teach church doctrine. The principle of absolute self-rule has ever been a Baptist tenet, and only an ignorant and carnal church would depart from this practice and apply to the civil authorities for a decision in any matter. But if there has not been sound teaching on Christian responsibility regarding submission to church authority, worldliness will motivate the carnal to appeal to a higher authority.

The Head of the church taught His infant church regarding this in Matthew 18:15-18, where the Scriptural order for settling church disputes is given. (1) Individual differences are to be worked out individually (v. 15). (2) If, however, this attempted reconciliation fails, others are to be taken as witnesses and arbiters (v. 16). (3) This failing, it is to be brought before the church for its judgment and decision (v. 17). (4) If the guilty party or parties refuse to hear the voice of the church, then they are to be henceforth treated as the ungodly unbelievers that they appear to be until they make it right with the offended party and with the church (v. 17). But what is to be noticed is that the church's decision is final. "But if he neglect to hear the church, **let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican.**" These two terms were commonly used for those who were unsaved.

No doubt some one will ask, "But what if the church is wrong? Has a person no redress if he is certain that he is right and the church is wrong?" This is covered in verse 18 though not apparent in the Authorized Version. This verse does **not** teach that every decision of every church is ratified by God without regard to the right and wrong of it, as appears in the English version. Some of the tenses here are not even translated, and others do not have their full meaning set forth. A literal paraphrase, giving full expression to every verb, would be, "Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth must be what has already been bound in heaven, so that it abides as a law, and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth must be what has already been loosed in heaven so that it abides as a law." Some of the more literal translations recognize this sense

of the verse. Thus, this verse teaches that a church is only to bind or loose in accordance with principles already revealed from heaven. That is, in accordance with the Scriptures.

Every church has a responsibility before the Lord, no less than the individual has, and every church that uses its authority wrongly must answer to the Lord for the perversion of Truth. But the individual is responsible to "rather take wrong," to "suffer yourselves to be defrauded," rather than to appeal from the decision of the church to any other authority (1 Cor. 6:7).

But this is not an easy thing to do, for the carnal and worldly-minded do not like to give up a material advantage. Neither do they like to suffer loss of material things that they have helped pay for, yet this is God's demand for His people when they cannot obtain a just decision from a church. It was the writer's privilege many years ago to preach briefly for a small group of Baptists who had done exactly this. They had labored and sacrificed to help erect a fine church edifice, but afterward, finding the church being corrupted by a dictatorial pastor, and being unable to obtain a just hearing of their grievances from the church, they left the church. They left the results of their labors and sacrifices rather than violate the Scriptures and seek civil redress. The Lord will always bless such, for "the earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof," (1 Cor. 10:26), and He is able to restore their loss. However, He may, or may not restore losses in this life, but no one out-gives God. **God will be no man's debtor.**

The forsaking of material things if need be for the Lord's sake is the demand of Scripture, and this has been the historic Baptist practice, but it is greatly abused and corrupted by many in these last days. However such corruptions bear fruits that shall eventually come home to those who produce them. A case in point may be cited from church history.

In the fourth century, the Donatists, a Baptist group, in a contest with some of the corrupt churches of that day, either appealed to the civil tribunal for a decision, or at least agreed to allow the civil authorities to be judges in the matter. In any case, the Emperor Constantine, in the wisdom of the world, rejected the Donatists' spiritual stand for the more worldly and corrupt stand of the Catholic party, and issued edicts of suppression and persecution against them. This is recorded in most Church Histories covering that time. Even so may the churches that today appeal to the civil courts to settle internal affairs find themselves tomorrow being suppressed and persecuted by the same civil authorities in favor of some corrupt state-recognized church.

That judgment in any spiritual matter is to be made within the local congregation is evident from the Scripture, for Paul was moved to expressly say, "For what have I to do to judge them also that are without? Do not ye judge them that are within? But them that are without God judgeth. Therefore put away from among you that wicked person" (1 Cor. 5:12-13). "Without" and "within" relate to outside the church membership or inside the membership. The church is to judge its own. The world has no authority, either inherent or delegated, to exercise judgment over Christians in spiritual matters. It has authority over all civil matters, as shown in Romans 13:1-7.

The schisms and sects in churches which produce these corruptions of Baptist polity are the result of carnality on the part of church members. Paul minced no words when he said to the Corinthians "For **ye are yet carnal**: for whereas there is among you envying, and strife, and divisions, **are ye not carnal, and walk as man?**" (1 Cor. 3:3). Not only so, but such a situation makes it impossible to scripturally observe the Lord's Supper, for He also says "For first of all, when ye come together in the church I hear that there be divisions among you; and I partly believe it. For there must be also heresies among you, that they which are approved may be made manifest among you.

When ye come together therefore into one place, this is not to eat the Lord's Supper (or as the marginal reading is **ye cannot eat the Lord's Supper**)" (1 Cor. 11:18-20). That is, their dividedness prevented a Scriptural observance of this ordinance, for the use of a single loaf in the ordinance symbolizes the unity of the church body, (1 Cor. 10:16-17).

Most divisions that produce such an appeal to the civil tribunal are the results of: (1) Ignorance of individual and collective responsibility in church matters. (2) Ignorance of the Scriptures relative to church polity and authority. (3) Carnal and materialistic views of church life. (4) Rebellious attitudes towards church authority. (5) Entangling alliances with human institutions that claim greater allegiance than the church. (6) The proud party spirit that refuses to humble itself in the light of the Scriptures.

The antidote for all of these things is to be found in the study of the Scriptures, doctrinal teaching and preaching, and the practical application of church truth under the leadership of the Holy Spirit. Where these are missing, there will continue to be more and more corruption of Baptist church truth until the candlestick is removed, Rev. 2:5, and the carnal and corrupt church becomes nothing more than a synagogue of Satan (Rev. 2:9). Remember, the Roman church was once a Baptist church until it corrupted its doctrine, polity and practice. Now it sits upon the seven hills of Rome (Rev. 17:9), and rules over the kings of the earth (Rev. 17:18), as "MYSTERY, BABYLON THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH" (Rev. 17:5).

May the Lord Jesus Christ, the "**HEAD of the church**," awaken His churches from their ignorance and carnality before they corrupt themselves so completely that He must needs come and remove the candlestick from its place.