

ECCLESIOLOGY 101

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Having previously written “Eschatology 101” dealing with a basic approach to end-time events, I now offer “Ecclesiology 101.” I hope it will be a help to God’s sheep. Perhaps, for readers outside the U.S.A., I should explain the significance of “101.” Stereotypically at least, first-year basic or elementary university courses have been numbered beginning with “101.” So the nature of this article will be to provide a basic approach to ecclesiology or the doctrine of the church.

It seems to me that there are four views among modern Baptists as to the way in which churches ought to be organized. These four views have forced Baptists into four different camps. These camps are both incompatible (incapable of harmonious coexistence) and irreconcilable (impossible to restore to harmony). I shall try to give a fair, concise and understandable assessment of the first three views along with some objections to them and to provide support of the fourth one. As I cannot find the first three views supported by the Word of God, I cannot furnish texts that support either of them.

The first position held by some who are denominated Baptists is what I call The Direct Authority View. Briefly stated this view is that any group of baptized people may gather together and determine to organize themselves into a church. It assumes that they have the authority to do so, directly given by Christ, and that He will recognize them as a true church based on their actions. Sometimes this is called the “self constitution view.”

We object to this view for several reasons, in the main because we have no New Testament example of true churches originating in this fashion. On the other hand, we do have a group of Gentiles turning to the Lord in Antioch. The consequence of this was that the Jerusalem Church authorized one of their members to go to Antioch, evidently both to learn the truth of the matter and to act accordingly. His actions would have no doubt included baptizing and setting them in order, as this was the practice of the apostles (Acts 11:22; Titus 1:5). It is clearly stated that under his ministry “much people was added unto the Lord”

(Acts 11:24). These people would need baptism and teaching as to the observing of all things Christ had commanded. It is also interesting and important to note that it was only after the ministry of Barnabas to this group in Antioch that they were ever called a “church” by the Holy Spirit (Acts 11:26).

Neither do we have any Word from Christ or any apostle giving baptized persons this imagined “direct authority.” Matthew 18:20, the “*two or three gathered together in my name*” passage, does NOT teach such a “self constitution view.” That passage deals with an already established church dealing with matters of discipline as the context clearly shows. Church organization was not at all in view when the Lord spoke these words! To try to stretch this passage as a proof text for self-constituting a church is ludicrous and violates all sensible rules of Bible interpretation.

We also object because such a method is disorderly in that persons who have been excluded from the fellowship of a true church may, without repentance and amendment of life – without making things right with their previous church – form themselves into a new church in flagrant disregard for their former church. Churches organized in this manner make a mockery of church discipline just as open communion does. And so, just as churches that hold to closed communion have no church fellowship with open communists, so those who hold to biblical church organization are forbidden to have fellowship with those who hold this disorderly or heretical view. The Bible says, “*Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly, and not after the tradition which he received of us*” (2 Thessalonians 3:6) and “*A man that is an heretick after the first and second admonition reject*” (Titus 3:10). So, whether you view those who hold this view as “disorderly” or as “heretics,” the faithful Baptist cannot rightly cooperate with or have fellowship with them or their churches. To do so is to be a traitor to the truth!

We think the direct authority view is dangerous because it gives to the individual member the right to dismiss himself from the membership of a church –

whether to form a new one or to escape rightful discipline or both. Where this plan is adopted, church discipline is rendered meaningless and pointless.

We object to this view also because it is contrary to the Great Commission. In that Commission our Lord stated His authority and gave commandment to His true churches to do those things in His absence which He had formerly been doing while upon earth. The self constitution view would allow any group to form themselves into a church and by their self-act qualify themselves to do the work that Christ designated to be carried on by a specific body – His church. If such a thing as “ecclesiastical Arminianism” exists, this would be it! Just as the Arminian thinks he is saved because of something he did on his own, so these “ecclesiastical Arminians” think they are legitimate Baptized Churches of the Lord Jesus Christ because of something they did: Because of something they did completely apart from a church that had a commission from Christ to continue the work He was doing.

And what had Christ been doing while He was on earth? He had been making disciples and baptizing them and gathering them into a church (John 4:1; 1 Corinthians 12:28). What work did He leave for His church? Why the same work He had been doing, of course. Christ did not purpose that His work be carried on by individual believers or by a group of baptized individuals acting apart from a church body. So it seems unreasonable to think that continuing the work of forming churches can be accomplished by anyone other than a church body acting together to determine what is the will of God in these matters and to do it.

The second position held by some who are denominated Baptists is what I call The Ordination Authority View. This view says that any man ordained to the Gospel ministry has all the authority he needs. By virtue of that ordination he can administer both ordinances, ordain ministers, and organize new churches apart from either membership in or action by any true church. Sometimes this is called the “preacher authority” view. We reject this view because it was not practiced in the New Testament. It just is not to be found either in the teaching or practice of Christ and His apostles. No New Testament writer endorses it and so neither should we.

There are several very real dangers to this idea. Those who adopt this view have created a “class” of special men who, regardless of their doctrinal deviations or moral unfitness, are empowered to organize or refuse to organize new churches. These men would be similar in power to the “bishops” of the Catholic system. This view also promotes free-lance-ism among those called Baptists. This sort of free-lance ministry is similar in some ways to that mentioned in Acts 19:13 – i.e. “vagabond Jews” who went from place to place under the authority of none but themselves.

This view, like the first one, also makes a mockery of and would destroy biblical church discipline. Such a man, endowed at some previous remote ordination with such great personal authority, would be in submission to no church whatsoever. Such a man could be properly excluded from a church and it would have no bearing on his ministry whatsoever for he was “ordained” and to quote one who espouses this view, “When I was ordained I received all the authority I need.” We cannot find any scriptural basis for the “preacher authority” view!

A third view, The Denominational Authority View, holds that a Baptist convention, association or gathering of denominationally accredited ministers has authority to organize new churches. This view is easily debunked because the New Testament knows nothing of such man-made organizations as conventions and associations and therefore New Testament Christians are bound not to recognize their man-made offspring as true churches.

The fourth view maintains that Christ, having all authority (Matthew 28:18), gave specific orders to His church regarding the work they were to do in His absence. I call this position The Church Authority View. These specific orders are called the Great Commission and are in fact a delegation of Christ’s authority. Thus both the privilege and obligation – the right and the duty – for all service to Christ was given by Him to His organized disciples, His church. Some have called this the “mother church view” because it requires that a previously existing church be involved in the bringing into existence of each new church. In practice, this view holds that established churches have the (1) delegated authority and the (2) high privilege and the (3) obligation to ordain (publicly set apart) men whom they

believe are called of God to the ministry and to send them out to places near and far in the church's effort to carry out the Great Commission. Thus churches are and must be directly involved in the establishment of new churches. Since New Testament churches ordinarily determine the will of the church by the orderly method of voting, it is reasonable to expect church actions to be decided, if not unanimously, at least by a majority of the members. Thus no mere group of baptized individuals can properly act in the place of a church.

This view continues the practice of our Lord who Himself ordained certain men and sent them out to further His work (See Luke 9:1, 2; 10:1; Mark 3:14; John 15:16; 17:18, etc.). We think that viewing the work of a true church as continuing the work Christ did while on earth is a most important perspective and one that each true child of God should adopt. So the church authority view is consistent with the Great Commission that was most certainly given to Christ's church. If the Commission was given to the eleven as individuals we have no commission today for they are all dead. If the Commission was given to the eleven as apostles we have no commission today for we have no apostles today. Only if we view the Commission as having been delivered to those apostles and those with them in church capacity do Christ's words have any real meaning and the possibility of fulfillment.

The church authority view is clearly the proper one because it follows the pattern set forth in the New Testament. There we see that men were ordained (publicly set apart by a church) and then sent out to do the work of the ministry to which the Holy Spirit had called and equipped them (See Acts 1:21; 11:22; 13:1-4; 15:25; 1 Timothy 2:7, etc.). This view is consistent with the whole New Testament because all about whom we know that baptized with scriptural authority in that volume were (1) men, (2) baptized men, (3) ordained men, and (4) members in good standing with a previously existing church to which they were accountable. This view is consistent both with the Scriptural method of financing Gospel work and the accountability to the churches of the preachers involved in it. (Financial support and accountability go together.) Preachers sent out by New Testament churches were "brought on their way" by the churches (financially supported). (See Acts 15:3; Romans 15:24; and 2 Corinthians 1:6). Paul's example

of accountability is this: after his mission trips he always, even after visiting the famous Jerusalem church, returned to his home or sending church, Antioch in Syria. There he gave an account of his work in various places, thus showing accountability to his “sending church.” (See Acts 14:26, 27; 18:22). This is the practice even today of those missionaries who hold to the “mother church view.” Those missionaries who hold to one of the three earlier discussed views may practice some measure of accountability for practical reasons, i.e. to keep the money flowing in, but those who hold to the church authority view do so primarily as a matter of biblical principle.

We believe the church authority view is the orderly view because it does not foster a “class” of special men being set up as rulers over the churches. And we believe this is the scriptural view inasmuch as it does NOT foster free-lance-ism, i.e. that there is a class of ministers of Christ who are accountable to no one but themselves and God.

In conclusion let me point out the following: If either of the first three methods of organizing churches is right, the churches of the New Testament were organized in the wrong way for they were organized according to the fourth view. If one of the first three methods of organizing churches is right, those Baptist churches down through history organized after this pattern were organized in the wrong way and are/were not true churches. If the fourth view of church organization is right, then the first three are unscriptural and churches organized in either of those ways are not true churches of Christ.

The first view promotes oligarchy (authority of a few) and anarchy. Anarchy is defined as “a state of lawlessness” and “absence or denial of any authority” and “absence of order.” A synonym given by Webster is “disorder.” This first view says a group of baptized individuals can dismiss themselves from their church and, independent of anyone, organize themselves into a true Baptist church. The second view promotes hierarchy (religious leaders in positions of authority). It says that there exists a special clergy or class of ordained men who have the authority to organize true Baptist churches apart from any church action other than their original ordination to the ministry. The third is totally unscriptural because it depends on man-made denominational organizations for its authority. The fourth

view promotes biblical democracy under the Headship of the Lord Jesus Christ. It says that each true Baptist church is capable and responsible to be actively involved in carrying out the Great Commission at home and abroad. Further this view says that decisions to ordain men to the ministry, to send out missionaries, and to dismiss members for the purpose of organizing new churches rests in the church membership as a body and not in a clergy or in a group of members acting independently of the church as a whole. This is the biblical and orderly way. *“Let all things be done decently and in order”* (1 Corinthians 14:40).