

Toward a More Robust, Usable Ecclesiology

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Concerns and crosscurrents are emerging in the various communities of Canadian Baptists with respect to a usable doctrine of the church. Historic statements drawing heavily upon four centuries of the early confessions and denominational declarations seem inadequate as Canadian Baptists interact with other traditions and ideas about the church: its theological identity, polity, and mission.¹ This paper seeks to create a more robust Baptist ecclesiology for Canadian Baptists, informed by contemporary theological literature in the larger Baptist world and beyond.

The Importance of Ecclesiology

Ecclesiology is the differentiating doctrine of Baptists. We share with the vast majority of Christians across time, the great doctrines of the faith (cp. the creeds and confessions of faith). Most theological traditions do not include ecclesiology in their systems, because it is assumed to be of practical order, not theological gravity. For Baptists, however, the theological nature of the church, its ethical calling, sanctity, and mission under the Lordship of Jesus Christ, is of the theological essence. An experiential people, Baptists are focussed upon the visible church, its body life, and its ordinances/sacraments. At the heart of Baptist ecclesiology is the congregation, or gathering of God's people. The term "congregation" is employed here to distinguish usage from the "church" which can be used biblically speaking to denote both a local congregation and the universal Body of Christ. Some Baptists have equated the congregation as the

¹ Among those influencing various Baptist communities in western Canada are: Hyper-Calvinism (Neo-Reformed movement), charismatic and Pentecostal traditions, foundationalism, the "9 Marks" Movement, Anglican sacramentalism, Wesleyanism, the Emerging Church, the Gospel and Culture Movement, fundamentalism, and forms of Landmarkism.

manifestation of the kingdom of God on earth, while others have strictly separated the kingdom from the church.²

A key New Testament text in defining the nature of the congregation, through a Baptist lens, is Ephesians 4: 4-6: “There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.” Herein lies a concise doctrine of congregationalism imbedded in the Trinity.

Further, the Apostle Paul wrote, “to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and knowledge of the Son of God...” (vv. 12-13) The service of the congregation is thus summarized as ministry of the body. Ministry occurs primarily, though not exclusively within the environment of the congregation. For Baptists, the congregation is the foundational element of all expressions of polity.

**Understanding the congregation as a “body” is essential to a Baptist ecclesiology.*

The Nature of Congregation

Let us consider the core aspects of the term, “congregation.” Is it an adequate synonym for the “church.”? The Scripture term is *ecclesia*, the English equivalent of which, according to Baptist polity, is “congregation.” The root word, “congregate” historically means “to collect or gather things together into a mass or crowd; to flock; to assemble; to meet; to mingle with. Further, a “congregation” is

a collective body of colleagues; a company; the body of the faithful; a particular local assembly or body of believers; a body of persons assembled for religious worship; the body of persons who habitually attend or belong to a particular place of worship; in the American New England colonies in which Congregationalism was established, the community of a settlement, town, or parish, having its particular place of worship as distinguished from the ‘church’ or body of communicants within the same. Now called the

² Compare for instance, J. R. Graves with Walter Rauschenbusch.

‘society.’ [usage from 14th-17th centuries]³

The theological importance of the congregation is two-fold. Firstly, it is the gathered assemblage of those who are “in Christ.” It is in every way, “the church,” not just “a congregation,” and it reflects, as one theologian asserts, the nature of God in Trinity.⁴ Baptists and their forbears, the Anabaptists, have rigorously defended the nature of a congregation as gathered by the Holy Spirit. Anabaptists for instance, eschewing any reference to Matthew 16, identify the church as “a gathered congregation of believers who have voluntarily entered it by baptism upon confession of faith.”⁵ The Anabaptist Bernard Rothmann (1633), wrote, “The church is gathered, erected and built of those who believe,” and the true Christian congregation is a gathering large or small that is founded on Christ in the true confession of Christ.”⁶ In 1542, Peter Riedemann, the Silesian founder of the Hutterites, further agreed, “that the church is a people, community, assembly or church gathered and led together by the Holy Spirit...”⁷ Centuries later in the Anabaptist tradition, Robert Friedmann summarized, “that these churches were always “gathered” churches may almost be taken for granted.”⁸ Later English Baptists declared, “the Church as it is visible to us, is a company of visible Saints, called and separated from the world...” and that the church “consists of the whole number of the Elect that have been, are, or shall be gathered under Christ the head thereof...”⁹ It cannot be over-emphasized that the congregation originates in the gathering work of God’s Holy Spirit.

The second theological dimension of the congregation is that it is the environment in which the Holy Spirit works through His fruit and spiritual gifts. It is constructed and maintained from above. The Holy Spirit exhibits fruit (*carpoi*)

³ *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary, Complete Text, Reproduced Micrographically* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 823-827.

⁴ Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 207.

⁵ Walter Klassen, editor, *Anabaptism in Outline: Selected Primary Sources* (Kitchener, ONT: Herald Press, 1981), 101.

⁶ “Confession of Faith”, 1533, excerpted in Klassen, *Anabaptism in Outline*, 105, 106.

⁷ Riedemann, “Confession of Faith,” 111.

⁸ Robert Friedmann, *The Theology of Anabaptism: An Interpretation* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1973), 118.

⁹ “London Confession, 1644” (Art. 33); “Second London Confession (Art. 26),” in William L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1983), 165, 285.

among the congregation and bestows gifts (*charismata*). The *carpoi* (Gal. 5:22) include, love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control, while the *charismata* (I Cor. 12-14) include, knowledge, wisdom, prophecy, faith, healings, miracles, discerning of spirits, tongues, and interpretation of tongues.

**The congregation, as the Church, is the primary environment where these spiritual qualities are evident and exercised.*

Authority and the Congregation

“Authority” has been defined by a leading sociologist of the church as, “a right to exercise power.” Members of a community accept a leader as one who ought to lead them, based upon official and rational laws of the community, the traditions of the community, or the personality of the leader himself/herself.¹⁰ Let us look carefully at these three aspects of authority in the context of a Baptist congregation.

Congregations historically define themselves by reference to three kinds of principles: the Scriptures, confessions of faith, and covenants. Ultimate authority for the congregation lies in Jesus Christ, who is the Lawgiver. The congregation’s role is to discern the mind of Christ in both spiritual and temporal matters. That happens through prayer and group interaction. As the Second London Confession declared, “The Members of these Churches are Saints by calling, visibly manifesting and evidencing... their obedience unto that call of Christ.”¹¹

Scripture, of course, is revealed truth, while confessions and covenants are consensually produced documents. Confessions categorize the theological contents of Scripture, and covenants voluntarily bind members on Scripture principles. Confessions indicate articles of belief, based upon literal usage of Scripture text, the creeds of the church, and historic Baptist statements. Particularly in the English Calvinistic Baptist tradition (threading back to the radical Puritans and Separatists), covenants are agreed upon in a specific context

¹⁰ Paul M. Harrison, *Authority and Power in the Free Church Tradition: A Social Case of the American Baptist Convention* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1959), 4.

¹¹ Chapter XXI, Section 6, Second London Confession in Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 286.

to be the basis of fellowship and discipline and may change from generation to generation as the congregation agrees.¹² Oxford historian B. R. White has pointed out that the earliest Baptist, John Smyth thought of the covenant as a promise of the local congregation to the eternal covenant of grace, the very essence of defining the congregation. Covenants include statements about Christian lifestyle, family relationships, and Christian life in the world. Covenants should be uniquely drawn for each congregation and are essentially vows or promises between God and the Saints.¹³ Together, under the Lordship of Christ, the Great Lawgiver, these assertions establish the base of authority for a Baptist congregation.

Power, in contrast to authority, is the ability to determine the activity of others without their consent.¹⁴ Power is ideally exercised with the appropriate authority. Yet, within a voluntary association, such as a congregation, power can be the way of achieving the ends of a leader without legitimate authority. A pastor, or lay leader, who is gifted in persuasion may determine the activity of a congregation by strong assertion of ideas and establishing modes of accountability. The proper exercise of power may lead to the peak stage of a congregation's effectiveness. This may last several generations, or until anomie¹⁵ sets in.

¹² Here see the work of Paul Fiddes, *Baptists and the Communion of Saints: A Theology of Covenanted Disciples* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014), a proponent of the renewal of covenants, and Charles Deweese, *Baptist Church Covenants* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1990), who helpfully surveys Baptist covenants. A recent comparison of early English Baptist usage of covenant theology is *The Fourth Strand of the Reformation: The Covenant Ecclesiology of Anabaptists, English Separatists, and Early English General Baptists*, edited by Paul S. Fiddes, William H. Brackney, and Malcolm B. Yarnell III (Oxford: Regents Park College, 2018).

¹³ Fiddes, *Baptists and the Communion of Saints*, 131-133. It may be of interest to note that thousands of congregations have adopted the church covenant verbatim of the 19th century American Baptist, J. Newton Brown. He distributed *gratis* copies of his 1833 model church covenant (an appendage to his confession of faith) and it has become a canonized text among Baptists in many languages. See *Historical Dictionary of the Baptists*, 165, and the Canadian Baptist, Stanley Grenz, *The Baptist Congregation: A Guide to Baptist Belief and Practice* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1985), 115-116, who offered it verbatim as a model in his church manual.

¹⁴ Harrison, *Authority and Power*, 7.

¹⁵ "Anomie" is a term introduced by the French Sociologist Emile Durkheim (1912) to describe a sense of instability, purposelessness, and alienation. In my book, *Christian Voluntarism: Theology and Praxis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 85-90, I described the off-peak state of the life cycle of a congregation as "in anomie."

**Ultimate power, theologically speaking, is attributed to the Spirit of God, who energizes the congregation according to the rule or authority of Christ.*

Membership in the Congregation

Baptists hold to a New Testament basis for being a part of a congregation and the metaphor expressed in Romans 12: 4 and I Corinthians 12:12. The metaphor of the “body” is drawn from a physical aspect and applied to a spiritual reality. In the Romans text, Paul pressed the metaphor of the body as to its unity and internal diversity: “For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function...so we who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another.” He repeated the same emphasis to the Corinthian church: “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body...” Thus, there is an individuality and a unity involved in the membership of a congregation. An early Confession put it this way, “all believers are bound to joyn themselves to particular Churches, when and where they have opportunity to do so...”¹⁶

Membership in a Baptist congregation involves five factors: Profession of faith in Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord; experience of believers baptism by immersion; a commitment to participate in the life of the congregation; a commitment to abide by the moral standards agreed upon by the congregation and it’s chosen affiliations; and support for/by the congregation by prayer. Profession of faith involves a public witness of the presence of God in Christ in one’s life. Christ is the head of the church and members are his subjects. Experience of baptism is based upon Romans 6 which is interpreted to mean immersion from *baptidzo*. (some congregations may allow other forms of baptism from previous Christian experience, but immersion is the Baptist norm). Congregational participation involves the full employment of one’s gifts, consistent support of personal resources, and active attendance at worship and work. Below we shall look at the ethical dimensions of a congregation. The earliest Baptists knew that the congregation was a spiritual reality and so enjoined members to pray for their church continually. Because a congregation has mutually agreed to walk in the light of the Gospel, it normally adopts a theological confession and possibly a covenant. These two documents indicate what are the boundaries of Christian

¹⁶ Chapter XXVI, Section 12, “Second London Confession of Faith”, in Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 288.

belief, morality, and conduct.

**Ultimately it is the congregation that determines its confessional and covenantal identities. Membership is a sacred relationship for individual believers and congregations, entered into voluntarily at the leading of the Spirit.*

Independence and Governance of the Congregation

From a Baptist perspective, each congregation is a particular, independent body of believers. A congregation is not an indiscriminate multitude. As the First London Confession of 1644 stated, “And although the particular Congregations be distinct and several Bodies, every one a compact and knit Citie in it selfe...”¹⁷ As the Spirit gathers the congregation, Jesus Christ is its Head. All authority, meaning, and purpose is derived from Jesus Christ. Stress should be placed upon the terms “independent” and “particular.”

In a true church of true believers, as Se-Baptist John Smyth put it in 1606, the church possesses all that it needs to the part of the Body of Christ: believers, leaders, and resources.

Since 1908, many Baptists have employed the terminology “autonomy of the local church” to indicate the self-rule or self-governance of a congregation.¹⁸ The use of this terminology is problematic, however, for three reasons. First the term “autonomy” is found nowhere in Scripture. Second, it is not used in any confessional statement before 1908. It came about in southern American usage, much influenced by cultural and philosophical factors.¹⁹ Third, the term is problematic theologically, because it literally means “self-ruled,” which by itself nullifies the headship of Christ, making the church a human entity. As cogent observers have said, the church is really a monarchy, and nothing should be

¹⁷ London Confession, Art. XLVII, in William L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1983), 168.

¹⁸ Axiom II, *The Axioms of Religion* (Philadelphia, PA: American Baptist Publication Society, 1908), Chapter 8. Compare Grenz, *The Baptist Congregation*, 84-85, 87, who links the principles of individual competency and believer priesthood via the congregation, using the terminology of E. Y. Mullins.

¹⁹ See William H. Brackney, “Words are Inadequate to Express Our Convictions: The Problem of the Autonomy of the Local Church” *American Baptist Quarterly* 38/1(Spring 2019): 15-37.

allowed to infringe upon the Crown Rights of the Redeemer.²⁰ Contemporary Baptist writers are moving away from the usage of “autonomy.”²¹ If the term “autonomy” is used, it must be used in tandem with the Associational Principle.

**Over their four centuries of theological identity, Baptists have been careful to employ a specific vocabulary to matters pertaining to the church.*

The Associational Principle

That congregations in the New Testament letters and Acts worked together and communicated with each other is a given.²² Some of the usage of the body metaphor could well be applied to the larger interaction of congregations, as “all the members of the body, though many, are one body.” Membership in a local congregation is analogous to membership of congregations in an association. In Acts 2, 6, 13, and 15, representatives of the churches are gathered in Jerusalem or Antioch to consider, debate, and fund common work. This involved the selection and commissioning (ordination) of leaders, determination of the mission, and sharing of resources both to support the mission and in times of disaster relief. The fullness of the assembled representatives gave further value to the public witness of the church community.

The voluntary associational principle evolved into the institutional parish structure and episcopacy of the Catholic Churches (Eastern and Western). During the Middle Ages, the principle reasserted itself through radical movements and

²⁰ Maring and Hudson, *Baptist Manual*, 52.

²¹ See, for instance, Mark Dever’s usage of the term “congregational” in “The Church” in *A Theology for the Church*, edited by Daniel L. Akin (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman Academic, 2007), 842.

²² This has sparked a healthy debate among baptistic thinkers, notably the more connectional comprehensive Baptist organizations. See, for instance, Robert C. Walton, *The Gathered Community* (London: Carey Press, 1946), 147, who wrote, “A Baptist church is a local manifestation of the universal church,” and four years later, under the influence of the British Council of Churches, the Council of the Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland approved the words, “[Baptists] have always claimed to be part of the one holy, Catholic church of our Lord Jesus Christ” (*Baptist Union Documents*, edited by R. Hayden, 1980), 5-6. A contemporary advocate of this “catholic” version of Baptist ecclesiology is Curtis Freeman, *Contesting Catholicity: Theology for Other Baptists* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014), 242-243.

transformational groups, culminating in the Age of the Reformation, particularly the Anabaptist groups. Modern Christianity, stemming from European and North American evangelical roots, is driven by the associational principle. It includes both organized denominational types and free-organizing societies.

Baptists have been associative from their beginnings. Baptists chose the associative terminology, not because it is a biblical term (it is not!), but because it is a practical, task orientation to defining relationships (our ancestors being essentially workingclass people). Among the General Baptists, the congregations in England addressed common issues in the 1620s and even opened an ecumenical relationship with Dutch Mennonites. In 1644 seven Calvinistic congregations in London cooperatively issued the 1644 Confession of Faith; General Baptists created a national or General Assembly in 1654, followed by Calvinistic Baptist associations in Abingdon and the West Country in the 1650s. Seventh Day Baptists, a third type, met together associatively from the 1650s. In the North American context, importantly the earliest definition of the boundaries of extra-congregational influence were stated in 1791: “we consider ourselves to have no power as an association to determine any cases of discipline in the churches, but we are ready to give our advice and opinion on those points, and intelligence to such matters as come within the limits of a free Christian conference.”²³

**The associational principle produced the unique character of mutuality in Baptist ecclesiology.*

The Priesthood of Believers

This doctrine has been much debated over the last century among Baptists. For some it is mark of an individualist ecclesiology, meaning every individual believer is his own priest. Others maintain that it is a collective priesthood that the congregation enjoys, particularly in intercessory prayer and worship. The actual origins of the Baptist doctrine emerged from a reaction to the clerical priesthood of the Catholic and sacramental Protestant churches.

The biblical basis of believer priesthood is I Peter 2: 6 and Rev. 1: 5. In the first instance, the holy priesthood is likened to a spiritual house that offers spiritual

²³ Minutes of the Shaftesbury, [VT] Association (1791) in *Baptist Life and Thought*, 131.

sacrifices acceptable to God. The second instance declares the church a kingdom of priests serving God forever.

As believer priests, we hold that we have access to the Throne of Grace to which we can uphold each other, seek the mind of Christ, and the anointing of the Holy Spirit.

**Our priesthood is a collective spirituality, linking the Triune God and the congregation as the Body of Christ.*

The Congregation as an Ethical Community

Recent Baptist writers have identified the ethical character of the congregation. The role and empowerment of the Holy Spirit is crucial to this aspect of ecclesiology. It is the work of the Spirit to draw people to Christ and to sanctify them in Christ-like virtues. Baptists have long recognized this in confessions and the life and work of the church. Consider the words of the Standard Confession (1660): “It is the duty of all such who are believers baptized to draw nigh unto God in submission to that principle of Christ’s Doctrine...whereby we may mortifie the deeds of the body and live in all things answerable to their professed intentions and desires even to the honor of him who hath called them out of darkness into his marvelous light.”²⁴ Their Scriptural foundation was Romans 8: 13.

Baptists and their Anabaptist forbears have also nourished an eschatological understanding of the ethical demands of the Christian life. We have taken seriously Our Lord’s Prayer that “thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6: 10). We anticipate that when the Kingdom of God is fully realized, the law and teachings of Christ will be fulfilled.

In contemporary terms, this amounts to becoming an ethical community. The community is thus seen in two respects. First is the internal self-discipline of believers to honor biblical obligations and the principles growing out of Scriptural context. Secondly, given emerging issues in society and the changing moralities of culture, the church must continue to wrestle with implications of Scripture to respond to and model a defensible ethics. At times, this means that the

²⁴ Article XII, “Standard Confession” (1660), Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 229.

community must stand against prevailing moral trends, a part of the character of our anabaptist heritage. Some refer to this as “Christ against culture.”

In good times and when challenges to the faith arise, congregations must heed the words of Jesus in Matthew 5:14, “You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.” Good works employ an adequate theology worked out in human situations.

A contemporary set of ethical issues facing congregations surrounds human sexuality. As British Baptist theologian Nigel G. Wright has observed, individual churches might judge differently on the inclusion or exclusion of members according to sexual preference, but when they belong to wider groups, they must sublimate their own mind and respect the moral judgement of the wider group or risk withdrawal of cooperation or expulsion from the wider group. In essence, this creates a second circle of obligations as an ethical community. Wright cogently asserts,

Individual conscience and congregational autonomy, however valued, are not absolutes that can function without regard to collective conscience, since all are capable of deviation.²⁵

What ultimately matters in ethical terms, is consistency of values, deeply rooted in the Scriptures, that ideally are lodged in the congregation, while being extended and informed by associations and cooperation with other like-minded believers. The congregation, as an ethical community, is always the guardian under Christ of doctrine and praxis.

**Congregations carry an ethical obligation to be the people of God.*

The Congregation and Mission

During the past century, the mission thrust of the congregation has assumed

²⁵ Nigel G. Wright, *New Baptists, New Agenda* (Carlisle, Cumbria: Paternoster Press, 2002), 145.

major importance. It is primarily through one's involvement in the work and life of the congregation that one participates in God's mission. The mission of God is expressed in Jesus' Great Commission (Matthew 28: 19, 20) to go, teach, and baptize, or "when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, you will be my witnesses" (Acts 1: 8). The pioneer Baptist missionary and church planter in Europe, Johann Gerhard Oncken, observed "that every Baptist is a missionary," when queried by authorities who attempted to separate members of congregations from also being identified as missionaries. For Baptists, congregational identity and mission are inseparable. The congregation makes decisions about missional priorities that it agrees to support together. A congregation nurtures and participates in the commissioning of missionaries. Individual members may also of course decide to support mission organizations or associations and projects on their own. Individual members may also be missionaries, that is, emissaries of the Gospel, themselves.

**Concerted Baptist commitment to missions began with William Carey, the pastor of a small congregation with a global vision.*

In Summary

An eminent British Baptist scholar/pastor, Henry C. Cook, made the following observation: "Baptists at the beginning were Congregationalists but not Independents; that is to say, they believed in "the gathered church," the local community of believers made competent in Christ to exercise church privileges and responsibilities, but they set their faces against isolationism, and they regarded the local churches as livingly related for the common ends of the Gospel."²⁶ The heritage of English Baptists has been passed down to the mainstream Baptist communities in Canada where it has interacted with Baptist cultures in the United States.

Contemporary Baptist ecclesiology must reflect two denominating aspects: the independent identity of each particular congregation **and** the need to work in concert with like-minded congregations. Just as each congregation exhibits the mind of Christ as believers committed to Christ, in association several congregations "of like faith and order" also seek the mind of Christ. Both are

²⁶ Henry Cook, *What Baptists Stand For* (London: Carey Kingsgate Press, 1947/1961), 85.

manifestations of the fullness of the Body of Christ.

The only ecclesiology that adequately meets a post-modern religious culture is that of the Baptists. Far beyond Catholic, Orthodox, and Magisterial Reformation ecclesiologies, it fits human circumstances as it exhibits a local character. Additionally, it meets the need of collective Christian work and witness by voluntarily empowering various kinds of associations. Baptist ecclesiology, borne out of grievous ecclesiastical coercion, has been likened to a rope of sand: it is visible and effective, but non-coercive. As American Baptist historian Edwin S. Gaustad observed, “for Baptists, if it isn’t voluntary, it is not the true church.”²⁷ That is valid for both congregations and associations.

**A robust Baptist ecclesiology for today must recognize the essential spirituality of the church, manifested as local congregations and associations, exhibiting believers responding to Jesus Christ, their Saviour and Lord.*

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²⁷ Edwin S. Gaustad, “Address at Green Lake Historical Conference,” 1984.